

LEBANESE IN ALBURY

Edited talk by Mr E D (Eddie) Batrouney (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, February 1987 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletins No 247 & 248)

Around the period of 1850-1880 enterprising people of Lebanon found there was no scope for advancement in their country and they looked to the new world of Australia and America for their opportunities.

Some migrants with a little money came to Australia and settled in Sydney and Melbourne. They worked hard and prospered. Their letters back to Lebanon encouraged other people who were anxious to improve their future to come to Australia. In those days all immigrants paid their own passage and had to obtain work quickly so as to live. Families rarely came out together because they could not afford to do so. Usually the breadwinner and perhaps an adult child would come out first and as they could afford to they would send the fares back until all of the family had arrived. Their early settlement was very difficult but as a result of determination and hard work they survived and ultimately prospered.

There were some cases of people leaving Lebanon expecting to travel to America only to arrive in Australia and vice versa. Most of the arrivals to Australia from Lebanon were met in Melbourne and Sydney by some of the 1860 settlers who had established themselves in the clothing business. They staked the newcomers to a wagon, horse and stock and sent them to various parts of Victoria and New South Wales to hawk their goods from farm to farm. In Melbourne it was two brothers, Latoof & Callil Fakrey who started the Victorians and in Sydney two families, one Stanton Mellick and a Mr Aboud served those settling in New South Wales.

Those people venturing out from Melbourne suffered some severe droughts and lost their horses and when they became aware of the mighty Murray River as a permanent supply of water they found Albury very attractive. My research shows that the earliest Lebanese migrants to Albury were Messrs Sarroff, B Abicare and S M Abikhair. They arrived during the 1880s. They were followed in turn by the Elias Family, A M Abikhair, Salamy Family, Mary Haddad, Galleti, David and Nadar Families. Later arrivals to the Albury Wodonga area were the Bounaders, George Malouf, the Nesires, the Corbans, Farrah, Buckley, Assad, Joe Malouf, Azzi, Nash, Dihood, Wessen, Beca, Batrouney, Bacash, Nasser, Doble, Sedawie, Mellick, McConnell, Mannering, Jabour, Jabara and Metry.

When the early Lebanese came to Albury, the main centre of commerce was Townsend Street. It was later that the development of the commercial area started to creep along Dean Street and Olive Street and Townsend Street ceased to be the major commercial area.

Lebanese in the early years were primarily traders and shopkeepers and usually in the clothing field. However it is interesting to note that the Elias Family started the manufacture of ice in Albury. The Salamy Family started white work manufacture in the town and they were closely followed by A M Abikhair establishing a factory for manufacture.

As the settlers prospered they sought to invest their moneys in land and buildings. Over the years Betro Abicare built the 'Big Store' on one corner of Dean and David Streets. He subsequently built the magnificent Regent Theatre on another corner and then a service station on the third corner. Saad Abikhair eventually built on the corner of Olive and Swift streets and extended along both Olive and Swift streets. George Malouf built what is now the T & G Building which later had the tower erected at the front. Mr Malouf also built the shop on the site of the present [1987] Commonwealth Bank at 482 Dean Street. A M Abikhair built his premises in Dean Street and this was followed in the same block bounded by Olive and David streets with shops

with dwellings at rear and above by Dihoods, Corbans, Farrahs, Buckleys, Nesires and Assads. S M Abikhair built several shops for tenants in the same block. Mr J Dihood who acquired the Malouf shop then built the splendid Ritz building next door. Almost all the Lebanese in Albury to-day [1987] are 1st, 2nd and 3rd generation Australian. Nearly all have never visited Lebanon and in most cases the original migrants did not return to Lebanon for visits.

With the advent of World War 2 migration from Lebanon came to a standstill for many years. After the 1970s, few migrants from Lebanon came to Albury. Up to about the 1970s the Lebanese migrants to Australia and Albury were people of fine character, industrious, family loving and mainly of the Christian faith. After the 1970s, many of the migrants left Lebanon because of war, revolts and dissatisfaction with their country.

Whilst these people still had to pay their passage to Australia they had the advantage of the Government support here such as child-endowment, unemployment benefits etc, and did not have to work as hard as the earlier migrants did to survive. Many of these later migrants have settled in the capital cities and are not of the Christian faith. Undoubtedly some of these new migrants were politically active in their homeland but many of them were not and only seek a life of peace and quiet. Either way they had been caught up with the religious wars in Lebanon which had been going for years through the scheming of the Russians, Americans, French and others who schemed to introduce distrust of one religion against another.

After the early settlers, who had as I previously mentioned, been supplied with goods etc. by capital city Lebanese in starting their business, Albury became such a popular re-stocking centre that the Sarroff family developed a semi-wholesale situation for re-stocking the supplies to traders and this was followed with people such as Salamys, A M Abikhair and others who through their manufacturing set up became suppliers of goods to hawkers of all nationalities including Lebanese, Indian and Chinese.

After the Great Depression of the 1930s, Lebanese people in Albury branched into several fields. We find Granny Abikhair, who was really Mrs Mary Haddad and mother of Mrs Effie Abikhair and Mrs Jameelie Assad, having a fruit and vegetable business in Dean Street. She was very well known to the 'tramps' of that period who always passed the word to fellow tramps 'Call on Granny Abikhair in Albury she will always buy you a meal.' When Mrs Haddad died in 1940, her daughter Effie Abikhair who always sat on a chair or a box in front of her fruit shop was often mistaken for her mother by people who did not know that the first Granny had died and as Mrs Abikhair remained in business until almost 1970, it seemed that Granny Abikhair had lived forever.

We found that over this period Lebanese moved into many fields of activities. I have already mentioned the Elias Family in the ice works, the many drapery firms, the clothing manufacturers and semi-wholesalers, but we find Mr Jim Abikhair started his service station in Mate Street, Jim and Vicky Bacash established their pie and hamburger shop in Dean Street and later their very fine development of *The Cedar* as a reception centre. Batrouneys started with fruit and vegetables and then established a real estate agency, auction rooms and furniture store. The Assad family and members of the Sarroff family into the bookmaking field, George Abikhair and later Joe Malouf with a Billiard Club, Bounaders with a picture theatre in Wodonga, others involved with the food and refreshment business, dry cleaners and laundry by members of the Sarroff family, the jewellery business by Jabara's and Ada Abikhair, shoe repairs and poultry farming by members of the Metry family, and so it goes on.

Some Lebanese played their part in the sporting fields like Bob Mannering and others in football, many with bowls, golf and cricket. During the past 40 years many Lebanese throughout Australia have found their children moving away from being retailers and entering the

professions. We find they have entered almost all of the professional fields such as law, medicine, pharmacy, motels, politics and education.

They have served Albury and Australia in local government and management of various sporting activities. We find that Sir Nicholas Shehadie received his Knighthood after being Lord Mayor of Sydney and has been for many years and still is [1987] the power in Rugby League circles in New South Wales. Many Australians of Lebanese origin have received Australian and English Honours and Awards in many fields. We find that at Laverton in Victoria where Squadron Leader Alex Abikhair, father of Shirley Abikhair, has a Sargeant's Mess named in his honour.

I do not know of any Lebanese migrants to Australia or any members of their families up to 1970 being convicted for any crime. They have been law abiding, respectable and good living Australians. Australia has given them opportunities and challenges, and I believe that in commerce, the professions, sporting groups, Government and Local Government bodies, support to charities and charitable organisations, and the armed services and family responsibilities, they have accepted the challenges and by their activities have shown that they are good Australian Lebanese.