

PLEASANT DAYS SPRING 2023

KSA
REUNION
2023

THE MAGAZINE FOR SAUDI ARAMCO RETIREES WORLDWIDE

Al~Ayyam Al~Jamilah

الأيام الجميلة





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Saudi Aramco welcomed home 405 former employees and family members at the record-long Expatriates Reunion, held March 1-14 under the banner "Rediscover the Kingdom." The CEO's Welcome Luncheon on March 2 was among the highlights of the reunion, during which attendees crisscrossed the country reconnecting with people and places.



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Al-Ayyam Al-Jamilah

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A photo is worth a thousand words: Here's a selection from sites around Saudi Arabia that many Expatriates Reunion attendees visited this spring. Happy memories!



1. Terry Van Ballegoijen and sons, John (left) and David, aim to Rediscover the Kingdom. 2. Tattooing at Eco Park. 3. Former ARA officer Dawn Higgins meets old friends. 4. Gowns galore at wedding show. Munira al-Khagari, retired Shirley Seymour and the bride. 5. Saif and Sue Belvo Frank daughter, Emily, with son, Adam, and his fiancée at right. 6. A whirling dancer entertains visitors. 7. Zahid Sheikh, son of the late Aramco photographer Shaikh Amin, registers March 1.

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Gloria Gibbs met Woody Keller in Abqaiq as the 1940s came to a close. They married and moved to Umm 'Unaiq, a new community to the southwest, in 1952. She donated a cache of rare photos from Umm 'Unaiq to the company last year, and she remembers her time at the short-lived, friendly little town.



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Bob Norberg interned as *Sun & Flare* editor in 1956. He returned in 1964, moving from Public Relations to Government Affairs to head of the office in Washington, D.C., where he learned about the plight of the Palestinians. He wryly describes his journey.



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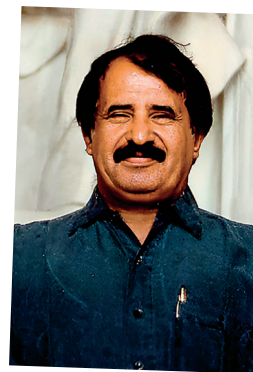
Rich Howard lost his parents and his sister, Elizabeth, age nine, in a plane crash in Cairo in 1965, when he was a boarding-school student. He deals with that event's effects on his life, and richly discusses his years in the kingdom.



IN MEMORIAM

41 Remembering Husain Saif (1937-2023)

Husain Saif made a deep impression on a fellow Aramco employee and friend: "Charismatic, magnetic, a torrent of energy and spontaneous humor, he could have sold furnaces door-to-door in the scorching heat of an Arabian summer."



Cover: Brat Lisa Sandefur (left), daughter of Warren and Vivian Menicke, and Ilaria Sézanne, wife of retiree Daniel Beard, watch the owner of a rose-garden tea shop in al-Hasa brew a drink during the KSA Expatriates Reunion in March.

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saudi aramco



ROUSING WELCOME

Greets 5th KSA Expats Reunion Attendees



STORIES WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY ARTHUR CLARK

More than 400 retirees, former employees and family members remembered the past, caught up on the present and peeked into the future of the company and the kingdom at the record-long Fifth KSA Expatriates Reunion, held March 1-14.

Attendees, along with hundreds of Saudi colleagues, received a rousing welcome home on Day 2 of the reunion when brightly clad dancers representing Saudi Aramco's international work force presented a Broadway-style show on floorboards they shared with a Saudi color guard and standard bearer at the CEO's Welcome Luncheon in Dhahran.

There, CEO Amin Nasser thanked everyone for coming, "whether you flew thousands miles or took a short car ride."

In the reunion program, titled "Rediscover the Kingdom," Amir of the Eastern Province Saud bin Naif bin Abdulaziz Al Sa'ud and Nasser highlighted the social and economic transformation under way in Saudi Arabia. Nabeel al-Jama', executive vice president of Human Resources and Community Services, said he was sure the reunion would "stir up a mix of emotions" among attendees.

It certainly did, as visitors sampled from a menu of nearly 120 events and trips—the most ever offered at a reunion—and traveled independently to places they loved.

The ever-energetic Ali Baluchi, who retired as director of

Community Services in 1990 after a 41-year career, reprised his role as the one-and-only reunion chairman. The first reunion took place in 2000, followed by big shindigs in 2009, 2015 and 2019. Two 2023 reunion participants, Vicci Thompson and David Jessich, have perfect reunion attendance records.

Baluchi, 93, thanked everyone "for coming together to celebrate your history." He praised his team of more than 100 volunteers for giving "hundreds of hours" to organize the event.

Taking advantage of even half the reunion itinerary options would have tested the skills of a top project manager, not to say the stamina of the average retiree (age 71). They included visits to company communities in the Eastern Province and to Shaybah in the far southeast, al-'Ula and Mada'in Salih in the northwest, Yanbu' and Jiddah on the Red Sea, Abha in the southwest, and Riyadh and Diriyah in the center.

In between, there were trips ranging from places like Aramco Trading, a marketing subsidiary in Dhahran, to the *suq* in Hofuf; outings to Jubail and to nearby islands in the Gulf; a journey to oil and gas facilities north of Dhahran; and a brief "enrollment" at the company's Expatriate Schools where teams of notebook-wielding Honor Society students led visitors through classrooms and a geponic greenhouse loaded with vegetables.

In addition, local businessmen with long personal and family

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histories with the company laid on fêtes for attendees. At several of these, guests joined in traditional dancing led by colorful local and visiting troupes.

Attendees reflected the company's worldwide demographic. The majority, 264, came from the United States, followed by Canada (40), Britain (30), Pakistan (24), India (17) and Australia (eight). Another one to four each attended from Lebanon, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Ireland, Italy, Sudan, China, Jordan, Thailand and the U.A.E.

Regardless of their passports, upon arrival at Reunion House in Dhahran they resumed their "Aramco citizenship."

Mohammad Riaz Baig, from Pakistan, said he, his wife, Aasia Khatoon, and their son, Mohammed Jawad Baig, "felt something touching our hearts" when they landed back in Saudi Arabia. He worked in Community Services in Abqaiq from 1977-2011, earning the nickname "AC man of Abqaiq."

One of those heart-touching moments happened Feb. 28, a day before the reunion began, when he met an old colleague, Khalid al-Hadi, at his hotel in al-Khobar. "What a happy surprise!" said Baig, who immediately accepted an invitation from al-Hadi for dinner at his home in Dammam.

American James Wilkins was equally pleased to be back in the kingdom. He attended with his wife, Supaporn, and their son, Tyler.

"I'm glad to be back ... to see what has changed and to see old Saudi friends," said the 2013 Exploration Organization retiree as he traveled with a busload of visitors to al-Uqayr—the old Gulf port for al-Hasa

Oasis. "I'm happy to be back exploring."

Amin Nasser struck a similar "exploration" chord at the Welcome Luncheon. The Reunion Committee switched the gala from its previous dinner timings to a luncheon to enable a large contingent of Saudi retirees to attend and reconnect with expatriate workmates and friends.

"For those returning for the first time in years or decades, you will see that the kingdom and our communities look very different from the last time you were here," Nasser said.

Vision 2030, the country's turbo-charged development plan unveiled by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2016, means "Saudi Arabia is in the middle of inspiring change. Business is growing and innovation, entertainment and tourism continue to expand and enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors alike."

Nasser said the company is one of the key "catalysts for the country's transformation. The foundation built by your trusted hands has now supported Aramco to become one of the world's largest and most profitable companies."

He asked retirees to continue serving as ambassadors by "telling the Aramco story to friends, family and future generations.... Each of you is a valued contributor to Aramco's story—and I personally cannot wait to see what the next chapter looks like."

The CEO praised Baluchi and his team for their work. "Once again, Ali Baluchi, you have done it!" he said to a big round of applause.

"It has been an immense pleasure bringing the last five expatriate reunions together," said Baluchi, who

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Dancers clad in costumes from around the world took the stage with a Saudi color guard and standard bearer at the Welcome Luncheon on March 2; CEO Amin Nasser and Reunion Chairman Ali Baluchi exchange a gift at the luncheon; Mohammad Baig and his old colleague, Khalid al-Hadi, had their own surprise reunion in al-Khobar on Feb. 28.



Saudi Aramco Retirees Reunion 2023



FROM TOP: A female rider saluted at an equestrian and camel show March 8; Ambassador to the U.S. Reema bint Bandar Al Sa'ud, flanked by Ali Baluchi, left, and Nabeel al-Jama', spoke to a group of reunion attendees March 2; a group including members of the 28-person Reunion Committee met with Chairman Ali Baluchi (center left) at Reunion House in January, continuing work begun many months before.

announced his retirement as reunion chief.

In an interview, Baluchi said he hoped the expanded CEO's Welcome Luncheon would spur the establishment of a forum of Saudis and expatriates to give them a stronger external voice for the kingdom and the company. "The time spent at the luncheon can be the beginning of forging these bonds," he said.

A key topic among retirees at Reunion '23 was the dramatic social change in the kingdom, evidenced by the number of women who have taken jobs—even becoming Uber drivers.

"There have been enormous changes," Baluchi said. "Now 33 percent of the government work force is female. In Aramco, many ladies are holding good jobs. Women are equally paid for the same job."

"We pay a high price for that," he joked. "We don't see the women because they are at work!"

Saudi women checked and stamped attendees' passports at the airport, guided visitors around cities and historical sites, and staffed cash registers and helped customers at supermarkets and shops.

At one bustling store in al-Khobar, a veiled young woman invited customers to take a sample from her tray of chocolate biscuits. "Try one," she said in Arabic and English, with a twinkle in her eye.

"When I talk to Saudi ladies, I think they are very happy with the changes," said Jiening Piao, whose husband, William (Allen) Rockwell, retired in 2012. "It's good to see women have a lot more freedom



and opportunities."

Stephanie Walsh, a U.K. citizen who worked in the women's Industrial Training Center (ITC) in Dhahran from 1984-'86, smiled as she remembered the old days.

"There's nothing like Aramco and Saudi Arabia," said Walsh, on her first trip back to the kingdom. "What's nice is that we are celebrating a company and a country."

"Aramco was at the forefront of training women 40 years ago," she said. But it had to take special steps to do that.

"Windows were high up so no one could see inside the ITC," she



The guide signals her approval during a March 1 outing that included views of the 16th-century Portuguese fort in Tarut, a stop at a fish market in Qatif and a banquet at a ranch in Saihat.



Mark and Morgan Dietsch stroll under Elephant Rock, one of the stops on a trip to Mada'in Salih and al-'Ula on March 10.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Saud bin Naif bin Abdulaziz, met 85 reunion guests March 7; Abdullah Ali al-Saihati signs his biography for Jiening Piao on a visit to his home and ranch; Jeanne Laswell displays a photo of herself and her mom, Helene, in al-Khobar around 1950.

said, “and an elderly Saudi couple would sit all day, he outside in the sun and she in the foyer,” in case a delivery man arrived.

“If a man did enter the ITC, she would say, ‘There’s a man in the building! There’s a man in the building!’”

That’s now long gone, Walsh said.

In a surprise visit on March 2, Ambassador to the U.S. Reema bint Bandar Al Sa’ud told a group of attendees at Ithra, Saudi Aramco’s ultramodern cultural facility on northern edge of Dhahran, that there have also been dramatic developments in the artworld in the kingdom.

“You’ll see for the first time a lot of Saudi artists who, five to seven years ago, couldn’t show their artwork here.... [Now they are] able to come home and be celebrated,” said the ambassador, who also made a surprise visit to meet 2019 reunion attendees at Diriyah. “I’m so excited for you to see this pivot point and change that I know in my lifetime I never thought I’d see.”

“One of the things the Ministry of Culture is trying to do is allow the current generation to express themselves and learn what

Saudi Arabia is changing fast without losing touch with “the good things that are part of our culture.” Prince Saud bin Naif talked with visitors for 40 minutes, received a Blue Button for Commitment in an unscripted gesture by Elizabeth McLellan, a nurse who worked in Ras Tanura in the 1980s, and asked attendees to return to the kingdom “again and again and again.”

After shaking hands with everyone, he posed for a group photo—and then sent a signed copy to each attendee.

Prince Saud got a little pushback when he thanked retirees for their work, saying, “We will always remember your sacrifices.”

“Working here was not a sacrifice—it was a pleasure!” replied retiree David Jessich. He grew up in the kingdom, joined the company fulltime in 1982, retired in 2004 and counts several big oil and gas facilities as “my babies.”

He told Prince Saud that his dad, Frank, joined the company in Ras Tanura in 1950 and that his son, Christopher, now works and lives in Dhahran with his family.

self-expression means,” she said, calling the shift “a symbol of where we’re trying to go and why it’s important to keep moving forward.”

At a meeting on March 7, the governor of the Eastern Province told 85 attendees that



“Maybe there will be a fourth generation” at Aramco, Jessich mused. “Saudi Arabia really is our home.”

Jenny Spaulding told Prince Saud that she’d arrived at Aramco in 1980 “as a young, single petroleum engineer, married and raised a family. I’ve always loved the kingdom, but an extra added element is that now women are working” where they never could before.

Iro Smith took her love for the kingdom even farther. The native of Greece, who lived in Dhahran with her husband, Ron, from 1982 until 2008 when he retired, told the prince, “When I die, I want part of me to be buried here and part of me in Greece.”

Short of that, she praised the kingdom’s launch of an electronic visa-application procedure that immediately provides an entry document to the citizens of a number of countries.

“Thank you very much for allowing us to feel and stay at home,” she said.

At least one attendee said she found it hard to feel “home” because of all the changes since she’d left, however.

“I don’t recognize anything,” said Jeanne Laswell, back in Dhahran after an absence of more than 70 years. “This is not the home that I experienced.”

She came to the kingdom with her stepdad, Charles (Chuck) Neher, and her mother, Helene, in 1948. She left in 1951, after starting first grade, when he was posted to Rome.

Her old house at 615 Sixth St. in Dhahran is gone, but with the help of a new friend from the Welcome Luncheon she found the corner where it had stood and the alley behind it where the phone for everyone on the block was mounted on a pole.

Sixth St., now the thoroughfare running into Dhahran from al-Khobar, was an “oil-on-sand” road when she lived in Dhahran, Laswell said. Al-Khobar had dirt streets and camels, she added, showing a photo of her mother and herself in the middle of the town on a scorching day in 1949.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Reunion attendees viewed an artist’s rendering of The Line, the futuristic home for nine million people at NEOM in the kingdom’s far northwest; Iro Smith joins in a dance on an Eastern Province trip; young Saudis celebrate Flag Day in Riyadh; a luncheon at Yanbu’ al-Bahr included a local rice dish called *sayadiyah*, center.



The sense of another kind of “home” came through in the remarks of David Edgington, consul-general at the U.S. Consulate in Dhahran, where he met a large number of retirees and family members March 8.

The consulate recently moved from its longtime home near King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran to a new building in al-Khobar. But it kept its old name.

“Welcome to the U.S. Consulate to Aramco,” Edgington quipped to his guests.

He said leaving the old building for a new, \$350 million facility a few kilometers away was “bittersweet.” Likening the shift to what’s happening in Saudi Arabia today, he said the legation near Dhahran



FROM LEFT: Old Aramco friends Lorna McLean-Spruill (next to her mother, Daphne McLean), Alison Cole, Celita Huggins and Janet Bowes paused for a moment to catch their collective breath during a visit to Riyadh's Financial District.



Brat Lisa (Menicke) Sandefur, right, and her daughter, Elizabeth, posed with a herd of oryx during a visit to Shaybah on March 3. They attended the reunion with two other family members: Pete Menicke, Lisa's brother, and Pete's wife, Karen Roach.

was “an old, beautiful place,” but that the move to a modern facility was in line with the times.

He called Aramco “the greatest company the world has ever seen.”

“Today, young Saudis are taking the company forward,” he said. “You should be proud of the incredible entity that is Saudi Aramco.”

Reunion attendees found young Saudis—some with company connections—at the forefront of what’s fast becoming another important enterprise in the kingdom: tourism.

At al-‘Ula, a tourist hot spot partly because of its proximity to Mada’in Salih, the Nabataean city famous for its stunning tombs carved into red-hued rock, Rayan al-Dossary looked like an Arab Luke Skywalker as he aimed a beam of light into the crystalline sky on a chilly night.

“I love stargazing and I wanted to do this program when I found out it was an Aramco group,” said al-Dossary, 26, who attended kindergarten in Dhahran and is now operations manager for Husaak Adventures al-‘Ula. “Aramco is a big part of our lives.”

Al-Dossary phoned his father, Yacoub, who retired from Human Resources at Aramco in 2017, after the stargazing session.

“I am so delighted that so many retirees came back ... to see what the future looks like,” the elder al-Dossary said.

“I am very pleased, very happy, to have them all here to remember those beautiful years. Thank you for coming!”

At Diriyah, capital of the first Saudi State (1727-1818), visitors from Dhahran had a chance meeting with the son of another Saudi retiree. Tom Owen, his wife Kathy and their daughter, Krissy, hugged longtime family friend Salman al-Ali on the mud-walled ramparts of al-Turaif and then continued their visit in its museum rooms. His parents are Mohammed Saeed al-Ali and Samia al-Idrissi.

“We want to get people to visit us and to have a good time,” said al-Ali, 39, who works for the Diriyah Gate Development Authority’s Marketing Dept., adding that he was very happy to see old friends at such a special site.

Visitors to Riyadh also stopped at the city’s Financial District, hallmarked by more skyscrapers per square foot than any other place in the kingdom. And they toured Masmak Fort, which monarch-to-be Abdulaziz Al Sa’ud and his small band of fighters recaptured in 1902, en route to establishing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932—the year before Standard Oil of California, Aramco’s predecessor, got the green light to explore for oil in the country.

It was Flag Day in the kingdom when a group of reunion attendees visited Masmak Fort, and the square in front was closed off for a celebration that drew a large crowd in the middle of the afternoon.

Moving from landmarks of the

kingdom’s present and past to those recently off the drawing boards, visitors traveled to a Riyadh exhibition hall displaying images and models of The Line, the multibillion-dollar horizontal city at the heart of the NEOM project in the country’s far northwest.

Described as “the most audacious urban-development project

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Al-Hasa’s famed potter demonstrated his craft for reunion attendees; in the background is a photo showing then-Riyadh Governor and now King Salman visiting the pottery. Tom, Kathy and Krissy Owen met Salman al-Ali, whose parents worked for Aramco, at Atturaif in Diriyah. Reunion Committee member Susan Franczyk hands an appreciation tray to Rayan al-Dossary, whose father is an Aramco retiree, after his stargazing show at al-‘Ula.





Doug and Kay Mitchell, from the U.K., admire a rose in a garden in al-Hasa.

ever attempted,” The Line will consist of linked modules forming a community just over a mile long, 0.3 miles high and 0.12 miles wide for up to nine million people.

Here, too, visitors found a Saudi Aramco connection: Nadhmi al-Nasser, CEO of NEOM, managed the Shaybah development project in the 1990s and led Aramco’s work to build King Abdullah University of Science and Technology at Thuwal, north of Jiddah, in the early 2000s.

The company put on two trips to Shaybah. Dick Heil, who worked in the Exploration Organization’s reservoir-management side, found his visit March 3 especially rich.

Although he was deeply involved in planning for the exploitation of giant field in the Rub’ al-Khali in the 1990s, this was the first time the 2004 retiree had set foot in Shaybah.

“There was no advantage to being onsite,” he said, given the ability to carry out reservoir simulation and associated work at EXPEC in Dhahran.

The company put the field into production by drilling horizontal wells from *sabkhas* (salt flats) between the massive dunes, then pushing out extended-reach multilateral lines and “fishboning” from those, said Heil. “The drilling people really knew their stuff.”

“It’s just nice to know you produced the field. I’m as excited as I can be at my age to be here,” said Heil, 76, with his wife, Peggy, at his side.

Nestled in the dunes not far away, is the Shaybah Wildlife Sanctuary, a 245-square-mile wilderness site for threatened indigenous animals such as the Arabian oryx, Arabian sand gazelle and ostrich. The first oryx were released there in 2020 and they love posing for pictures with visitors these days.

That night, there was a special buffet on the Shaybah patio, with the lights of headquarters and the company community twinkling below



ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: Dick Heil, who played an important role in the work that led up to production of the Shaybah Field, made his first visit to the site with his wife, Peggy. Ali Baluchi, center, with Reunion Committee members and friends, bowed out as Reunion Committee chairman, but pledged to help in the future. **BELOW:** Visitors to Diriyah cheer the company for Reunion '23.

and stars twinkling above. It was one of the most tranquil settings for a dinner anywhere.

In many ways, the reunion was a moveable feast—for the eyes, ears and tastebuds.

In Yanbu', for example, visitors dined on freshly caught fish from the Red Sea and a local rice-fish-and-flour dish called *sayadiyah*.

That came after they'd visited the original inland Yanbu' (Yanbu' al-Nakhil, or Yanbu' of the Palms), which was largely abandoned a half-century ago when its wells ran dry, and its successor community, Yanbu' al-Bahr, on the coast.

At Yanbu' al-Bahr, they got a partial look at the building where T. E. Lawrence lived while assisting in the fight against the Turks during WWI. Sadly, entry was impossible due to reconstruction work.

Attendees visiting al-Hasa Oasis, where Aramco had an office in Hofuf and taught basic Arabic to new employees in the early days, sampled Hasawi rice and dates—two economic staples of the region

when oil was discovered in 1938—at lunch.

Later, as the sun set, the group took a last look at the world's largest oasis from the top of a hill overlooking a reservoir. It was a peaceful, relaxing end to the marathon of rediscovery that was Reunion '23.

While some slept on the bus ride back to Dhahran, others wished for more.

"I hope there is another reunion," said Doug Mitchell, who attended from the U.K. with his wife, Kay. He worked mainly in Community Services in Dhahran from 1977-'87 and this was the couple's first reunion.

Mitchell had good memories of working for Ali Baluchi in Dhahran. "He was firm, but fair," he said.

Being able to look forward to another reunion "will keep me going for the next four to five years," said Mitchell.

Then, true to form, on March 16, two days after the reunion ended, Baluchi announced the date for the next one: February 2028. Stay tuned....





PATTERNS, NEW AND OLD

Cynthia and Robin Tams inspect a model of one module of The Line, the horizontal city for nine millions residents at NEOM in the kingdom's far northwest. Its walls and central corridor mirror those of the traditional *souq* in Hofuf (right), where Doug and Kay Mitchell bargain with a merchant.



'LAST HURRAH' FOR REUNION CHIEF

Ali Baluchi, the guiding light behind all five KSA Expatriates Reunions, says the gatherings "are the best way to get people reacquainted ... and find out how much they enjoyed life with Aramco."





Visitors to Diriyah, capital of the original Saudi state, cheer their appreciation for KSA Expatriates Reunion Chairman Ali Baluchi. He not only led the latest event, but also successful reunions in 2000, 2009, 2015 and 2019.

“Oldtimers and new retirees get together and share things at reunions. They find the whereabouts of old friends. They see new developments,” he says.

As he put it in a letter last spring inviting retirees to Reunion ‘23, “I very much encourage you, your children and your grandchildren to come aboard and enjoy the great things Saudi Aramco is offering. This is a wonderful way to maintain our fruitful relationships, and we will meet to share more good times and foster the bonds we already have with each other.”

Baluchi has long had a ringside seat on the expatriate community. He worked with its members during a 41-year career that concluded in 1990 when he retired as director of Community Services and he chaired the first KSA Expatriates reunion a decade later.

Leading reunions “gives me a certain kind of pleasure,” he says. “Physically and mentally, I enjoy it.”

The task begins months before the event kicks off and continues well after the last “goodbyes.”

Baluchi credits Reunion Committee members and a big support team of other volunteers for the success of the events.

“We appreciate the community volunteers. Their efforts and dedication serve as a living example of what it means to be an Aramco family,” he says.

“My family also supports me” in what he calls “a social obligation, a commitment for my life [that] stems from my relationship with expatriates from the early days.”

Baluchi, an al-Khobar native, began working for Aramco on Feb. 15, 1949, after attending the Jabal School. He got his first taste of

Community Services and an introduction to Aramco’s expatriate work force in the 1950s.

“Through its Recreational Services, I enjoyed a variety of what were, for me, formative cultural experiences,” he writes in *Heart and Soul—A Memoir*. “I believe these experiences rooted in me the deep personal interest and desire to share the lives of those in our expatriate communities....”

“While still a young man without family commitments, I became very much involved with the Dhahran community. I spent numerous long evenings with many other volunteers decorating Building 510 (the “Quarter Riyal Meal” Dining Hall for employees in Grade Codes 3-10) for various occasions, even some religious events.

“I became very adept at seasonal decorating and my interest in recreation and food services grew, especially during the Christmas and New Year holidays.... During this time I also became involved in organizing various sporting events amongst the young residents.”

Baluchi had years of experience with Aramco reunions prior to the first in-kingdom event in 2000.

He attended the first biennial Annuitants Reunion in Pleasanton, Calif., in September 1958. That clearly caught his fancy, for he’s missed only a few U.S. reunions since then.

He quotes from Aramco Chairman Fred Davies’s message to the first reunion as mirroring his own thoughts: “Friendships founded during the early operations in Arabia are no small thing and perish the thought they should become lost.”

Baluchi became the leading proponent of holding an in-kingdom reunion in 1998. That’s when Doug Rimes, heading a group of retirees, approached him at the biennial Annuitants Reunion in Scottsdale,



Baluchi, 93, joined in dancing to traditional rhythms at a party in al-Khobar with cousins Kelly Briggs (left) and Sarah Motyl-Szary. Their grandparents, William and Ruth Young, lived in Ras Tanura.

Ariz., and asked, “Ali, how soon before a retiree reunion in Saudi Arabia,” he writes in *Heart and Soul*.

“Pleased at their interest in returning to the kingdom, I thought quickly ... and came back with a favorable response,” he writes. When he announced that the first expatriates reunion would be held in March 2000, “immediately everybody stood and applauded most enthusiastically....”

Upon returning to Dhahran, he met with Khalid al-Falih, then senior vice president of Industrial Relations and later CEO. Al-Falih “immediately approved the idea.”

Baluchi enlisted the support of friends prominent in the local business community and—through them—gained support from Prince Saud bin Naif, deputy governor of the Eastern Province. (Prince Saud’s support continues: Now governor of the Eastern Province, he met a large group of reunion attendees this year, giving them a warm, “Welcome Home.”)

The first Expatriates Reunion drew “300 retirees plus a few Brats ... [and] was a huge success,” Baluchi writes.

He calls that gathering “the realization of my long-held dream of being able to return the hospitality offered to me so generously at so many of the reunions I had attended in the United States. I was also incredibly appreciative and proud of the considerable enthusiasm we had been able to muster in support of this first official gathering on Saudi soil at that time.

“The success of this reunion laid the foundation for the subsequent gatherings ... in 2009, 2015 and 2019.” To this, he can now safely add, “2023.”

“When I meet these [reunion] visitors to Saudi Arabia ... they tell me how much they enjoyed Saudi Arabia ... and express their appreciation of what we have been accomplishing as citizens of Saudi Arabia,” he says.

He notes that former Aramco CEO and Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources (and fellow Jabal School student) Ali al-Naimi asked him personally to serve as reunion chairman in 2019.

As al-Naimi put it in *Heart and Soul*, “While Ali has many skills and abilities that explain his successes throughout life, perhaps the most significant is his ability to maintain a large network of relationships—and indeed friendships—with Aramco’s international staff and retirees....

“But Ali also serves as a link with the past—what retirees refer to as *al-ayyam al-jamilah* or ‘the beautiful days’ spent living and working in the kingdom. The older we get the more beautiful those days seem, and Ali has played an invaluable role in keeping precious memories and priceless friendships alive for countless Aramcons.”

Baluchi’s fondest memories of the reunions are “seeing friends returning and ... [them] seeing my family,” he says. But the 2023 reunion was his last hurrah as chairman.

“I need to bring in new blood ... and give somebody else the opportunity to organize” the next reunion, he explains. “But I won’t be hesitant to help.”



Brat 'Detective' TRACKS DOWN OLD HOMES

BY CHRIS HOLDER

This is a detective story—
not so grand as one penned
by Agatha Christie or Arthur
Conan Doyle to be sure, but
one which engaged me and
left me guessing.



Brat Chris Holder plots his search for his abodes
on an old map of Dhahran. He succeeded in finding
them, but the house at right was very well disguised.

The two houses where I lived in Dhahran from 1970-'73, and then 1973-'74, 038-2B and 1223B, respectively, had gone missing. I made it my mission to find them during the recent Expatriates Reunion.

Changes to the streets, the house numbers and the houses themselves, along with simple poor memory, made navigating my way “back home” to the first house difficult. Finding the second one was a much more elementary exercise.

My sleuthing took place March 2, the second day of the reunion. I'd flown all the way from Australia and I'd been away for half a century. I was eager to start.

Tracking down 038-2B proved trickiest because the familiar landmarks were all essentially gone. Even Hercule Poirot would have been challenged!

I started my search by walking the entire length of old H St. (now Holmes St.) from Kings Park (the old ballfield/tennis court complex). My quest was hindered by the mistake of not bringing my old Dhahran map with me, overestimating my ability to carry on where I'd left off, at age 12, when my father, Forrest, my mother, Barbara, and my sister, Carys, departed Dhahran.

Two other siblings were already back in Adelaide, Australia, and another was in the U.K. working as a nurse.

The hill running up old H St. was easy enough to see, even though the playground and its notorious giant slide along Third St. was gone.

In retrospect, the huge slide probably wasn't all that huge, but it was certainly designed to heat up incredibly in the boiling sunshine, and even on not-so-hot days. In the summers, it could be a challenge just to approach its shiny surface.

The hill itself had somehow shrunk. It was clearly not the steep goliath that it was back in 1972.

Somebody had obviously come along with some sort of giant industrial grader and leveled it to its current form. Or perhaps its diminution was due to a mysterious seismic subsidence.

I thought I could pick out the house at the base of the hill on the north side of the street as the one that had been marked by the year-round presence of a Christmas tree in the front window. I continued past it to the top of the hill, but then got mixed up wandering around the streets there—Oak St., Apple St., etc.—compounding my initial confusion.

Good detectives don't get distracted in unfamiliar territory!

Then there were the house numbers, which had completely changed. Oddly, I found one “038,” but it stood all alone when there should have been several blocks' worth of neighbors.

Then I ended up on Pine St. and mists of 50 years cleared.

The house I found was markedly different from what I remembered, but this was the right spot. Everything fell into place: I could imagine the undeveloped areas that variously stretched down to the school and perimeter fence.

Those spaces, great places to play, had long since been filled in with houses or what is now the Apple St. car park.

Confirming the identity of 038-2B took a fair amount of



imagination, as the walls enclosing the front yard that I knew were gone and the hedge running along the side had been replaced by a wall.

Nothing about the house was the same either—not the windows, the front door, nothing—but it still felt like the place.

Sometimes, detectives have to rely on gut feelings.

Finding 1223B was entirely different. There was no uncertainty, no confusion about its location—just opposite King's Park and the Heritage Gallery—and it was largely how it had been when we left.

The front-door lock had been changed and the tiny stone decorative pool in the front yard was gone, as was the back patio and the T-shaped clothesline. After cleaning the windows, thanks to a large supply of napkins from the generous nearby Starbucks, I could see



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: House 038-2B, where Chris Holder lived from 1970-'73, was the most difficult to find: new walls (or the lack of them) nearly derailed his search; house 1223B, near the old ballfield, was basically unchanged but for a rainbow of handprints by the last young residents; "My last day in Saudi Arabia, July 27, 1974," at house 1223B; the author poses by a company car in 1970.

the interior was essentially the same, even the old breakfast nook which, as a child, I'd found one of its most endearing aspects.

No tricky costume switches by this house!

On the other hand, everything about the place was sad: Where what had been 038-2B remained occupied and was still valued, 1223B—its windows encrusted with dirt and its front-door paint shedding—had unquestionably been abandoned.

I also learned that this house, like all the remaining housing in this part of Dhahran, is to be demolished.

At this point, I would be extremely remiss if I did not mention the

wonderful people at the Housing Office who kindly arranged for me to access 1223B. They really went out of their way to help and I cannot thank them enough.

Inside, I saw further changes, still mainly minor. There was also an inevitable major build-up of dust accumulated over possibly 13 years, judging by a discarded dietary request form dated 2010.

What really appealed to me in this old house were the children's handprints in red, blue and green that adorned part of the living-room wall. Another family, presumably the last one ever to live there, had cared enough to make that final gesture, which was a fitting end.

MADINA 20 PLATE 23 FOUND!

David Jessich (DH68) found a new "favorite place" for one of his hobbies—collecting license plates with ties to Saudi Arabia—at a museum in Tarut. He also discovered the provenance of a 1955 plate carrying the word *anabeeb*, or "pipe." It's from Tapline (the Trans-Arabian Pipeline), which opened in 1950 to link oil fields in the Eastern Province to the Mediterranean.

If you're attending an Aramco reunion and strike up a conversation with David Jessich, you're bound to hear the 2004 retiree talk about one of his favorite subjects: license plates linked to Saudi Arabia.

The KSA Expatriates Reunion this spring was no different. There, Jessich had photos of his license plates from the kingdom handy as he searched for the last one to complete his collection from 1955, the year Saudi Arabia began issuing plates.

Jessich had plates from Riyadh, Makkah, Jiddah, Dhahran, al-Hasa and Taif, but lacked one from Madina.

In fact, he'd stopped in Jiddah for three days prior to arriving in Dhahran for the reunion March 1 to search for the missing plate. "I ran out of time," he said.

Jessich, a 1968 Dhahran School graduate, also collects ARAMCO vanity plates in the U.S. He acquired his first one himself when he retired to Austin, Texas, and now has plates from 20 states.

He and his wife, Vicki, have Texas covered: They have signature plates ARAMCO, ARAMCON and ARAMCD for their three racing-green Jaguars and T-ARAMCO for a Toyota minivan.

Jessich regularly attends Aramco reunions in the U.S., asking fellow attendees to help him build his collection.

"Neil Horton got me North Carolina and Rich Howard got me Connecticut," he said. Brats from New Mexico and Alaska also sent him plates.

While other expatriates were talking about old times with Saudi colleagues at the recent reunion, Jessich was busy showing them pages from his license-plate album.

The kingdom "now has graphics on plates" rather than just numbers and letters, he noted. "Crossed swords and a palm tree is standard."

Aramco led the way issuing license plates in Saudi Arabia, starting in 1948 "when more and more vehicles came in" after WWII, Jessich said.

In 1955, a plate appeared carrying the word *anabeeb*, or "pipe," in Arabic. That plate's meaning and provenance were a mystery to Jessich until found one in a museum in Tarut on Day 1 of the reunion.

"When I asked the owner what city it came from, he called it the 'Tapline plate,'" Jessich said. "Only by visiting the museum did I find out."

What about his own search for the elusive Madina plate?

"Madina plate found!" Jessich wrote two days after the reunion ended.

"I hooked up with a Saudi I met on Instagram who lives in Dammam and finally, the last day I am here, I was able to go to his house and see his collection. We talked license plates for three hours straight."

The Madina plate he'd been seeking so long "was a gift to me" from his fellow

license-plate aficionado, Jessich said. "He also gave me a donkey cart plate—even more rare."

Now, he said, "I'm so inspired to write a handbook/guidebook on Saudi plates."



FROM TOP: A collector in Dammam gifted David Jessich a 1955 Madina license plate—plus a rare donkey-cart plate—two days after the reunion ended; a plate reading *anabeeb*, or pipe, is from Tapline; all four Jessich cars, including this pair of Jaguars, feature Aramco-related license plates.



'I Got Paid to Come and Do ... ARCHEOLOGY'

Sometimes, dreams come true in roundabout ways.

That's what former Technical Services employee Guy Gettle recalled when he visited Tarut Island with his wife, Carol Rice, on March 1, the first day of the 2023 KSA Expatriates Reunion. Gettle worked for the company from 1975-'78.

Peering through a fence at the towers of the 16th-century Portuguese fort that stands on a tell on Tarut that archeologist Geoffrey Bibby explored briefly in 1968 (and determined held remnants of the Dilmun civilization, dating back some 5,000 years), Gettle said he'd originally wanted to be an archeologist himself. However, practicality won out over pottery shards: He earned a mechanical-engineering degree from UC

Berkeley because he "needed a job" when he graduated, he explained.

He quickly landed a post in his field, but he kept up with developments in archeology in the Middle East—an interest that dated back to grade school in Walnut Creek, Calif., when he wrote a report about digs in Mesopotamia.

He'd learned about Aramco as a teenager when he did yardwork for an elderly woman in Walnut Creek whose husband had been an electrical engineer at the company in the mid-'60s. "She told me about Aramco, and she had all these Arab garments," he said.

He read Bibby's book, *Looking for Dilmun*, focusing mainly on his work in Bahrain when it appeared in 1969. And he enrolled in Arabic classes at Berkeley.

When he heard that Aramco was seeking engineers, "I jumped at the chance," he said. He knew that Aramco's Grace Burkholder and Marny Golding, keen amateur archeologists, had made discoveries relating to the 'Ubaid civilization in eastern Saudi Arabia, giving it a clear Dilmun connection.

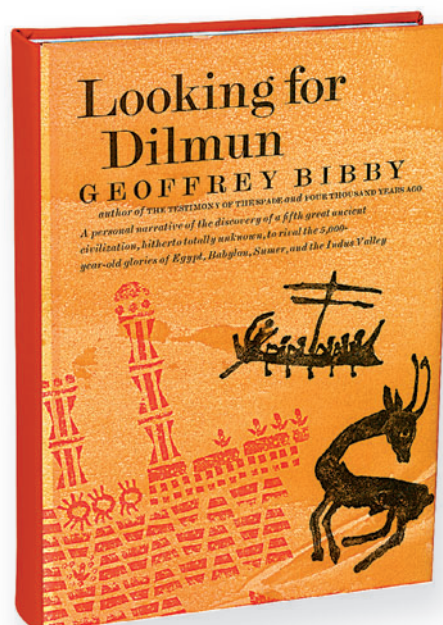
"I wanted to be in the place where new discoveries were happening," he said. "I got paid to come and do what I really wanted to do: archeology."

Gettle became friends with Golding and her husband, Bert, and met Bibby when he came to the Goldings' home in Dhahran in 1978. He spent hours in the couple's extensive library and "we went out to the desert a lot," he said.

Coming to the kingdom for the reunion was "absolutely a marvelous experience" for him and his wife, who was making her maiden visit, Gettle said.

Indeed, he still had archeology on his mind when the reunion ended: He planned to visit Tayma in the northwest to explore in the Dawmat

al-Jandal and al-Jawf areas with Saudi friends.



FROM FAR LEFT: Guy Gettle stands next to the Saudi guide who led him and a number of other reunion attendees on a visit to Mada'in Salih in the kingdom's northwest. Geoffrey Bibby's *Looking for Dilmun*, which describes the author's work in the Gulf region—including eastern Saudi Arabia—inspired Gettle as a young man.





Guy Gettle and his wife, Carol Rice, found themselves at home in a museum on Tarut Island on Day 1 of the Expatriates Reunion. Getting to visit sites like Tarut, with ties to the kingdom's ancient past, was "absolutely a marvelous experience," he said.



SCRAPBOOK: Celebrating SAUDI ARABIA

PHOTOS BY ARTHUR CLARK

Dhahran and al-Khobar



① Liz Germani shows off new henna tattoos; ② Guy Boulanger (left) and Pierre Crevier join a table of old Rocking Country colleagues at the CEO's Welcome Luncheon; ③ Vicci Turner and Tom Owen; ④ Reunion Committee members Matt Horton and retiree Berni Wright; ⑤ Ilaria Sézanne, spouse of retiree Daniel Beard, tours the Saudi Aramco Expatriate School for grades 5-9 in Dhahran.



1 Terry Van Ballegooijen and sons, John (left) and David, aim to Rediscover the Kingdom; **2** tattooing at Eco Park; **3** former AAA officer Dawn Higgins meets old friends; **4** gowns galore at wedding show: Munira al-Ashgar, retiree Shirley Seymour and the bride; **5** Jeff and Sue Belvo flank daughter, Emily, with son, Adam, and his fiancée at right; **6** a whirling dancer entertains visitors; **7** Zahid Shaikh, son of the late Aramco photographer Shaikh Amin, registers March 1.



Al-Hasa



1 Travelers pause in a palm grove on a visit to Hofuf and its environs March 14, the last day of the reunion—al-Hasa has three million palm trees, producing 22 kinds of dates; **2** Kay Mitchell soaks up scent in a rose garden; **3** Paula and Jeffrey Maitlen savor Hasawi delicacies.

Al-Maha Ranch



1 Host Khalid al-Abdulkarim and old friend, Reunion Committee member Khalid Abubshait, share thoughts; **2** Mohammed Muqeeth and his wife, Sayeeda Habeeb; **3** Hamanulla Jaffer, his wife, Shamshad, and son, Haseeb Aman; **4** guests and cameleers pose at the Safari Baqiq fair.



Al-'Ula and Mada'in Salih

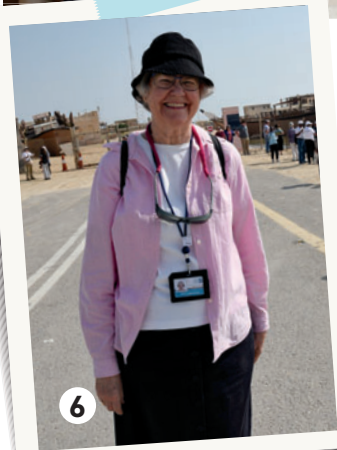


1 The sun slices through a gap at the top of Qasr al-Farid, a famous unfinished tomb at Mada'in Salih; 2 attendees (right of campfire, from left) Michael Pollard and Stephanie Walsh, a former women's ITC teacher in Dhahran, and Veronica Lau, a Ras Tanura retiree, warm up on a chilly evening at al-'Ula; 3 Rich Howard sets the pace on an oasis stroll, followed by Krissy Owen—who 4 soars in a swing for a better view.





Al-'Uqayr and Qurayyah



① The McCurry family, headed by Danny and Georgia, lines up at Qurayyah and then ② joins the full entourage of visitors; ③ Mike and Judy Butler, with grandson, Owen; ④ an international intercultural gathering on Qurayyah beach; ⑤ David and Ishrat Karbach; ⑥ Penny Payne Harvey arrived in Dhahran in 1952, age eight—this was her first trip back since 1965; ⑦ Jan Massaro, daughter of Frank and Mary Fugate, with her daughter, Erica.



Atturaif, Diriya



① Genaro Molina and his wife, Brat Patty Housen, visit the original Saudi capital, near Riyadh, on a drizzly day, as do ② Cynthia and Robin Tems; ③ Brat Luke D'Alves and Belen Barrow stroll on a new walkway into the fortified city; ④ a Saudi guide shelters from the weather.



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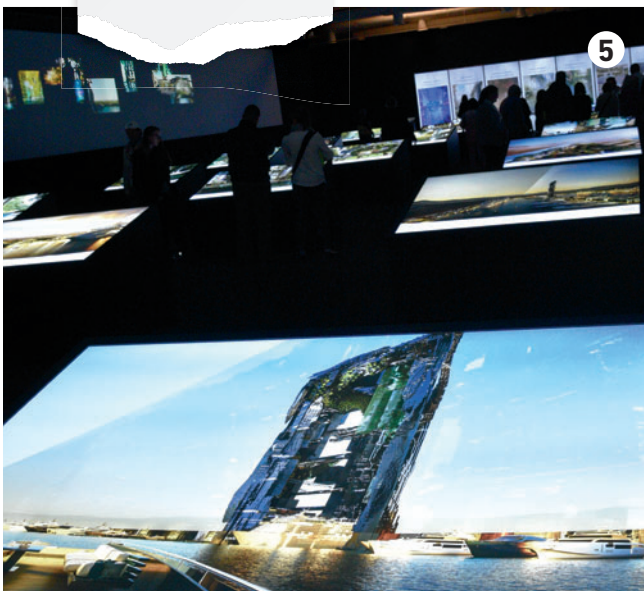
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Riyadh

1 It's a sunny day at Masmak Fort; 2 Stanislaus and Beryl Clotilda D'Cruz enjoy the National Museum; 3 Khan and Yasmin Akmal stand at the top of the capital's tallest building, with a capital view of the city; 4 meals on wheels in the Financial District; 5 visitors learn about The Line, NEOM's futuristic horizontal city; 6 the Hijrah mural at the National Museum.



5



4

Saihat and Qatif



❶ The Qureshi family, Mohammed (left), Shagufta Rana and Samad, relax by the Gulf, old fishing dhows in the background; ❷ the Green family eyes the day's catch in Saihat—retiree Paul Green is second from left, his son, Stephen, is third from left (pointing), and his daughter, Stefani, and grandson, Erich, are farther right, while Stephen's wife, Jennifer, stands left.

Shaybah



❶ The Shaybah "gang" gathers, backdropped by oryx and a mountain of sand; ❷ Angus McDonald, son of retiree Melvin McDonald, takes time to sketch; ❸ Syed Yunus holds a falcon, flanked by Saudi Aramco fliers Abdulmajeed al-Rasheesh and Abdullah al-Fraih; ❹ Brat Mohammad Jawwad Baig rests after a tall climb.





1



2



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Yanbu'

1 A guide discusses the house of T. E. Lawrence in Yanbu' al-Bahr, undergoing renovation to his right; 2 Linda Gerhardt explores Yanbu' al-Nakhl; 3 a giant fish sculpture backdrop a rose—a gift to each reunion arrival at the airport; 4 Mushtaq and Waheeda Mahmood; 5 local fare like a brown rice-and-fish dish called *sayadiyah* feature at lunch; 6 the updated Yanbu' al-Bahr *suq* proves popular.



6



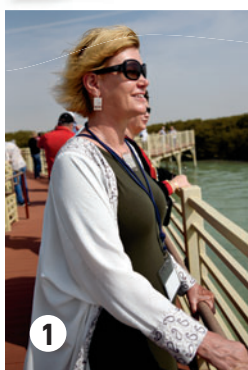
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Ras Tanura

A batch of Brats: 1 Deborah Kearney enjoys the sea breeze at Saudi Aramco's mangrove conservation project; 2 Jodi and Luis Fernandez get into the swing of things on the seashore; 3 Gary Barnes and his wife, Kim Scott; 4 Azhar Khan, with his dad, Mahtab; 5 Denise Dickhaut, daughter of William and Ruth Young, and daughters Kelly Briggs (left) and Kate Dickhaut leave a love note in the sand.



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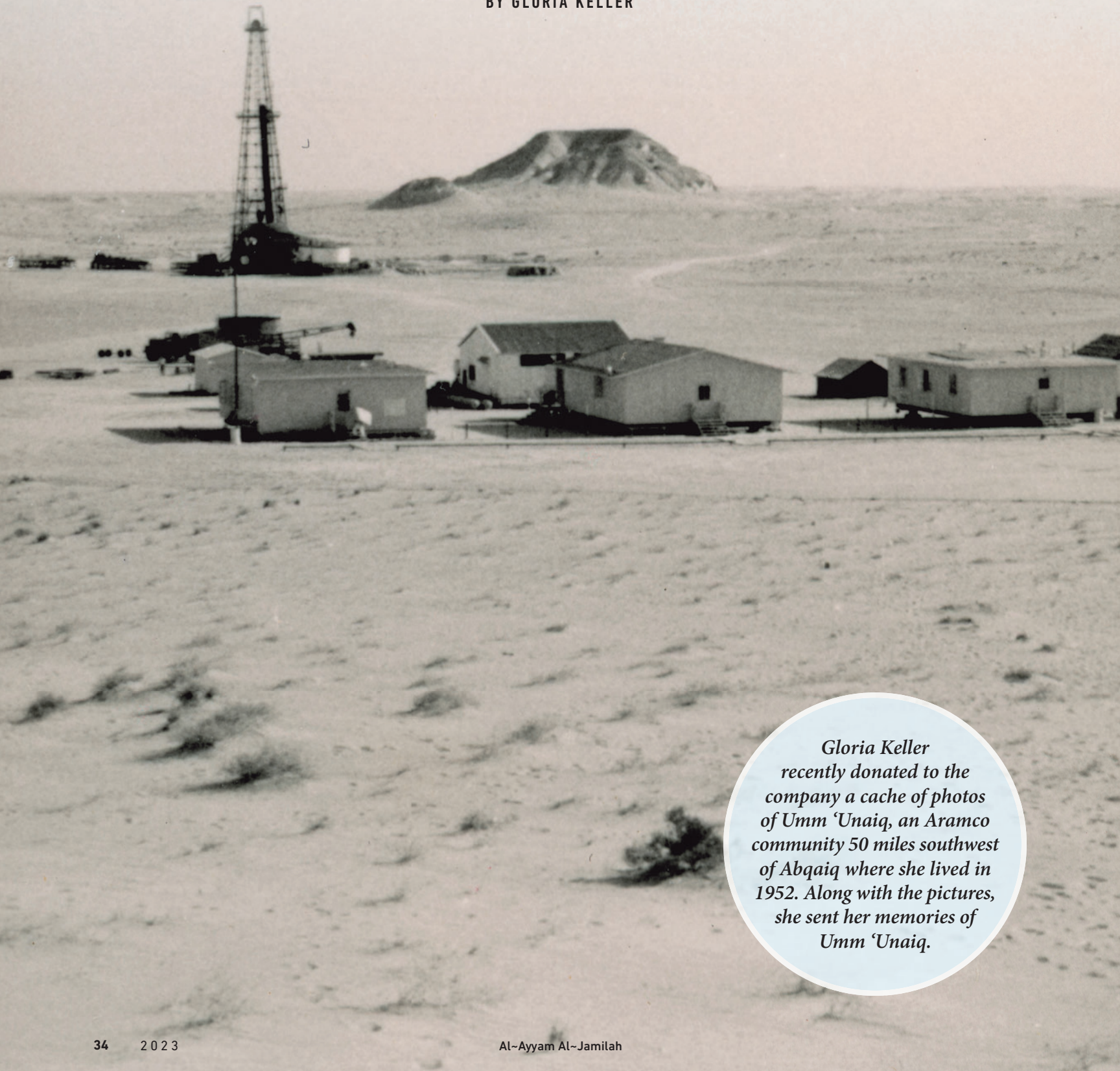
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Recollecting UMM 'UNAIG

BY GLORIA KELLER



Gloria Keller recently donated to the company a cache of photos of Umm 'Unaiq, an Aramco community 50 miles southwest of Abqaiq where she lived in 1952. Along with the pictures, she sent her memories of Umm 'Unaiq.



I moved to Umm 'Unaiq in March 1952 with my husband, Elwood Keller. I met Woody in Abqaiq in 1947 when he arrived to work as a mechanic on the oil rig where my father, Clem Gibbs, worked as a driller.

My father (Badge #409) went to Saudi Arabia via the Suez Canal in mid-1944, working first as a machinist in water wells. My mother, Marie, and I joined him in Abqaiq early in 1947. We were among the first families in Abqaiq.

Woody (Badge #5235) arrived in December 1947 as a diesel mechanic. Dad announced that there was a new man on the rig from Santa Rosa, Calif. As we were from Santa Cruz, we were almost neighbors and Dad invited him to dinner.

I left with my parents on long leave in 1949 and stayed in the U.S. until 1950 when Woody came on his leave. We were married in February.

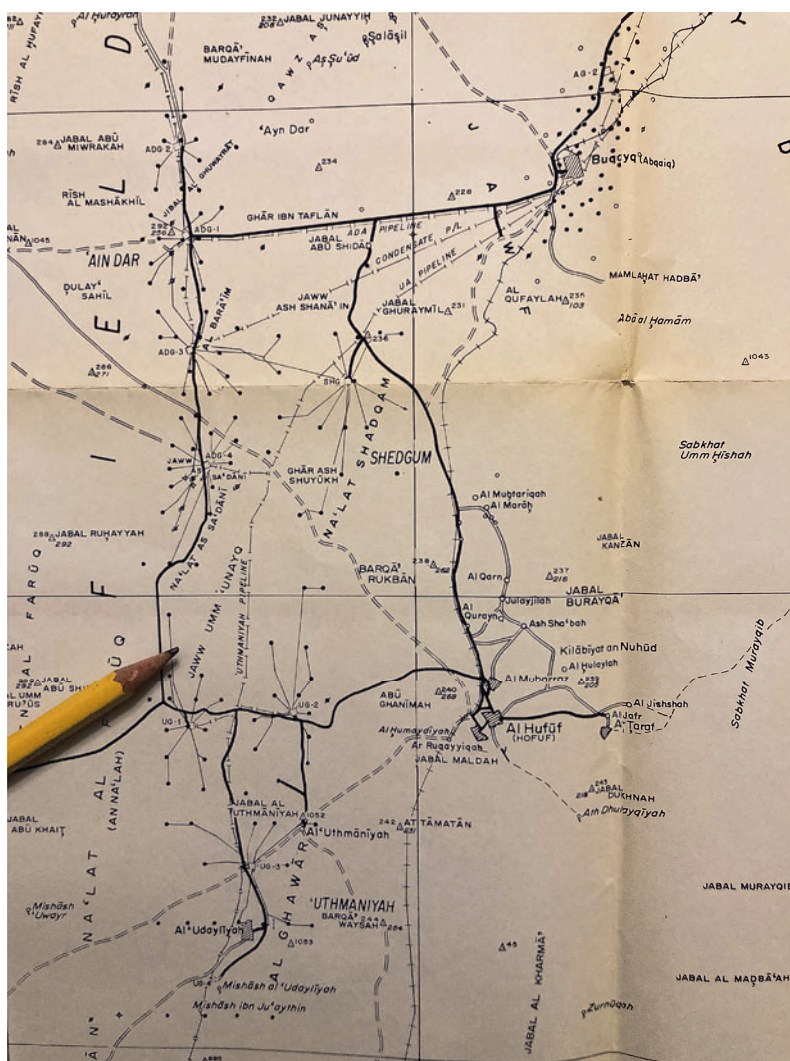
When we got family housing in Abqaiq, I joined him in July 1950.

Moving to Umm 'Unaiq (literally, "mother of 'Unaiq") was an adventure, something like our early days in Abqaiq.

In fact, Umm 'Unaiq was nicknamed the "daughter of Abqaiq." Red Tindall was the camp manager.

The focal point of Umm 'Unaiq was Well #40.

CLOCKWISE FROM FACING PAGE: The focal point of Umm 'Unaiq was Well #40. The community had a dozen portables for families and bunkhouses for bachelors. Gloria Keller sits at left, next to her husband, Woody. Located at the tip of the pencil, the town was a two-hour bus ride from Abqaiq.





FROM TOP: Gloria Keller's mother, Marie Gibbs, sits second from left in this photo of the Abqaiq Parts Store staff; her dad, Clem, is pictured far left with the drilling crew. The author and her husband often joined her parents for dinner at Umm 'Unaiq.



There were around 12 family houses, all Swedish portables, in two rows, close to a theater with sand floors and benches where we watched movies under the stars.

The camp was surrounded by a palm-fiber fence which was later

replaced by a chain-link fence.

There was also the Oasis Clubhouse. It was more of a stag club for the single men, but families would gather there for special occasions.

There was a dining hall, a few offices and a clinic for emergencies. Pauline (Polly) Meserve from Abqaiq was our visiting nurse.

Bedouins would sometimes camp close by, drawn by access to water for their livestock.

Umm 'Unaiq had a small Commissary with basic items. We would call Community Services to place our food orders and Abqaiq Family Issue would send them out three times a week.

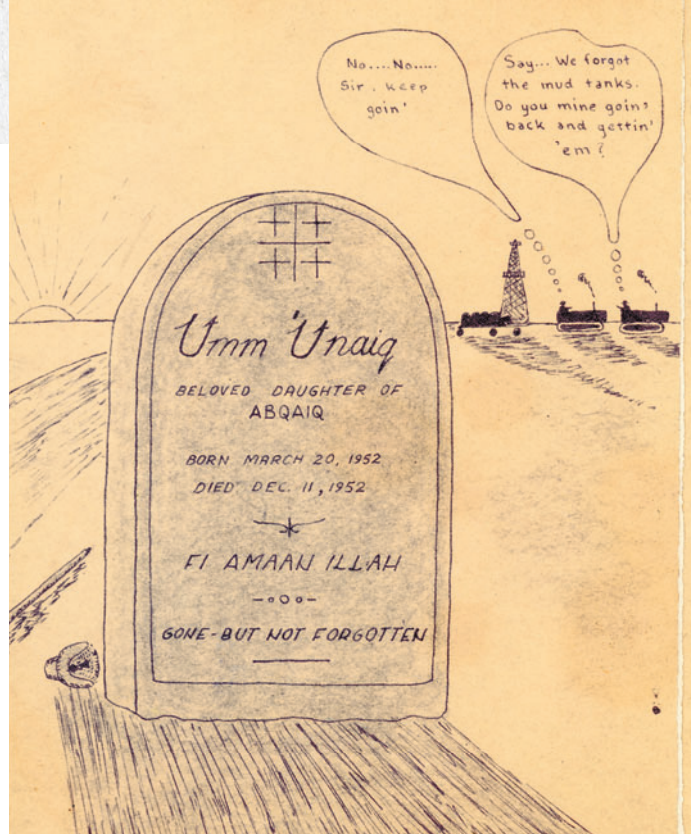
For a short time, school-age children lived with families in Abqaiq during the week and came home on weekends. Later, the company opened a one-room schoolhouse in Umm 'Unaiq for about 10 children.

The families with children were Bob and Jo Waters (Susan and Bobby), Charlie and Corrine Eastwood (Teddy and Susan), "Tex" and Johnnie Guyon (Chuck and Stephen), Dallas and Zella Ives (Larry and Laurel), Richard and Rosemary Smith (Lex) and Ed Jones and his wife (Judy).

Along with Woody and me and my parents, couples in Umm 'Unaiq included John and Sara Witt, and Wren Wooley, Ed Skinner and Frank Hargrove and their wives.

There were bunkhouses for single Aramco employees and for IBBI (International Bechtel Builders, Inc.) men building a nearby GOSP.

We were not too isolated, as we could take the twice-daily



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Aramco announced the opening of Umm 'Unaiq on March 26, 1952. A tombstone on a memorial card marked its closure near the end of the year. Gloria Keller returned to the kingdom for the Expatriates Reunion in 2009. She's pictured with her daughter, Andrea, and son, Mike, and the son of her husband's coworker, in Abqaiq.

transport for the two-hour run to Abqaiq. The area around Umm 'Unaiq was very flat and we enjoyed driving into the desert to the surrounding *jabals* for a little different scenery.

Because Umm 'Unaiq was so small, you became good friends with the other wives in the community, getting together for coffee, baking or other events. I did not miss Abqaiq, for we made our own entertainment and kept busy. Woody and I often got together with my parents to visit and for dinners.

When Umm 'Unaiq closed in December 1952, "last rites" were held at the Oasis Parlor.

Most families moved back to Abqaiq, but we moved to Udhailyah to the south, with our portable housing from Umm 'Unaiq. We stayed there a little less than a year and moved back to Abqaiq in 1953.

Our son, Mike, was born in 1954 and our daughter, Andrea, was born in 1958, both at the "mother house" near the ballfield in Dhahran.

We never returned to Umm 'Unaiq or Udhailyah, but I have many good memories of those early days.

Woody was resourceful, a great woodworker and he always managed to make our prefab houses into comfortable homes.

My parents moved to Dhahran where Clem was in Producing/Exploration, working as a supervisor of drilling in the Rub' al-Khali. He retired in 1964.

Woody retired as Foreman/Drilling Equipment Services in 1968.

I am glad to have had the opportunity to be a part of the early days of Aramco. We felt like pioneers. I have so many happy memories of our life there.

I enjoyed returning to Saudi Arabia after 40 years for the 2009



Reunion, accompanied by my son and daughter. But I realized I really liked it better when we were living there.

When the reunions first started, my husband had no desire to attend. He said he wanted to remember life in Saudi Arabia as he had lived it and he felt that he had lived there at the best time.

Me too!

Norberg Pens: *BOB TALES* *Small Towns, Big Oil, Daffiness*

BY ARTHUR CLARK

Readers interested in Aramco lore during the last half of the 20th century will likely find Bob Norberg's *Bob Tales—Small Towns, Big Oil, Daffiness* hard to put down.

In the book, self-published this year, Norberg also offers insightful, often funny, coverage of his newspaper work in the Midwestern U.S. prior to joining Aramco and what he's learned about the conflict between Israel and Palestine, especially since he retired as director of the company's Washington, D.C., office in 2004.

Norberg joined Public Relations in 1964, taking his wife, Shari, and their young children, Scott, Robin and Jeff, to Dhahran. He'd worked previously in Dhahran in 1956 as a summer intern editing the *Sun and Flare*, predecessor of *The Arabian Sun*, and then managed and edited weekly newspapers in Minnesota and Iowa.

Norberg's full-time job in Dhahran began with another stint at the *Sun and Flare*. He writes that the paper "wasn't much for real news, but if you yearned for bowling scores, promotion and retirement stories, movie listings and a crossword puzzle, then that was the real deal.

"The announcement that a shipment of plastic pails had just arrived at Jameel's store in al-Khobar was enough to fill the seats of the dedicated buses that ferried eager shoppers to and from al-Khobar on weekends."

Still, he says the paper, with its weekly oil story (which he often wrote), "turned out to be an excellent spot to learn about the oil business and Aramco."

"I can't recall just how long I was editor of the paper," Norberg said in an interview, "but I think it was between two and four

years. The paper was being printed at a shop in Khobar at that point and the drill established before I arrived turned press day into a late-night proofreading session.

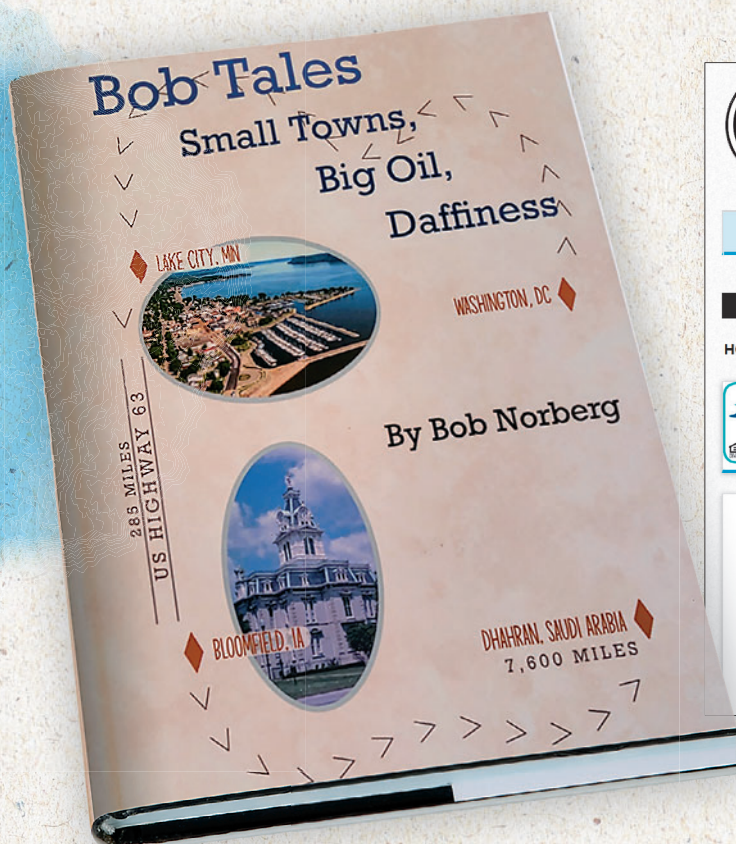
"Paul Cunha or John D'Souza would ferry the material down to Khobar and perform an initial proofread and then Lynn Maby and I and sometimes a third party would recheck the pages and sign off on the press run around 11 at night. I had a family, which the others involved in the exercise did not, and I moved the timetable up considerably so our work was done several hours earlier."

Norberg moved to Government Affairs in 1972, earning promotions through various divisions over the years. In 1984, when Majed Ellass became vice president of the Washington office, he tapped Norberg to go with him; when Ellass retired in 1990, Norberg became the director.

Government Affairs provided a good fit for "my writing, research and people skills," Norberg writes. But he says his lack of Arabic and Middle Eastern-studies training made him feel like "an interloper" alongside experts like Pete Speers, Jim Knight, Harry Alter, Bill

RIGHT AND FACING PAGE: Bob Norberg poses with his daughter, Robin, who urged him to write *Bob Tales*. He met Saudi astronaut Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz in Washington, D.C., after working as Aramco's liaison for his Space Shuttle flight in 1985.





ABOVE: *The Lake City Graphic* in Lake City, Minn.—where Norberg landed his first post-university editing job (and met his wife, Shari)—announced the publication of *Bob Tales*.

Mulligan, Rick Vidal, Jim Mandaville, Malcom Quint and Dick Kerin.

His work there led to friendships with a number of Saudis, including the late Husain Saif (see story, page 41).

Norberg calls his move to the Washington office “in the same league as winning the lottery.” There, he kept the company on top of issues potentially impacting the business and established lines of communication with government departments including Commerce and Energy.

Another plus: His dad, an ardent Democrat and a veteran Iowa weekly newspaperman himself, had gone to work for the Kennedy Administration after the 1960 election and still lived in the capital.

Since retiring, Norberg has devoted much time and energy to Americans for Middle East Understanding, an organization offering insights into the region—especially Palestine. He served as president for 10 years, until 2015, and is now president emeritus.

His time in Washington, meeting the likes of diplomats Andrew Killgore and Richard Curtiss, author Grace Halsell and scholar John Esposito at Georgetown University, opened his eyes to “the plight of the Palestinians,” Norberg said.

But the most poignant piece of writing in *Bob Tales* is about Norberg’s first fulltime employer, Esther Oberg. She and her husband, Larry, hired him in 1958, fresh out of the University of Minnesota, as editor of the *Lake City Graphic* in Minnesota.

In June 1992, Norberg sat in Oberg’s living room to interview her for her obituary, at her request. In a story called “Lois Lane in a June Cleaver World,” he wrote: “She wanted to be thorough, factual and fair” in her work at the *Graphic*. “And she was.”

Bob Tales is much the same, with a good dose of humor mixed in—and is all the richer for it.



Aramco Brat Reveals Love for K I N G D O M

BY ARTHUR CLARK

Rich Howard's book, *Aramco Brat, How Arabia, Oil, Gold, and Tragedy Shaped My Life*, begins with a bang: the death of his parents, Lewis and Marian Howard, and his sister, Elizabeth, age nine, in the crash of Pakistan International Airlines Flight 705 near Cairo Airport on May 20, 1965.

One can only imagine how 18-year-old Howard (RT61), a student at Cranbrook School in Michigan, felt when he got the news. He talks about his loss, but not until late in the book, self-published in 2021.

In between, he tells the story of his life as a Brat, in al-Khobar upon arrival in 1955, in Dhahran, in Ras Tanura where his father worked—first as a safety engineer and then for the Home Ownership Program (and perhaps also a secret job for which Howard found clues but could never substantiate)—and in boarding school and beyond.

His family's first home was in the al-Suroor building in the Thugbah neighborhood of al-Khobar, which only had electricity for a few hours every morning and evening. There was "[n]o telephone, no TV, but there was a balcony" from which the nine-year-old gained his first impressions of his new home.

He joined the fourth grade in Dhahran and discovered places and people like money changers and bread bakers in al-Khobar, where "[t]he main street had a sidewalk of sorts, otherwise we walked on hard-packed dirt."

Dhahran, on the other hand, was like "an upper-income American suburb.... In fact, teleport the whole city of Dhahran and—other than a dearth of the very rich, the poor and the old—it would seem natural."

He stayed five months in al-Khobar, but never gave up his affection for the place where—a few years down the road—he bought gold coins which he sold for a handsome profit in the United States (perhaps laying the groundwork for his very successful career as a securities analyst).

When the Aramco-built railroad from Dammam to Riyadh, via Hofuf, opened in 1956, displacing camel-borne commercial traffic, Howard traveled with his dad to Hofuf to see one of the last camel caravans (of just three camels).

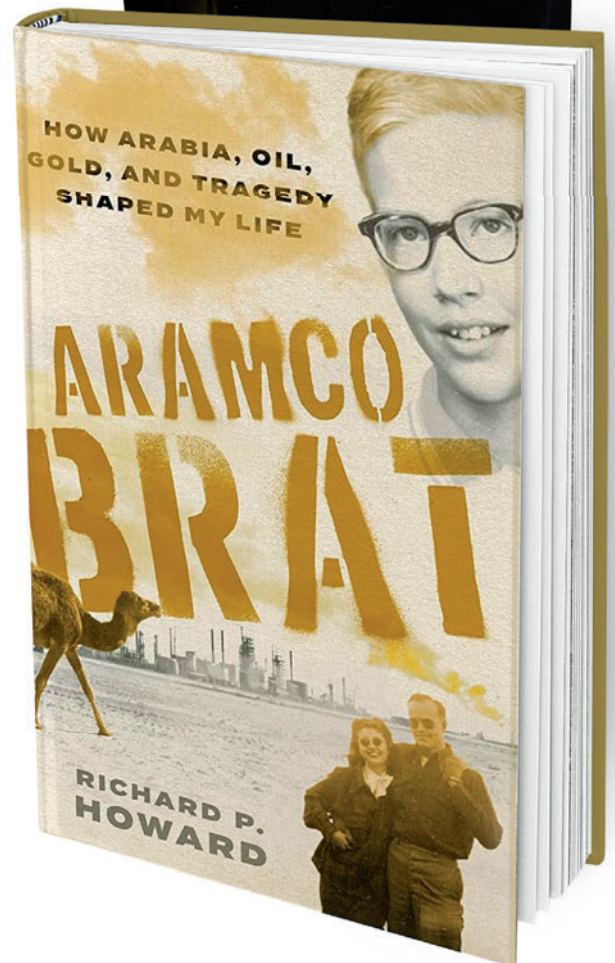
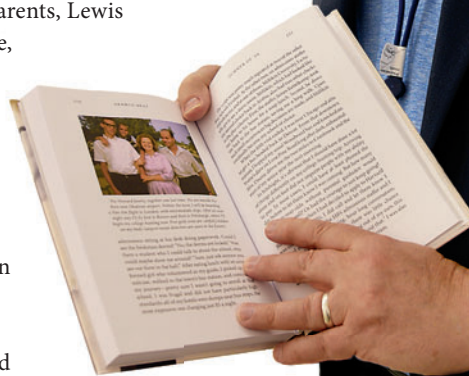
They also reconnoitered territory between Dhahran and Ras Tanura—where the family moved in September 1956—exploring *sabkhas* (salt flats) which provided income for salt harvesters and looking into the towers of ancient *qanat* irrigation systems that poked out of the sand near Qatif.

Howard fared better in the Ras Tanura School than he had in Dhahran—for one thing, the classes were smaller. Then he migrated to the American Community School in Beirut and then Cranbrook in the United States. That's where one of his teachers broke the news about PIA Flight 705.

With the help of friends (including the girl he later married) and their families, Howard got through that crisis, going on to earn a degree from Millikin University in Decatur, Ill., and an MBA from Harvard.

He did not get to return to Saudi Arabia to collect his family's possessions; they were sent to him. Still, he kept a love for the place where he grew up.

His memoir, plus the fact that he's come back to the kingdom for three Expatriates Reunions, in 2015, 2019 and 2023, are testaments to that.



Rich Howard holds a copy of *Aramco Brat*, open to the page with the last photo taken with his family.

REMEMBERING

Husain Saif

(1937-2023)

BY BOB NORBERG

Husain and I worked side by side in the early 1970s when we were both deputies in Aramco's Dhahran office that dealt with Saudi officials in the Eastern Province. The friendship spanned more than five decades and was punctuated by phone calls some 40 years after my family and I no longer lived in Saudi Arabia.

He was charismatic, magnetic, a torrent of energy and spontaneous humor. He could have sold furnaces door to door in the scorching heat of an Arabian summer.

To put the word "humble" into his origin story would grossly understate the reality. Unsure of his age, he guessed he was born in 1937 because his mother told him it was the year of the big snow, precipitation virtually unknown in his home region of Asir.

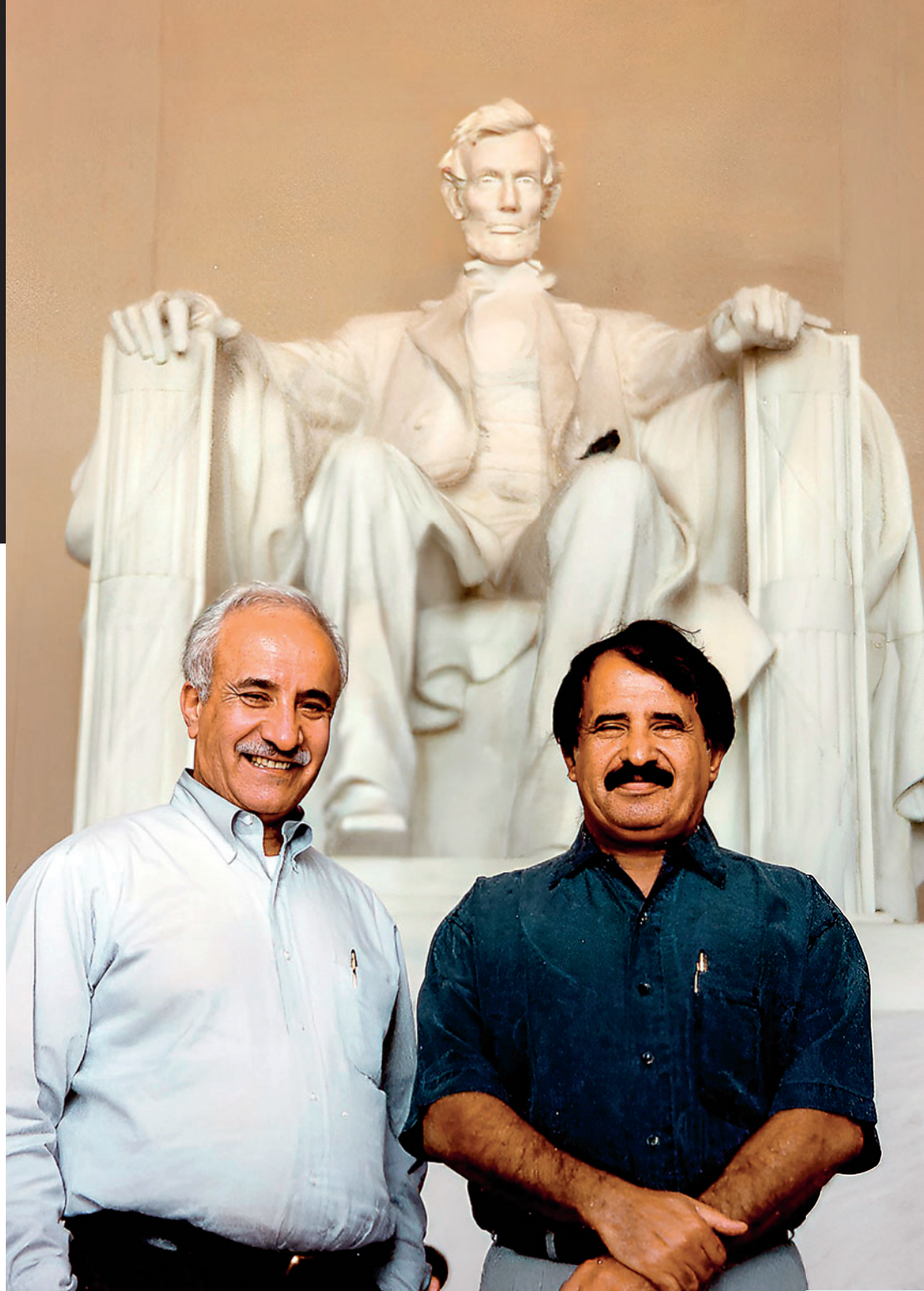
He was one of 11 children and six of his siblings perished from illness and malnutrition. He was three when he was put to work leading sheep to pasture and his only formal education before joining Aramco as a teenager was at the mosque where he learned to read the Koran.

When he left the company in 1977 to go into business for himself, he expressed his inner farm boy early on. He and Faiza had been married only a few months when he came home with an orphaned baby camel he had found in the market, feeding it milk from a bottle in the couple's kitchen.

Later on, as his business ventures became more successful, he built a farm he named "South Fork" (from the TV series "Dallas") and stocked it with camels, some peacocks and the usual livestock.

His first business was based on what he knew best: interacting with Saudi Government offices at the provincial and central levels. He assisted the foreign partners of Saudi enterprises with representation services, handling passport and visa matters, licenses, permits and customs clearances. He ran interference with the police and Sharia courts when their expatriate employees ran afoul of Saudi laws.

But he quickly moved out of his comfort zone to form alliances with foreign companies to market their products in the kingdom. He



Old Aramco colleagues Husain Saif, right, and Hamed Juraifani pose in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Saif was "charismatic, magnetic, a torrent of energy and spontaneous humor," writes old friend Bob Norberg.

was probably the first to sell traffic lights, got into bottling water and built plants that fabricated massive steel platforms for offshore oil installations.

He was extremely proud of his family. Faiza had worked as an educator and school inspector. His daughter, Farah, graduated in computer science. His sons, Ali and Majed, brought home degrees from U.S. colleges. Majed and Farah are integral to the ongoing operation of the family business and Ali is vice president at Naif Arab University for Security Sciences in Riyadh.

When I brought the sad news to my son, Scott, a teenager when he came into Husain's orbit, his response no doubt echoed the sentiments of many: "I was a huge fan. He brought more light to the world than almost anyone I have known."

PLEASANT DAYS SPRING 2023

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Bidding Adieu

A number of lucky attendees watched the sun set over al-Hasa Oasis on the final day of the Fifth KSA Expatriates Reunion on March 14. Some dozed on the ride back to Dhahran, while others wished for more. Soon after that, they got their wish: The next reunion is slated for February 2028.