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Spring 2004

**Review of *Prairie Peddlers: The Syrian-Lebanese in North Dakota*  
By William C. Sherman, Paul Whitney, and John Guerrero**

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*Prairie Peddlers: The Syrian-Lebanese in North Dakota.* By William C. Sherman, Paul Whitney, and John Guerrero. Bismarck, ND: University of Mary Press, 2002. vi + 404pp. Photographs, maps, notes, appendices, index. \$28.95.

This remarkable ethnographic study of the Syrian-Lebanese in North Dakota is unique.

The data and information are original, never mind that the voices heard are nearly those of the early settlers, certainly those of their children. The authors use the records of the late 1930s (early 1940s) Federal Writers Projects and the Works Progress Administration to understand the reasons for Arab migration to North Dakota and the Great Plains, their employment practices, life styles (marriage patterns, culinary habits), and religious traditions, their distribution, settlements, institutions (or lack thereof), and finally their near total assimilation.

If it were homesteading that attracted many Syrians to the Midwest, it was peddling that made them successful. Homesteading also explains why more Lebanese than Syrians settled there. Syrians from Mt. Lebanon came from smaller, rural communities and farmed. Those from Syria proper were often from Damascus and Aleppo, established cities.

An old Arab proverb states "Trade takes a man far" and if Syrians do anything well it is buying and selling. An entire economic chain developed among them wherein Syrian wholesalers in the Northeast supplied "peddlers" with goods that they brought to needy customers throughout the West. To facilitate economic success, the community published a *Syrian Business Directory* (1908), which included the names and addresses of every Syrian enterprise in the United States. Peddling Syrians is not a stereotype. It was their signature occupation.

Another distinguishing characteristic of this book is its inclusion and respect for the early, oft-ignored Arab Muslim settlers. If anything, emphasis has always been on the Christian emigrants (of all denominations and rites) who settled in large Northeastern cities. Today's Arab-American scholarship, of course, can't and doesn't overlook Muslims, but to see how the Syrian Muslims at the turn of the century accommodated rural American society (and vice versa) is an eye-opener. Many scholars claim that the first Mosque in the United States was in Ross, North Dakota.

*Prairie Peddlers* is a study in rural assimilation that broadens our understanding of the

entire Syrian-Lebanese experience in this country. Here were communities without their own churches which elsewhere served as the source of ethnic maintenance. To be a Syrian or Lebanese American meant being a Melkite, Maronite, or Antiochian Orthodox. Without churches, assimilation would proceed rapidly, as was the case in North Dakota. These communities did struggle to stay alive via the *Mahrajans* or picnics they regularly held.

What caught my attention was how their isolation created a gap in knowledge about their own roots and traditions as well as the larger socio-cultural and political forces that shaped both Syrian-Lebanese identity and assimilation all over the United States. While the authors did do their homework using the commonly available information, they do not relate the attitudes, knowledge, and opinions of the Syrian-Lebanese to larger historical issues. This situation is evident, for example, in how the group identified itself and how the authors attempt to adjust for it. Throughout the text there is reference to Arabic people. Arabic is a language. Arab is a people. Arabic-speaking people would be accurate. In all fairness, however, the modern usage seems to be "Arabic people," but it is incorrect.

Were the Syrian-Lebanese Syrians or Lebanese or both? They came as Syrians, they thought of themselves as Syrians, and even spoke "Syrian" (another error). In any given chapter, they are referred to as either or both, often in contradiction to the said plan of the book. Though this is no real problem for knowledgeable readers, others might get confused. Yet this is not the authors' fault. Many Syrians became Lebanese after World War II and after a concerted effort by the Maronite/Lebanese owned *Al-Hoda* press. After years of struggle and debate, the solution was to call the community Syrian-Lebanese.

Being an ethnographic study that allows its subjects to speak in the first person, *Prairie Peddlers* offers no interpretative analysis in terms of causality. For example, the authors quote the early histories of the Syrian-Lebanese that indicate the group was politically inept. No reason is given. It might have some-

thing to do with the nature of the host society because the Syrian-Lebanese in Latin America have claimed the presidency of at least two countries and countless other municipal governments. They have now won political offices here as well, and oddly enough many come from the Dakotas and the Midwest.

*Prairie Peddlers* incorporates pages of “data” (immigrant names, place of origin, landownership, date of naturalization, and so on). Rare photographs add to its merits. All in all, it is a great read.

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