

Oregonian

GOVERNOR'S PILGRIMAGE — Oregon Gov. Vic Atiyeh (center) dances with villager in Amar, Syria, during ceremony welcoming governor to

birthplace of his father, George Atiyeh, who left Amar for Oregon in 1900. All 500 residents welcomed the Oregon governor for his triumphant return.

Atiyeh resets time machine, goes 'home'

Alan K. Ota is traveling with Gov. Vic Atiyeh in the Middle East.

By ALAN K. OTA
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AMAR, Syria — When the black limousine finally squeezed its way around the last narrow curve in the road, the church bells began to ring and the ululating cries of the village women filled the air.

In 1900, George Atiyeh, the father of the future governor of Oregon, left here to go to a strange and distant place called Portland. Dozens of Amar natives would follow.

On Thursday night, George's son, Gov. Vic Atiyeh, returned "home" to his roots.

His cousin, Aniese Hadeed, 80, hugged the Portland-born governor and remembered Atiyeh's first and last visit 55 years ago to the birthplace of his father.

"He was so little and so happy. He would climb up and down the stairs and ride the horses," she said.

All 500 residents of this isolated hillside village turned out for his triumphant return.

It was, as Atiyeh later described it, like "scenes from a movie. . . Suddenly you're in the middle of it."

The village lies in a grassy bowl just over a hill from the Krak des Chevaliers, a crusader castle dating back to the 11th century. It is nestled among groves of olive, fig and almond trees, about 90 miles north of the capital, Damascus, and 25 miles west of Homs, Syria's third largest city.

Traveling the final circuitous route to it was like traveling back another

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century. The one-lane road wound through the hills past Bedouin tents and steep terraced ridges covered with flocks of sheep.

When Atiyeh emerged from the car in a brown suit, wing tips and a State of Oregon tie, he was immediately engulfed. Six trumpets and three drums led the cavalcade down the village's main street, a narrow alley barely wide enough for two donkeys. Walking in the middle of the throng, Atiyeh and his wife, Dolores, were showered with lilac water, rice, rose petals and hard candies.

People crammed balconies and roof tops applauding, as they walked under an arbor graced with twin pic-

tures of Atiyeh and Syria's President Hafez Assad.

At the home of his cousin, Aziz Atiyeh, gypsy musicians awaited, dancing wildly and playing on snake-charmer horns and hide drums. When Atiyeh finally sat down, he turned to his friend, Nofam Kasrawi, the Syrian-born vice president of CH2M Hill International of Portland, and quipped, "I never get treatment like this in Oregon."

The governor and his wife, his son, Thomas, 36, and 14 other Oregonians in his group sat around a long table, loaded with freshly grilled lamb, olives and many bottles of arak, an anise-flavored Syrian white lightning.

The local dignitaries included a Bedouin chief and a company of khaki-clad policemen for Amar and the 40 other villages of the Christian valley.

Riyad Kasses, 23, introduced Atiyeh: "He is the governor of one of the biggest and best states of the United States of America."

After eating, the party began.

Gypsy women, wearing bright veiled gowns, danced enticingly, tossing their hair and swinging their hips. The milk-drinking two-term Republican governor got up three times to join chains of dancing villagers. He sipped

gingerly on a quarter-glass of diluted arak.

It went on until 1 a.m.

Shortly after dawn Friday, Atiyeh was up for a walk through the village, sampling freshly baked pocket bread and trying to jog old memories.

"I remember this street," he said.

"I remember the last time there was dancing in the streets, guns going off."

There were no guns this time, except for a young boy's BB rifle that he borrowed and fired in the air.

He walked slowly among the sun-bleached cement block houses with Dolores, tracing the parade route. "It's real affection," Atiyeh said of the villagers. "You can feel it. It's an experience you can have only once in your life."

"Not many Americans have it," he added, "I'm glad I did."

When it was time to leave, on Friday afternoon, Atiyeh had a farewell lunch and said goodbye to his cousins, Aziz and Hadeed, and his namesake, Victor, Aziz's 10-year-old son. Then he got back in one of the nine limousines in his caravan and started the three-hour trip back to Damascus, with a coterie of security guards and Syrian ministry of information officials.