

Buffalo Tales



Volume 9, No. 4

Buffalo County Historical Society

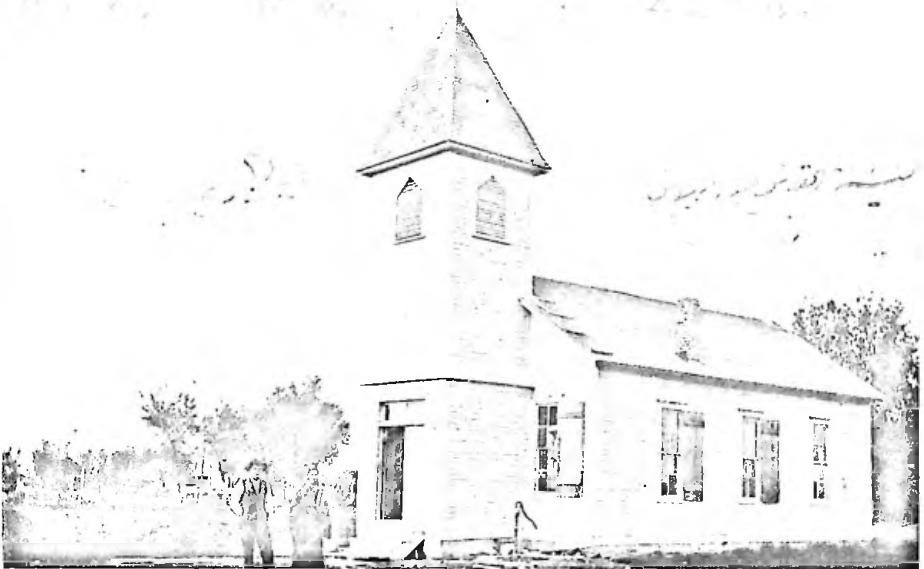
April 1986

THE LEBANESE IN KEARNEY - Part I

by Minnett Yanney Steinbrink

Kearney had among its early settlers numerous individuals who came from other countries. No single country sent a large enough number of immigrants to Kearney to result in the domination of one group. However, a group which stands out from others is the Lebanese because these very few immigrants organized the St. George Syrian Orthodox Church in June of 1903. This church was organized under the direction of the Rev. Nicola E. Yanney, who was the first priest to be ordained in the United States by his church, and St. George Church in Kearney was the second of its kind in America. It is difficult to evaluate the influence of a church, but the existence of St. George in Kearney undoubtedly influenced many immigrants from the Near East to come to Kearney. When Greek families emigrated to Kearney in the 1920's, they also attended St. George, and it is known today as St. George Orthodox Church. It has ministered not only to the spiritual needs of its people, but also has helped them adjust to their new country.

Economic depression was the primary reason for Lebanese persons in Lebanon and Syria to leave their home countries. Until they could learn the English language



St. George Syrian Orthodox Church, 1903.

(Continued on Page 3)

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68847. It is sent to all members of the Society. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people.

Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

Basic Membership	\$ 7.50
Institutional Membership	\$10.00
Supporting Membership	\$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Chandler Lynch III; Vice-President, Barb Avery; Secretary, Margaret Hohnholt; Treasurer, Leo Henricksen; Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Merlin Berglund, Leonard Silver, Philip S. Holmgren, Minnett Steinbrink, Henrietta Rhamy, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield and Marian Johnson; Publications Chairman, Alice Howell.

Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director.

Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Attend the Annual Meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society on Sunday, April 20, at 1:00 p.m. at the First Lutheran Church, 3315 Avenue G, in Kearney. Bring a casserole, a salad or a dessert. After the luncheon and the business meeting following, a program on *Old Kenwood*, one of Kearney's historic districts will be given.



Are you one of the 85 *valuable volunteers* who spent a total of 624 hours helping at Trails and Rails Museum last year? If you are, we would like to say *Thank you* by inviting you to come to Trails and Rails Museum on Tuesday, April 22, at 2:00 p.m. or 7:30 p.m.

Or, are you one of the many members who wanted to be a tour guide or to do some other volunteer projects at the museum last year but could not fit it into your busy schedule? Now you have a chance to join this year's volunteer group at the Museum on April 22.

You will be treated to a sneak preview of the Freighters Hotel interior restoration in the newly completed slide program about Trails and Rails. Share in some refreshments. Visit with other volunteers. Let us show we appreciate your help. There is an evening session for those of you who have jobs but could volunteer a Saturday or Sunday afternoon.



Dig out the sun bonnets and overalls. The *Wagons West Celebration* is back by popular demand to usher in the summer season. Plan to spend Saturday, May 31, at the museum. Think about Freighters Hotel tours . . . Sandy Creek Muzzle Loaders camped on the museum grounds . . . living history demonstrations . . . square dancing . . . musical entertainment . . . barbeque supper . . . baking pies for the concession stand.

More details will be coming later about the activities being planned. We had excellent cooperation and participation from BCHS members last year. This year promises to be even more fun.

NEW MEMBERS

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------|---------|
| Tom Cook | Kearney | Mr. & Mrs. George Peterson . . . | Kearney |
| Mr. & Mrs. Peter J. Paul | Kearney | Douglas R. State | Kearney |

they were peddlers or farm workers, sometimes both, in their first years in Buffalo County. Later many became grocers or truck gardeners, living in south or southeast Kearney near their church.

Hayek

The earliest Lebanese immigrant to travel to Kearney and settle there was Michael Hayek. His journey to America from Fih, Lebanon, was in 1884 at the age of seventeen. He resided in Omaha a short time, then realizing the tremendous business possibilities and the booming community, he moved to Kearney in the late 1880's. He was a peddler for a few years, but soon after the turn of the century he opened the Hayek Grocery Store at 1806 Central Avenue. Later he built a new store at 1822 Central Avenue and operated it until he retired.

Mr. Hayek was the moving force in the organization of St. George Syrian Orthodox Church. He and his friends purchased the ground and located the church next to the Hayek home at Third Avenue and 14th Street. The church building was the former Cotton Mill schoolhouse which had been moved in from west of Kearney. Mr. Hayek was remembered by friends, sitting by the pot-bellied stove in his store reading a Bible approximately four inches thick, as he waited for customers to come in. Mary Hayek was the first Lebanese child born in Kearney on March 12, 1894, to Mike and Sadie Hayek. Mary worked at the Boston Store from the time (in her words): "I was old enough to see over the counter." She was later employed by Liberty Cleaners as a seamstress, earning 15¢ an hour. During World War II when the Air Base was located in Kearney, Mary often remarked that she had clothes piled to the ceiling that needed mending.

In 1921 the Hayeks purchased the large Victorian style home located at 1303 Ninth Avenue. The family kept it in its original condition while living there. Sadie Hayek was proud of her yard and often gave tours of her lovely flower gardens and lily pools. Mike and Sadie Hayek, their daughter Mary and son Gabriel are now deceased. A daughter, Julia (George), lives in Aubrey, Texas.

George

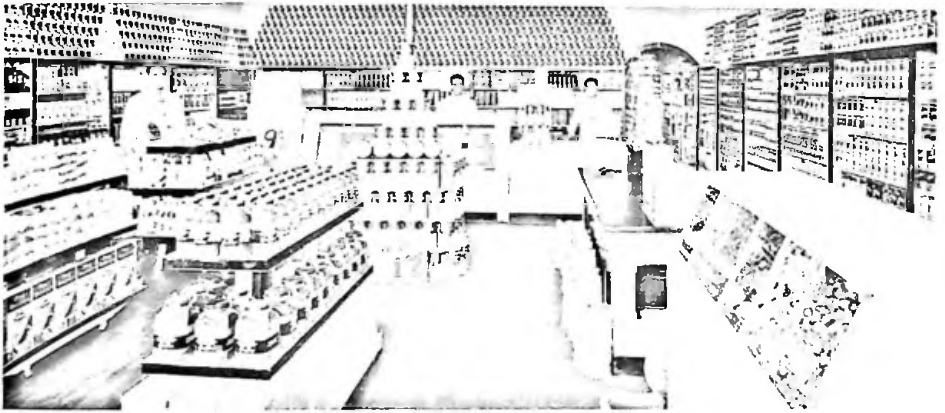
Brothers Charles, Simon and Sam George traveled to America from Fih, Lebanon, probably around the turn of the century, and located first in Omaha. Mike Hayek was a relative, and while visiting the Georges in Omaha, informed them of the great opportunities available in Kearney. All three came to Kearney. Around 1913 Charles started The Boston Store, a well-known general merchandise business in Kearney, first at 2010 Central Avenue, later moving to 2109 Central. The Boston Store contained three floors with furs and coal stored side by side. It is believed that it was in this area of furs and coal that a fire originated in the store, causing the destruction of the building and later the closing of the store in 1932.

Charles and his wife Mary purchased a large home on 31st Street and Central Avenue, later selling it for the construction of the Good Samaritan Hospital. After the closing of The Boston Store, Charles and his family left Kearney, moving to Lexington and Cozad, then back to Omaha.

Samuel and wife Anna moved to Kearney at about the same time Charles did, but they stayed only a few years, then moved to Lexington and opened a store there.

Simon George and his wife Mary were in Kearney as early as 1910, and opened a store at 1912 Central Avenue, later moving one door north to 1914 Central. Their

first home was at 1701 Avenue D, near Bryant School. Their eldest son George was born there in 1911. He recalls that it was a two-bedroom dwelling eventually housing the parents and their six children. As a young child, George asked for a pony for his birthday, but his mother felt it best to give him a small wagon instead, and taught him to sell home-grown vegetables door to door. Customers would wait for him as he pulled his wagon along and would place orders in advance—the beginning of his lifelong grocery sales career.



George's Grocery, 1935.

Behind the counters, left to right: George George, Allen Howard, Eli George.

The Simon George Grocery started in 1910 is the oldest locally owned, independent grocery store in Buffalo County. It was a family business with the children, George, Eli, Minnie, Doris and Lucille participating in its operation. The Colgate-Palmolive Co. awarded George's Grocery the honor of being the friendliest store in town. There is always a smile, a laugh and a song greeting customers entering the store.

In 1931 Simon turned the store over to his son George. George George was then the youngest grocery store owner in Kearney. George says that his first five years of business in the early 1930's were bitter years. He used white muslin for partitions, but the dust storms soon changed the color of the muslin. He attributes the business success of the store to several store policies. Customers were allowed to charge, and even today about twenty percent of their customers charge. The store made deliveries twice a day, and one delivery a week to a special customer in Lexington, Casper and Mary (Shada) Casper.

After turning the Kearney store over to George, Simon moved to Hildreth to open a store, with his son Eli and daughter Sadie assisting him. Both Eli and Sadie graduated from Hildreth High School. They remained in Hildreth only a few years, then returned to Kearney and Eli was associated with his brother at George's Grocery until his retirement, except for the time served in military service in World War II.

Doris George married Roy Abood in California in 1946. They returned to Kearney in 1950 and operated Roy's Cafe for seventeen years, located in the south half of George's Grocery building. The cafe was a family-operated business involving Roy, Doris and sons Dick and Tom. They combined their talents to provide the public with home style meals. Doris's homemade cinnamon rolls for coffee and Roy's chicken-fried steaks at noon will long be remembered by their patrons.

George George married Alice Knoll of Kearney. Their eldest son, Dave, was made manager of the grocery store in 1982, thus bringing the third generation into the management of George's Grocery.

Eli married Helen Franklin of Ravenna, and Sadie married Harold Greenfield. All live in Kearney except Sadie, whose home is in Omaha. The parents and daughters Minnie and Lucille are deceased.



Wedding picture of Mose and Sadie Shada, 1904.

Shada

The Shada family is possibly the largest Lebanese family in Nebraska. Three brothers, John, Gabriel and Mose, left their village in Fih, Lebanon to embark on a journey to America, more specifically to Omaha, Nebraska. Gabriel had a camel freight business in Fih and had not planned to go, but the morning of the brothers' departure his camel died, so he packed his bags and went along. They arrived in New York in the fall of 1896 on the S. S. LaTouraine. A brother Abraham may have been with them, or may have come a few years earlier. Abraham had settled in Kearney by 1904, the first of many Shada immigrants to come to the city.

John, Gabriel and Mose traveled by railroad from New York to Omaha. While there they earned their living by peddling, then peddled their way to Kearney to reside. Later John and Gabriel returned to Fih to bring their brides to America. They both became farmers near Kearney and in the early years continued as peddlers. Their wives spent hours crocheting so the husbands could peddle their hand work. Their children attended Glenwood rural school.

In Omaha Mose met Sadie George, his bride-to-be. Sadie was born in 1886 and had come to New York from Lebanon in 1898, and from there to Omaha. Her marriage to Mose in 1904 was prearranged by parents and friends, a practice quite usual at that time. After their marriage in Omaha they made their way to Kearney to establish a home. Kearney was selected because of the many Lebanese who had emigrated to the Platte valley. Neither could read or write the English language so had to depend on others who knew the language. On arrival Mose and Sadie resided in a large two-story home at 25th and Avenue E (the site of the new post office). Here no less than six other families resided, all relatives.

Mose started a career in peddling, also doing farm labor as he found it. In 1905 Mose and Sadie decided to homestead near Gandy and their first child, Albert, was born there. One afternoon Sadie noticed a rattlesnake on the roof of their home. She quickly gathered up the baby, packed all their belongings, sat outside and waited for Mose to return from the field. They headed back to Kearney, their homesteading days over. In Kearney their source of income was largely from a family vegetable garden. Mose worked for the Union Pacific for a few years but was forced to leave due to ill

Buffalo County Historical Society
Box 523
Kearney, NE 68848

Non-Profit Organization
Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage
PAID
Postal Permit No. 7
Kearney, Nebraska

Floyd Randall
 Rt. 1
 Gibbon, NE 68840

health. He died in July, 1939, and Sadie passed away in February of 1965, having lived in Kearney for sixty-one years. Five of their ten children are still living, Mike and Ruby (Sadd) in Kearney; Elizabeth (Stutheit) and Paul in Santa Rosa, California; and Mary (Casper) in Lexington.

Nephews in Lebanon followed the first Shada immigrants to Kearney. Sam and his wife Selma arrived in 1907. Sam worked for the railroad until 1910, then they moved to Omaha where he was a member of the Fire Department until 1917 when the family returned to Kearney. Until 1943 Sam had a truck garden and peddled vegetables not only in Kearney, but in surrounding towns. Selma died in 1941 and Sam died in 1964. Eight of their nine children are living: Nick and Eli, in Kearney; George, Paul, Katherine (Ganen) and Sadie (Barton) in Omaha; Perry in Loup City, and Mary (Powell) in Austin, Texas.

Other nephews coming to Kearney were brothers Charles W., who arrived in 1905, George W. in 1907, and John W. in 1910. John's wife Helen and their baby son Nick followed a year later. The men worked at peddling, on the railroad or in the grocery business. Charles operated Shada's Cash Grocery at 2410 Central Avenue for several years. John tried farming but was not successful so he went into the business of trucking produce, wholesale and retail, eventually managing several trucks and hauling from Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, Idaho, Utah and Colorado. When five of John and Helen's six sons went into military service in World War II, the father had to sell the trucking business. He then went to work in a wholesale store in Kearney.

John Shada died in 1958 and Helen in 1981 at age 91. Ten of their eleven children are living: Victor, Victoria (Applegarth), Tony, Leo and Josephine (Wetzig) live in Kearney; Mabel (McCauley) in Ansley; Norma and John Jr., in Grand Island, and George and Maxine (Greever) in Fort Worth, Texas.

A Shada family reunion is held every summer in Nebraska, often in Kearney. Attendance is now well over two hundred from all over the United States. The 1946 reunion was an especially happy one when the twenty-six Shada boys who had been in overseas combat had safely returned from World War II.

SOURCES

Kearney Centennial Edition, 1973; Bassett's History of Buffalo County, 1916; Kearney Daily Hub; Kearney Cemetery Records; Kearney City Directories; Interviews with Charles Shada, Sr., Mildred Shada, Julia Hayek George, George George, Doris and Roy Abood, Lillian Shada, Dr. and Mrs. F. M. Shada, Nick Shada, and Tony Shada.

(Part II will continue the history of early Lebanese families in Kearney.)