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Our Town

The Ithaca Journal Tuesday, September 27, 1988



MEMORIES: Holding a photograph of her father, Mary Bada reflects on the rich and unique history of her small Lansing neighborhood. Her father, Abraham Salameh, was one of the original settlers of "Syrian Hill" when he came to America at age 14 in 1909. The generational ties remain very strong in the community where gardens abound and the view of Cayuga Lake is breathtaking.

A pocketful of Syrians remain on Syrian Hill

By LYNN M. FONDY

ANNING — The same 11 houses stand on Myers Heights Road today as 80 years ago, but the neighborhood has changed. On this once-known town of "Syrian Hill," there once lived dozens of native Syrians. Now, only two remain on the hill. Most are second, third and fourth generation Syrians. These days they are joined by people of other nationalities living on the hill, including Czechs and Poles. There aren't many children living on the hill today either. Two generations ago there were 40, now there are five. Only two of them are of Syrian descent. Abraham Caldeh, 70, still lives on the hill. He came to America in 1904 with a group of 40 or so people to escape poverty and religious persecution in Syria. Some of those Syrians stayed in the Lansing area to work at the International Salt Company and live with Syrian families who had already settled in the area. The rest scattered over Cayuga Falls and Geneva. There are now about 20 Syrian families in Lansing. Native Syrians all came to the hill from the Christian town of Melkias along the Mediterranean coast, said Mary Bada, Bada's father and mother traveled to Myra, Houghton at meetings between 1909 and 1914, before they were married. Though Bada's family and the other Syrian families in the area were poor, they sent money to their friends in Melkias every two months. Bada said her mother would take a dollar or two out of a five dollar paycheck and send it to Syria. In those days, the dollars collected on Syrian Hill could help feed their friends in Syria. "We thought we were well off," she said. Bada spent two days in Melkias in the 1950's. "It was a very beautiful place, a beautiful country," she said. She couldn't forget, however, that her parents had been a poor and persecuted minority when they had lived there. By the 1920s large groups of Syrians had stopped immigrating to the area, although Syrians continued to trickle in to Lansing over the years. Bada now lives in the house her father bought in 1928. He bearded with other Syrian families until he could afford to buy one of the houses on Syrian Hill that had been built by the salt company for their workers. The trees behind the big old houses still sweep out towards Cayuga Lake, but the original green shingles have been replaced.

Lifelines have changed too. Most Syrians don't follow traditional customs anymore such as celebrating Christmas 11 days after the traditional American Christmas, said Sophie Caldeh, Abraham Caldeh's daughter. "We're all of kind of American and now."

Yet, there's still a Syrian flavor in the lives of these descendants. While English is their first language, all the Syrians learn to speak Arabic too. The Badas still serve traditional Middle-Eastern foods for dinner: tabouli, mezzeh, rice and yogurt.

The St. Melkias Society, a church organization with members of Lansing's first and second generation Syrian families, still meets regularly. There is a yearly Arabic speaking picnic in Lansing, and once a year the Syrians put on a "Harbi" for the public, with traditional Syrian dancing, music and food. There is no longer a priest to preach regularly at St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church on the hill. It stands empty with the white curtains drawn in front of the altar while the

Syrians go to a Greek church in Ithaca. But a couple of times a year, the Syrians walk under the cross above the little door. Their friends from the Greek church like to host and they sit in 75 blue folding-chairs. Pictures of holy people line the walls. "It's very old country like," Bada said.

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Police blotter

Groton roundup

Here's a roundup of police activity in the Village of Groton between Wednesday, Sept. 14 and Tuesday, Sept. 20. The following was furnished by the village police department:
• Personal Injury Accidents — 1
• Vehicle and Traffic Issues — 3
• Criminal Assault — 1
• Curfew — 2
• Changing mischief — 2
A 16-year-old male youth was sent to Tompkins County Jail after being charged Sept. 15 with allegedly having sexual contact with a 12-year-old girl under the month police said. The youth was arrested at the residence at 508 E. Cortland St. and later a charge of first-degree at school rape.
The following roundup of police activity in the Town of Groton was reported by the Tompkins County Sheriff's Department:
• Curfew — 1
• Personal Injury Accidents — 1
• Vehicle and Traffic Issues — 2
• Burglaries — 2
• Trespass — 1
New York state police had no report of a controlled

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