

Going home . . .

Love for Syrian homeland not limited to Atiyeh clan

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Gov. Vic Atiyeh remembers little of his first visit to the Syrian village of Amar, except the big celebration that greeted him in the place he sometimes calls "my home."

The year was 1929, and America was descending into the Great Depression.

Atiyeh, who was 6 and still in short pants, had journeyed to Amar with his homesick mother, Linda — a native of Beirut — his uncle, Aziz, and his twin brothers, Edward E. and Richard A. Atiyeh, who were 8 at the time. His father missed the trip because of business commitments.

The governor, who celebrated his 61st birthday last month, recaptured a little of the magic of that time when he returned to Amar Thursday for the first time in 55 years.

The Atiyeh family is not alone in its affection for Amar. Other Oregonians have warm memories of the tiny tile-roofed village on a hillside just east of the Mediterranean Sea.

Although Amar, which is about 90 miles north of Damascus, has only 500 residents and lies 7,000 miles from Oregon, it has much in common with the state.

There are about three times as many descendants of Amar natives living in Oregon today as there are present-day residents of the village. Several of the Oregonians have prominent positions in government and industry in their new home.

Sam Joseph "Sami" Kahl, a carpet store owner, was born in Amar. He was appointed by the governor, his first cousin, to be a member of the Oregon Racing Commission in 1983.

Multnomah County Circuit Judge Philip T. Abraham, Daniel C. Hanna and Albert Azorr Jr. are all the sons of Amar-native fathers, who worked their way up as laborers and became construction contractors in Portland. They were raised in the gregarious Syrian-Lebanese settlement that once straddled Southeast Foster Road.

Abraham has been a Multnomah County Circuit Court judge since 1981. "We were raised in a ditch," he recalled in his chambers, chuckling. "My father said he was going to make sure none of us would have to do manual labor. And he was right."

Hanna, the founder and president of Hanna Industries, a \$40 million-a-year Milwaukie business, has a large picture of Amar in his home. He holds the patents on the Hanna equipment used in 6,700 car washes in 50 countries around the world.

Azorr is a retired investigator for the Internal Revenue Service and now works for the organized crime unit in the office of Attorney General Dave Frohnmayer. When all the Azorr clan meet at Blue Lake each year, they number about 150 persons.

"My uncle lives in the old family home" in Amar, Azorr said. "The mud house where my mother and father first lived is there. While I've never been there, those things mean a great deal to me. I have a very special place in my heart for it."

The Atiyeh family played a central part in the story of Amar and the great exodus that began from it in the late 1800s.

The emigrants from Amar sought to escape poverty, burdensome taxation and the mandatory draft of Turkish rule. It was the kind of tale that would bring hundreds of immigrants to Oregon from Eastern Europe to Asia near the turn of the century.

Aziz Atiyeh, the eldest son of a farmer and landowner who was one of the wealthiest men in Amar, left in 1895 after learning English from Presbyterian missionaries and studying at Beirut's American University.

He became a peddler, lugging sacks of dry goods from door to door on the streets of New York City and, later, in the burgeoning steel and coal country around Allentown, Pa.

Then he headed west, hawking his wares from Butte, Mont., to Walla Walla, Wash.

Other sons of Amar soon followed in his path.

Dozens of them settled in the United States. Others went to Guadeloupe, Trinidad, Venezuela and Cuba.

In 1900, Aziz and his brother, George, moved to Portland and opened an oriental carpet business, A. Atiyeh & Bro. on Southwest Washington Street. The business would be a big success, and Portland, along with Allentown, Pa., would become Amar's two main settlements in the United States.

Philip Atiyeh, Aziz' son, who now lives in Manhasset, N.Y., described the brothers' method of doing business this way: "It was almost like a pyramid game. He (Aziz) would buy a rug for one unit and sell it for two. Of course in those days, you weren't handicapped with income taxes and things like that. If you were industrious you could do well."

George Atiyeh would have three sons; twins Edward and Philip in 1922, and then Victor in 1923.

When the Atiyehs of America returned to Amar in 1929, they were like conquering heroes.

Victor Atiyeh and his two brothers arrived with their mother, who had wanted first to see her home in Beirut. Their uncle, the rug merchant, was also along en route to visit his company's rug looms in Persia.

After a long ship journey from New York to Beirut, the group had piled into a Franklin Phaeton, a flashy four-door touring car that Aziz had shipped from America for the long overland journey.

There was a driver for the car, who carried a dust broom and wore a fez, and a nurse for the children.

The Atiyehs owned the largest house in the village and the most land and raised Arabian horses. To the people of the village, their relative wealth seemed at times dazzling, and the stories they told of America, irresistible.

Norma Hanna, 75, of Portland, Daniel Hanna's aunt, recalls the Atiyehs as the "wealthiest and most wonderful family" in Amar. "We used to always think that if you went to America, you would be in paradise," she added.

The worst times for Amar had come during World War I. "I'll never forget then," said Hanna, who lived in Amar from 1911 to 1924. "We would go to the field to get spinach and greens, radish and onions. We were very thin. There were a lot of beggars, just starving. Many died."

The French took control of the region in 1920. By then, she recalled, "Everyone was heading for America."

The village sits in the middle of the Christian valley, an offshot of the Homs Gap, one of two openings in the curtain of mountains separating coastal Lebanon and Palestine from the inland deserts of Syria to the west and the plains of Turkey to the north.

This mountainous region of central and western Syria is known mainly as the home of Syrian President Hafez Assad and the members of his minority Shiite Moslem sect, the Alawis, who dominate the area.

For centuries the Homs Gap was a strategic route to the rich agricultural fields and cedar-lined slopes of the coastal region.

The Crusaders, fresh from their conquest of the Holy Land for Christendom, wrested control of an Arab garrison that controlled the gap in 1110 A.D. and transformed it into the Krak des Chevaliers, which remains the best preserved castle of that era in the Middle East.

The European invaders held the hilltop fortress for 161 years, before surrendering it to Mameluk conquerors from Egypt.

By then, the entire region around the castle, stretching west to the sea and north to Turkey, had become a haven for Christians as well as Alawis, two groups of religious outcasts who enjoyed the protective shelter of the coastal mountain range.

Conflict would occasionally divide both groups.

In later years, the Amar people would reject European influence. The Christians would accept it and emigrate to the west en masse.

Not far from the Krak des Chevaliers, a Christian village was constructed during the 1700s on the site of the ruins of an earlier Christian settlement.

It was called Amar, or "place that has been rebuilt."

In the 89 years since Aziz Atiyeh first left Amar, much has changed.

It resembles many of the hundreds of villages of central Syria. But its many western-style amenities — rare for Syria — set it apart. They include an expensive sewer system, paved roads, electricity and running water.

The luxuries were largely paid for by Amar's overseas population of emigres and their descendants, who now number about 8,000.

The Amar Rural Reviving Society runs one of the village's prime industries — manufacturing glossy calendars with color photographs, which are then sold for donations to Amarians and their descendants around the world.

The amount of the donations is a measure of the success Amar natives have achieved around the world.

Vic Atiyeh is a contributor. Since the end of World War II, he has been an owner of Atiyeh Bros. Inc., the Portland rug retailing and cleaning business, with his two brothers, Richard and Edward.

The Portland shop was run by Aziz and George Atiyeh until the 1930s, when Aziz moved to New York to open a wholesale business to import rugs.

Two years ago, Daniel Hanna donated \$15,000 to Amar in memory of his father, Charles, to help build a new sewer.

Hanna said he wanted to remember his father's sacrifices and his values of "fairness, strength and appreciation for people."

"It's the place of origin of my father," Hanna said.