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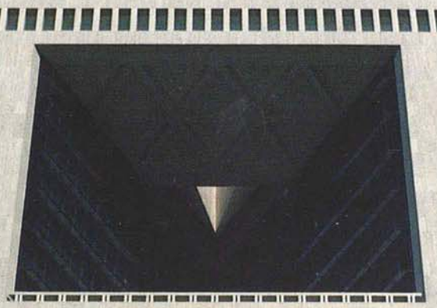
SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1987



A CITY *WITHIN* A CITY

ARAMCO WORLD magazine

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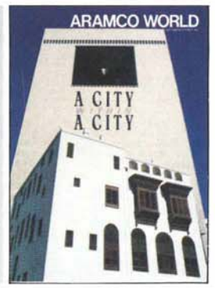
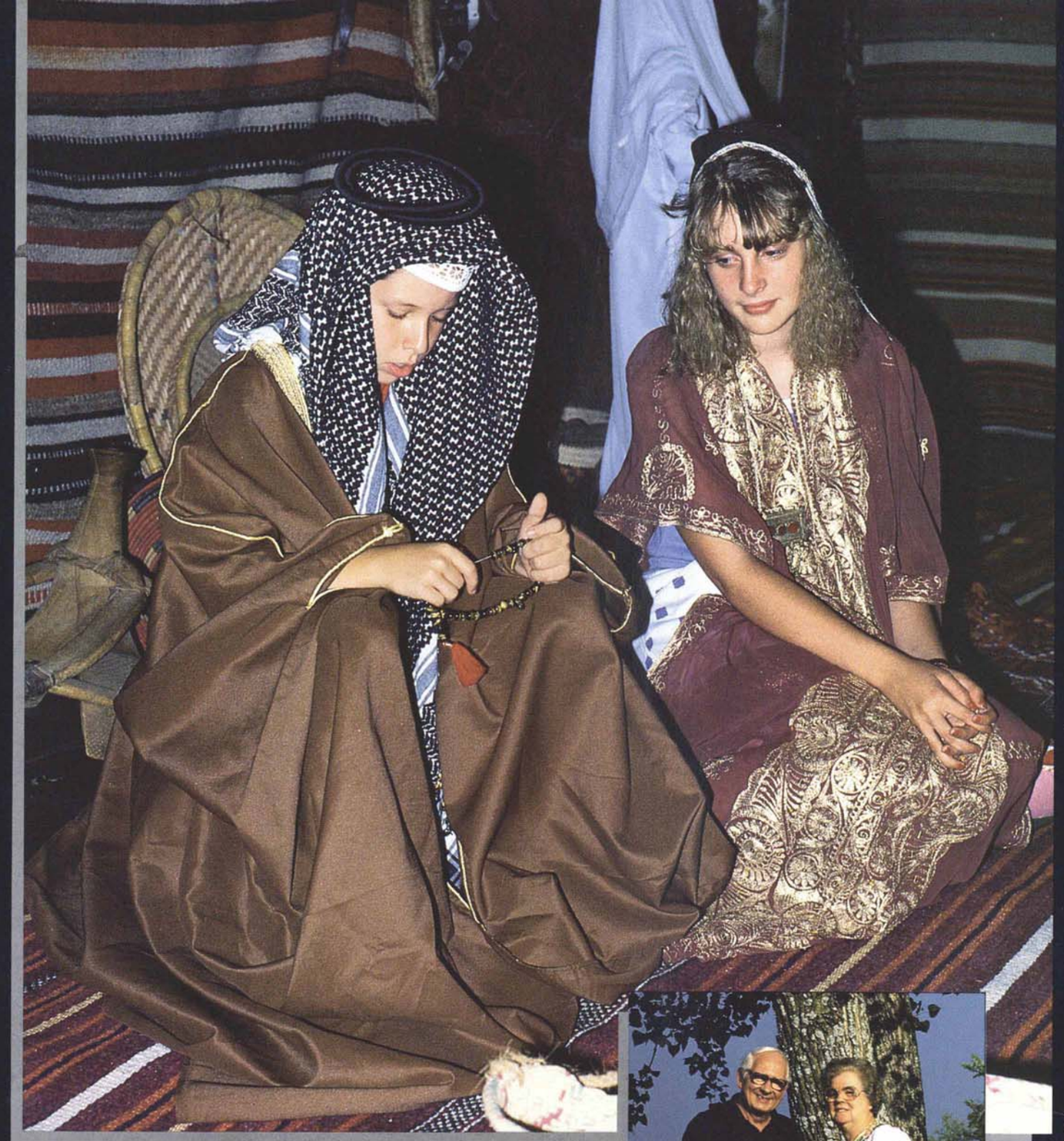


Cover: One of Jiddah's architectural treasures is the 19th-century building that once housed the city's British Legation. Crenelations, *mashrabia* windows, and corbeled and corniced *rawasheen* typify a Red Sea style that contrasts pleasingly with the modern severity of the award-winning National Commercial Bank building by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, in the background. Photo © Robert Azzi/-Woodfin Camp. Back cover: Hand-embroidered palm trees on a Najdi dress. Photo Paul Rocheleau.

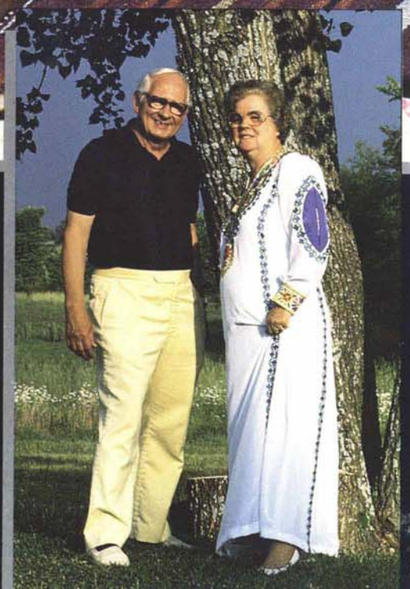
◀ A girl's silk-fringed cotton hood from southwestern Arabia shows the fine "seed" beadwork in geometric designs that is typical of the region.



THE NANCE MUSEUM

MIDDLE WEST *meets* MIDDLE EAST

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY WILLIAM TRACY



The lands along the Missouri-Kansas border are a green patchwork of lush creek bottoms and rolling pastures, where eastern forests begin their retreat to western prairies. Farms, small towns and cities pulse with the strength of the American heartland.

Spring here brings thunderstorms to soak the earth and renew the cycle of life. As dusk comes, cottonwoods stir in the warm breeze, robins pull worms from damp lawns and lightning bugs flash their Morse messages against darkening skies. In overgrown hollows, deer and quail move through groves of hawthorn, oak and walnut, and water moccasins hunt frogs in pristine lotus ponds. The meadows are fringed with daisies, clover and wild rose. Everywhere it is green, and it is a *long* way from Saudi Arabia.

Yet between Kingsville and Lone Jack, in Missouri's rural Johnson County, sits a green metal building crammed to the rafters with artifacts and exhibits from that ancient desert land. "The first impression . . . is of a hobby gone wild," wrote the *Kansas City Star*. But in fact, the Nance Museum and Library of Antiquities is much more: It is at once a valuable learning resource, an act of love, and the fulfillment of a remarkable couple's personal vision.

The Nance Museum houses an impressive collection of everyday objects, textiles, costumes, jewelry, curios and photographs from Saudi Arabia and such nearby Middle Eastern countries as Egypt, Syria and Yemen. It includes one of only three collections of Bedouin artifacts accessible to the American public, along with the John Topham collection (See page 30) and a collection at the Museum of Natural History in New York.

The museum in Missouri reflects the dedication of Paul and Colleen Nance, a warmly outgoing American couple who lived in Saudi Arabia for 31 years and came home to the Show-Me State to share their experience and their love for the Middle East with families, friends and neighbors in their native Middle West.

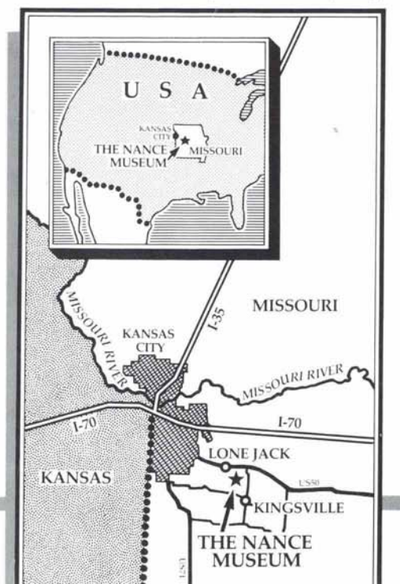
Paul Nance was born on a family farm near Lawson, Missouri, north of Kansas City, and remembers a childhood touched by the hard times of the Depression years, sustained by the ethic of hard work and his father's religious faith. Colleen grew up in a family of 10 children in the town of Baxter Springs in southeastern Kansas.

In 1952 Paul Nance joined the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) and the young couple moved to Saudi Arabia. The Nances found the company's Arab employees striving to improve the lives of their own families in a harsh and difficult environment with much the same determination and faith which they themselves had known at home.

The Nances made friends among their Arab neighbors and fellow employees and, as the years passed, grew to respect and admire the richness of their culture and traditions. At first they collected Saudi Arabian artifacts and souvenirs of their travels strictly for their own enjoyment. Gradually, though, an idea began to germinate. They had brought their American skills and experience to Saudi Arabia; why not share with those at home what they had seen and learned – and acquired – during their years abroad?

So some 10 years before they were to leave the Kingdom, the Nances began to fill the gaps in their collections, adding to their pieces of Bedouin jewelry, traditional clothing, woven baskets and hand-loomed rugs, hand-crafted objects of wood, leather, copper and brass. They sought out paintings, bought books. Their youngest son, James, made photographic prints of 250 lithographs of Middle Eastern scenes by Scottish artist David Roberts, who visited the region in the 1830's (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1970).

And they acquired the ultimate prize in their collection: a 6.7- by 16.7-meter (22- by 55-foot) Bedouin goat-hair tent, complete with most of its furnishings, which they purchased from a family which had made it their movable home in the deserts of northern Saudi Arabia for more than 40 years.



As their plans gelled, the Nances were faced with two opposing viewpoints about the legitimacy of their plan. In the world of collectors and museums, some believe that historical artifacts or unusual handicrafts are best left in their regions of origin, as part of the cultural legacy of future generations there. Others favor protecting and displaying such objects abroad, for the sake of cross-cultural understanding. The Nances, respecting both schools of thought, submitted a complete list of the items they had assembled to the Saudi Arabian Department of Antiquities before sending them out of the Kingdom. The officials concerned gave their approval and, indeed, applauded their efforts.

During this final two years with Aramco, Nance helped to coordinate the early development of an ambitious Aramco exhibit center, soon to be formally opened in Dhahran, where visitors will learn at first hand about the Arab technical heritage, science and the oil industry. He joined the American Association of Museums and attended its meetings when he could. When Nance finally retired from Aramco in 1983 he and Colleen were ready to build a museum of their own. And it was not to be in a bustling U.S. coastal metropolis, but somewhere in the long-remembered green countryside of middle America from which their own dreams had sprung.

The site they chose was a 65-hectare (160-acre) farm some 50 kilometers (30 miles) southeast of Kansas City, bought as long ago as 1960 to serve as a vacation home during their leaves from Arabia. They had terraced the slopes of the land, planted several thousand trees, and constructed a pond and a three-hectare (eight-acre) fishing lake. Here they would plan and build the museum to house their collections.

It was indeed the heartland.

Transcontinental travelers on US 50, the historic highway that spans the breadth of the United States from Annapolis to San Francisco, pass the Nance Museum three kilometers (two miles) to the north. The geographic center of the 48 contiguous states lies only half a state away, in north central Kansas. In the region are places with names like Liberty and Independence – places associated with authentic American heroes and villains familiar to generations of school children: men like Buffalo

Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickock, Cole Younger and the notorious James brothers, Mormon leader Joseph Smith and populist president Harry Truman. Here, in the mid-19th century, steamboats carried settlers up the Missouri River to the staging points of the prairie schooners and Conestoga wagons, westward bound on the Sante Fe, Oregon and California Trails. The first railroad reached nearby Saint Joseph in 1859, the short-lived Pony Express set out not many kilometers from here in 1860, and in 1863 an important battle in America's Civil War was fought in Lone Jack, just six kilometers (four miles) to the west.

In 1983, when the Nances arrived home in Missouri, they formally established a private non-profit foundation, assembled a board of trustees and compiled bylaws for the proposed museum, library and ethnic gardens. Among their objectives, Nance wrote, was to enhance understanding of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East by displaying objects acquired there, by interpreting them to museum visitors, by lending exhibits to others and by lecturing to schools and other groups. The work was to be its own reward: Although the foundation accepts donations, it charges no fees.

Their budget was limited. The Nances searched the area for affordable, sometimes used, glass cases, partitions and other furnishings. Over two years, they planned the ethnic gardens below the house – there were to be Islamic, Chinese and Greek gardens – and organized the exhibits, dividing the museum displays into three sections. The first, on Bedouins, includes half the length and width of the large tent with its furnishings, including *kilims* (flat-woven rugs), and a special display on the coffee ceremony. The second section, on town dwellers, includes knotted carpets and such items as musical instruments, *mashrabiya* windows (See *Aramco World*, July-August 1974), a handsome wooden chest from Medina, a glass mosque lamp, samples of ornate Arabic calligraphy (See *Aramco World*, September-October 1979), and an illuminated page from an antique copy of the Koran. The third section, on ancient monuments, displays the Roberts prints, maps, jewelry and replicas of Egyptian statuary.

The centerpiece of the Islamic Gardens is a one-fifth scale recreation of those in front of India's Taj Mahal (See *Aramco World*, July-August 1968), with emphasis on Central Asian plantings able to survive Missouri's harsh winters. With a gift from close Saudi-American friends, the Khalid

al-Turki family of al-Khobar, the Nances constructed a fountain and a cruciform pool, with arms facing the cardinal points of the compass, representing the rising and setting sun and flowing rivers.

In August 1985, two years after their "retirement," Paul and Colleen Nance officially opened their museum. Family, board members, representatives from other museums and the local press were in attendance; friends came from west and east. In honor of each guest present the Nances planted an ash tree flanking the path which stretches from the house and museum down the grassy slopes toward the Islamic Gardens, fountain and ponds.

Since then, between April and October of each year, the Nances have opened their museum to the public. They greet visitors personally and walk them through the collections and grounds. They receive students of all ages: Girl Scouts, Kiwanis Club members and senior citizens. Sixty-five groups came the first year alone, and today the museum guest book shows visitors from some 20 states and several foreign countries, including many – both Arabs and Americans – from Saudi Arabia.

In one week in May this year, Paul and Colleen Nance had an unusually heavy schedule of visitors. It began with a Sunday reception for journalists and journalism students. As rain pounded on the museum's metal roof, Paul Nance showed slides of Egyptian jewelry and the gold of Tutankhamen (See *Aramco World*, May-June 1977). The sun reappeared while the guests toured the Islamic Gardens' rich display of red and white spring peonies, in full bloom and dripping with moisture.

Monday morning came the first of five scheduled visits by second- through sixth-graders from the Independence Missouri Program for Academically and Creatively Talented youngsters (IMPACT). This spring their "special learning project" was the Middle East, and their field trips to the Nance Museum, followed by a visit to a Kansas City mosque, were the high points of the semester.

Each morning that week, Colleen presented a slide show on some of the modern aspects of Saudi Arabia to about half the children, while Paul spoke on the traditions and customs of the Kingdom to another group gathered on a large Persian carpet in the museum.

He made a few key points to the students before drawing their attention to several of the objects and inviting them to explore the exhibits for themselves. Along with Christianity and Judaism, he pointed out, Islam is one of the world's three great monotheistic religions, sharing a belief in one God and the prophets of the Old and New Testaments. The Arabian Peninsula, with Makkah as the goal of the annual Muslim pilgrimage, has long served as a cultural bridge between Africa and Asia, and sits astride vital trade routes from the Orient to the Mediterranean. The Arabs were the custodians and elaborators of classical Greek science during the Dark Ages of Europe. And today, Saudi Arabia

holds in trust a quarter of the world's known petroleum reserves.

"The museum was smaller than ones I've visited with my parents," said sixth-grader Emily Stephens, from Blackburn Elementary School, "but I liked it because it's more open. You can touch things. I smelled some frankincense, for example. In most places it would be locked inside a glass case. My favorite thing was the Bedouin tent, actually set up, with cooking things, costumes, and a camel saddle. We saw pictures in books in class, but I didn't realize it would be so big."

Fourth-grader Christopher Williams from William Southern School had carved a set of prayer beads, or *misbaha*, for his class project (See *Aramco World*, November-December 1968). He particularly enjoyed the collection of beads in the museum, the displays of jewelry and the food and water bags made from animal skins. "I like the idea of living in a tent," he said. "I'm going to join the Scouts."

"Until this year I didn't even know there was a Middle East," Glendale School fourth-grader Charley Jones said. "I was surprised by the sophistication of the Bedouins. The people in the desert use what they have available – wool, palm fronds, leather – and make the best of it."

Another Glendale boy liked seeing the *khanjar* (dagger) and *'ud* (lute) on display. "My dad collects weapons and is interested in music," he said. Meghan, a sixth-grader from Santa Fe Trail School, studied the wedding dress displayed on a mannequin.

When the students had left Monday afternoon, Paul Nance dropped by the public library in Lone Jack (population about 400) to chat with the librarian and

check on the display case of museum artifacts and art which he maintains there. Tuesday afternoon, the Nances loaded the trunk of their car with artifacts for a lecture at the middle school in Holden (population about 2,200). Three sixth-grade classes saw a slide show and passed around a basket of goat-hair yarn used for weaving. The children fanned themselves with notebooks in the hot and humid air, but the question-and-answer period following the lecture was spirited.

After the IMPACT group had left the museum on Wednesday, Paul drove over to look in on his display case at the Lees Summit branch of the Mid-Continent Library. (The Nances also maintain a display at a nearby university campus.) That evening, a neighbor lady pulled up in a van: Would the Nances please show the gardens and museum to her five German and two Swiss visitors? They did, and Paul patiently answered the guests' questions while the neighbor interpreted.

The weekly edition of the Holden *Progress*, delivered Thursday afternoon, included coverage of the previous Sunday's reception at the Nance Museum. On Friday morning the fifth and last group of IMPACT students came to the museum. And by now the four teachers were helping Paul and Colleen field the boys' and

girls' questions with the ease of the old Middle East hands they had become.

Besides such extensive "in-house" activities, the Nances also run what they term their outreach program, lending exhibits and showing objects or slides at area schools, churches and civic clubs. They have provided an exhibit on Islam at a local Islamic conference, twice shown Middle Eastern jewelry (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1979) at gem and mineral shows, spoken on rugs and textiles to the Kansas City Weavers' Guild, and last year lectured to a school assembly of fourth- through twelfth-grade students at a nearby Air Force base.

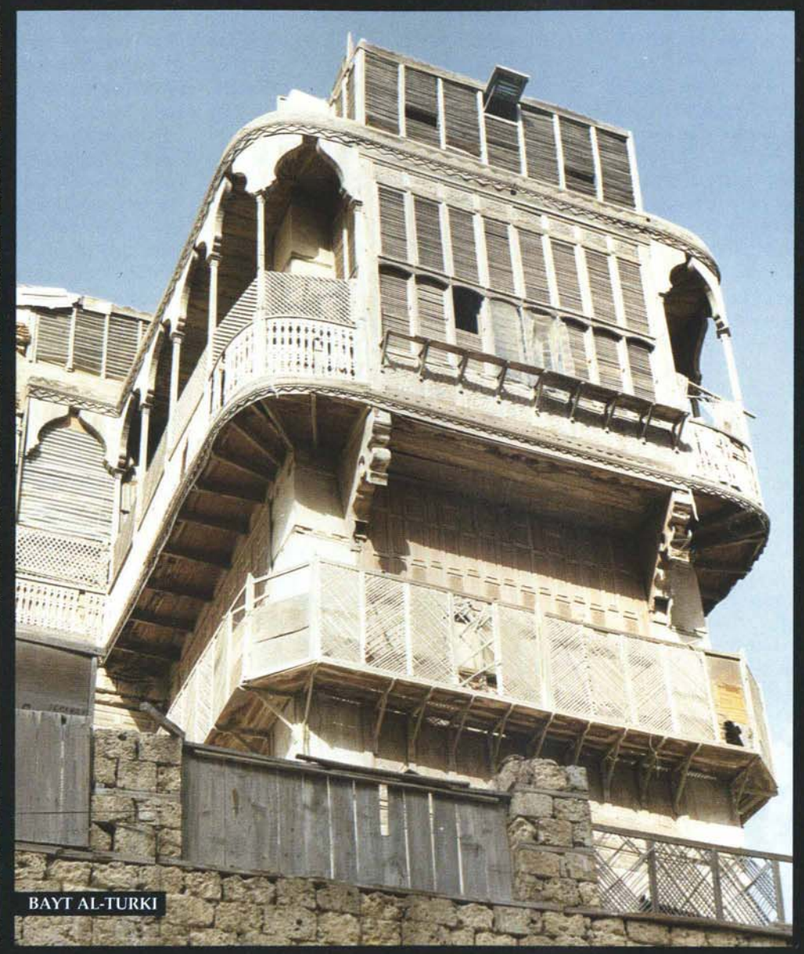
Paul Nance has spoken to classes at Texas Christian University and lent artifacts and art to two Texas libraries. In 1985 he mounted one exhibit in the lobby of Dallas City Hall that was seen by an estimated 25,000 visitors, and another in the lobby of the Aramco Services Company's building in Houston.

This summer the museum's outreach extended in a new direction. The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) in Dearborn, Michigan, is attempting to found an Arab folk museum and performing-arts center. Dearborn and the Detroit area are home to an Arab-American community of more than 250,000 people, and ACCESS contacted the Nance Museum for funding advice and support. The Nances responded by lending some 100 pieces for a display in the ACCESS offices and public spaces this summer, with other loans – including the Bedouin tent – being considered for the winter months.

From the beginning, Paul and Colleen Nance hoped their museum would become a resource and study center for young and old. It has. "Before this year," one of the IMPACT children said, "All we knew about the Middle East was the pyramids and the deserts and that there was some fighting going on over there. Now we've learned about the people and their lives and something about their religion. Kids play soccer there too. If I grew up in Saudi Arabia it would probably be home for me, just like we feel in America."

The Nance's dream is helping to build a legacy of respect and understanding between the peoples of the two places that have been home to them: the American Middle West and the Arab Middle East.

William Tracy, long-time assistant editor of Aramco World, *has recently completed a novel about Saudi Arabia. The Nance Museum can be reached at Route 1, Box 313, Kingsville, Missouri 64061, U.S.A., or by phone at 816/566-2526.*



BAYT AL-TURKI

A CITY *WITHIN* A CITY

WRITTEN BY JOHN CHRISTIE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALI MUBARAK AND JOHN FRENCH

From the land or from the sea, Jiddah today looks nothing like the second-oldest city in Saudi Arabia. A forest of steel, concrete and glass towers, Jiddah, at the height of its growth in the late 1960's, ranked as one of the fastest-growing cities in the world. But wrapped within this bustling cosmopolitan metropolis lies an architectural treasure from the past. It makes Saudi Arabia's second city one of the many sites in the country that, together, mirror all ages of humankind. The few square kilometers of Old Jiddah, a city within a city these days, contain an architectural richness of old buildings and a culmination of style and form which epitomize the city's long traditions and the eventful course of its checkered history.

From its earliest beginnings, Jiddah has enjoyed a romantic and notable significance. According to a city guide published by the municipality, a "Kodah" tribe first settled on the site of pre-Islamic Jiddah, establishing a small fishing village on the shores of al-Manqabah Lagoon to the north of the present town.

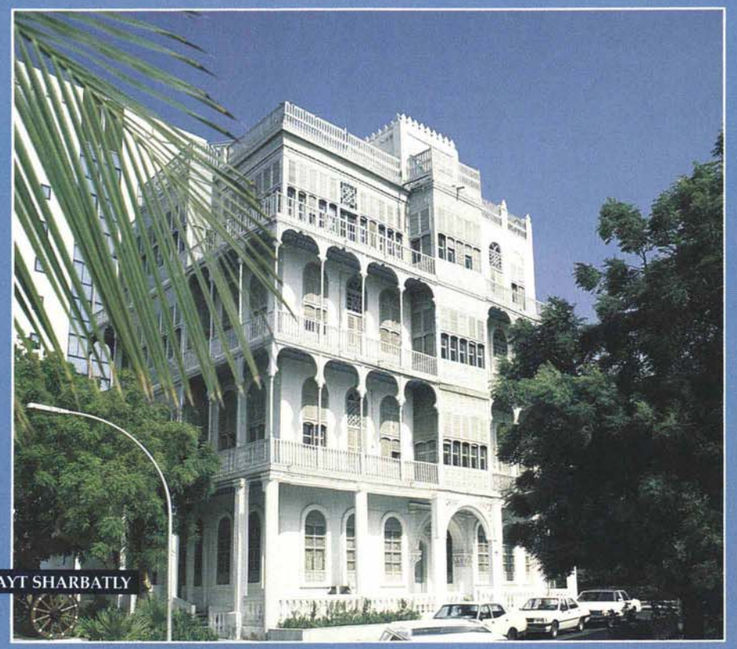
The site was favored with a fortunate geography: a good anchorage at a rare gap in the formidable triple coral-reef barrier along the Red Sea coastline, and a location at the end of the southern Hijaz Escarpment, whose precipitous cliffs run all the way to Yemen in the south. The fishing village blossomed into an important staging post on the ancient trade routes linking the civilizations of the Far East with the city-states of the Mediterranean.

By the sixth century, Persians of the Sassanid Empire had ensconced themselves in the city. They built Jiddah's first fortifications and constructed a system of conduits and cisterns to furnish an assured water supply to the fast-growing city. Although the Sassanids held the city for centuries, nothing now remains of their occupation.

The coming of Islam greatly increased the urban importance of Jiddah and, ever since, the city's fortunes, history and development have been intimately linked with the progress of Islam. As the entry point for the pilgrimage to the two holy cities, Makkah and Medina, Jiddah's distinction was confirmed and its prosperity assured. In addition to the all-important pilgrim traffic, Jiddah flourished as a transshipment port, and the cosmopolitan character of the city was well established. By the time the Amir of Makkah expelled the Sassanids from the city, the Persian poet and traveler Nasir-i Khusrow, could describe Jiddah as:

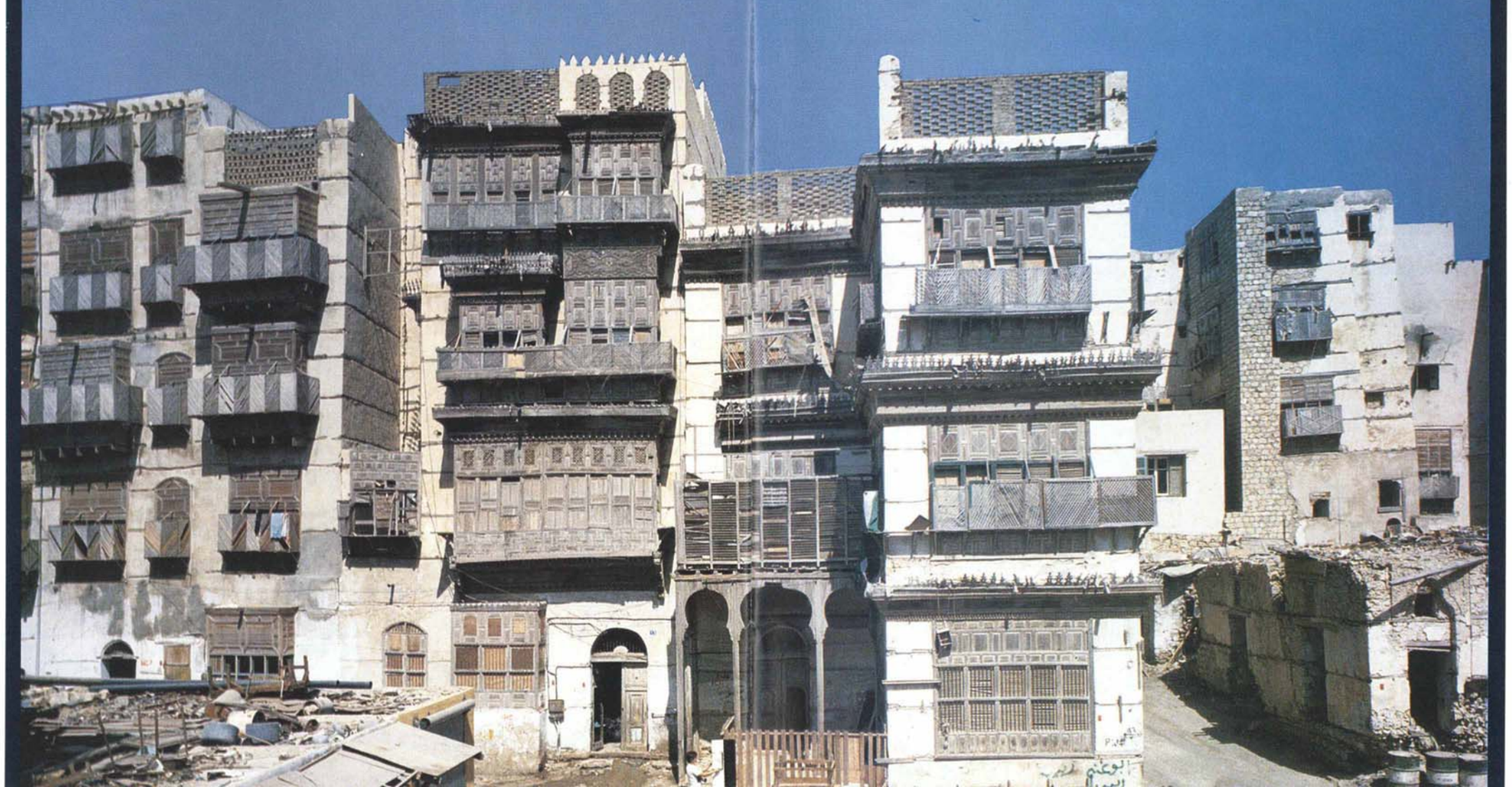
> . . . a great city situated on the coast and surrounded by a strong wall. Its population reaches the number of five thousand male inhabitants. The bazaars are beautiful, the *qibla* of the Great Mosque faces east. There are no buildings to be seen outside the city, except for a mosque which is called Masjid al-Rassul. The city has two gates, one to the east opens on to the Makkah road; the other to the west opens to the sea.

But about 100 years later, the city walls had fallen into ruins. They were not to be rebuilt for another 500 years, when an Ottoman governor re-established the city's fortifications. Within those confining walls, which were not demolished until 1947, Old Jiddah's conformation was settled. The physical appearance of the city scarcely altered over the subsequent years.



BAYT SHARBATLY

BAYT NASIF



When the Englishman Charles Doughty, one of the greatest of the early foreign travelers in Arabia, wrote his classic *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, he ended the account with a description of his arrival in Jiddah. Coming from the uplands of Ta'if, southeast of the city, Doughty recalled the words of his Arab traveling companion as they neared the city. "Rejoice!" said the Arab, "for from the next brow we will show thee Jiddah!" Then, Doughty wrote, he beheld "the white sea gleeming far under the sun, and tall ships riding, and the minarets of the town!"

Until recent times, as late as the mid-1960's, the traveler's first view of the city of Jiddah was much the same. Whether seen from inland or from the sea, the skyline was dominated by the shining white minarets of the numerous mosques, by the lofty town houses and palaces of the great merchants of the town, and by the celebrated caravanserai of the port.

The town inns, mosques and merchants' houses of Old Jiddah are concealed today behind modern steel skyscrapers that make up Jiddah's bustling business district. Even the shoreline no longer holds its earlier shape: Old Jiddah is separated from the shallow waters of the reef by a wedge of reclaimed and developed land. At first sight, it could be thought that Jiddah's historical and architectural heritage had been swept entirely away in the immense surge of development which took place during the 1960's and 1970's.

In those hectic years, when Jiddah – and much of the rest of the country – was literally transfigured, the pace of change could be marked from day to day. In such an atmosphere, voices calling for renovation and conservation tended to be drowned out by the roar of construction machinery. In the general mood of eagerness to change and determination to modernize, there was little place for ideas on preservation and conservation.

The economics of the time were no help to conservation. Land prices and rents in the main town had risen astronomically. Rebuilding and redevelopment was an almost certain path to profit, and the buildings of the recent past got short shrift. That any part of Old Jiddah escaped the developers' bulldozers was due to some fortunate circumstances – and to some exceptional men.

The preservation of historic Old Jiddah might never have come about had the mayor of Jiddah at the time, Muhammad Sa'id Farsi, not been a trained engineer and architect. Farsi was also a man with a profound belief in the importance of cultural values and the necessity of protecting the national heritage.

As mayor, Farsi was particularly concerned about Jiddah's fast-vanishing architectural heritage, and he was determined to do something about it. Fortunately, Farsi's personal convictions were reinforced by his professional qualifications, and his plans on conservation were much facilitated by his mayoral authority. Equally fortunately, the actions of the Saudi government were also helpful to the project Jiddah's mayor had in mind.

In the late 1960's the Saudi government set up, with help from the United Nations, regional and city planning studies throughout the country. Each city had an approved master plan, geared to the national Five-Year Plan. In the case of Jiddah, the city managers had to cope with an explosive growth rate of about 16 per-cent a year, one of the highest in the world.

In 1979, when the pace of expansion had slackened a little, the Saudi authorities appointed a leading British consulting firm to make a detailed study of Old Jiddah and draw up plans to preserve the area's unique architecture and, at the same time, ensure the continuation of its thriving community life. The decision was a particular pleasure to George Duncan, a partner in planning for Saudi Arabia's Western Province. As early as 1971, he had drawn attention to the outstanding urban heritage in Old Jiddah and urged measures to make its survival certain. He joined with Farsi as a member of the team to save Old Jiddah.

The consultants' surveys showed that more than one thousand historic structures in Old Jiddah had survived the ravages of time, climate and, in many cases, sheer neglect. About half that number were designated "buildings of architectural and historical significance" and recommended for preservation and protection. Farsi established a special branch office of the municipality – called Al-Balad, or the City – charged with putting the preservation program into effect.

But Old Jiddah was not to be turned into an open-air museum merely to display a fossilized, static sample of the past. On the contrary, the historic community was to remain the home of its 50,000 people and, by the careful injection of various commercial enterprises, be the source of jobs for several thousand more. The conservation of Old Jiddah was to prolong its useful life, for the authorities recognized that the key to the physical survival of Jiddah's "historic core" lay in its continuation as a living, functional urban entity. The rehabilitation of Old Jiddah called for a large investment of both money and human resources; Mayor Farsi, backed by national authorities, was determined that the result would be worthwhile in every sense.

Bayt Amrikani

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM E. MULLIGAN

After successfully negotiating the oil concession agreement with the Saudi Minister of Finance in 1933, Lloyd Hamilton, the SOCAL *lawyer, made another deal. He agreed with H. St. John B. Philby to take over Philby's combination house and office for use by the company's Jiddah representative. That great, rambling building on the seashore was known as Bayt Baghdadi.*

Bill Lenahan arrived in Jiddah on 18 October. He moved into Bayt Baghdadi, but he didn't like it, even though it had an electric generator and a number of marble-floored, domed bathrooms. He found it too big, too dilapidated, too old-fashioned.

Lenahan scouted around and found a building in the handsome Jiddah style under construction for a local merchant, whom he talked into making some modifications. Lenahan signed a lease, and the building became Bayt al-Amrikani – the American House – the residence and office of the oil company's representative and his small staff from 1934 until after World War II.

Bayt Amrikani, as it was known to its residents, was situated just inside the northern wall of the old town of Jiddah, across a small open space that separated it from the building occupied by the qayim-maqam *– the mayor, more or less – of Jiddah. That building was opposite the Medina Gate, a gate so narrow that a larger one, al-Bab al-Jadeed, or New Gate, had to be opened in the wall nearby for motor vehicles. One building away on the west side of Bayt Amrikani was the Dutch Legation. Other prominent buildings just inside the wall were the Egyptian and Italian legations and the British Consulate.*

Bayt Amrikani was the first building in Jiddah with flush toilets, and the British Minister, Sir Andrew Ryan, was of the opinion that they were unnecessary and would not work. Even more a topic of conversation at the time was the air-cooling equipment installed in several rooms. Parker T. Hart, a young American diplomat later to become ambassador to Saudi Arabia, recalls his pleasure at visiting Clark Cypher in 1944, then the Aramco representative, and sitting in his air-cooled living room. Hart also recalls his frustration at Cypher's custom of repairing, with his guest, to the large veranda on the front of Bayt Amrikani overlooking the Jiddah wall. Although it caught the breezes and was quite comfortable, Hart said he would have preferred sitting inside in front of the air-cooler.

To operate the many electrical conveniences of Bayt Amrikani a fair-sized generator ran day and night at the rear of the building. Protests about the noise it produced went all the way to the King's cabinet. Colonel Daan van der Meulen, the Dutch Minister who lived one house away, expostulated about his inability to sleep. Shaykh Yusuf Yasin, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, said the noise disturbed the prayerful. Eventually, the culprit was removed to a place outside the wall.

Several parties of oil men crossed the Arabian peninsula by automobile before World War II brought air travel to the region. One of the highlights of these trips was a stay in the comparative luxury of Bayt Amrikani. Wallace Stegner, in his book Discovery!, *described the place.*

The house itself was big and airy and pleasantly decorated, part of the growing European quarter. The furniture, which Lenahan had ordered when in Cairo, was chaste and elegant, the tile floors were spotless, there were bathrooms with both tub and shower, the water closets, to Sir Andrew Ryan's disgust, worked. . . . *The house was, in all, a revelation in modern comfort and convenience.*

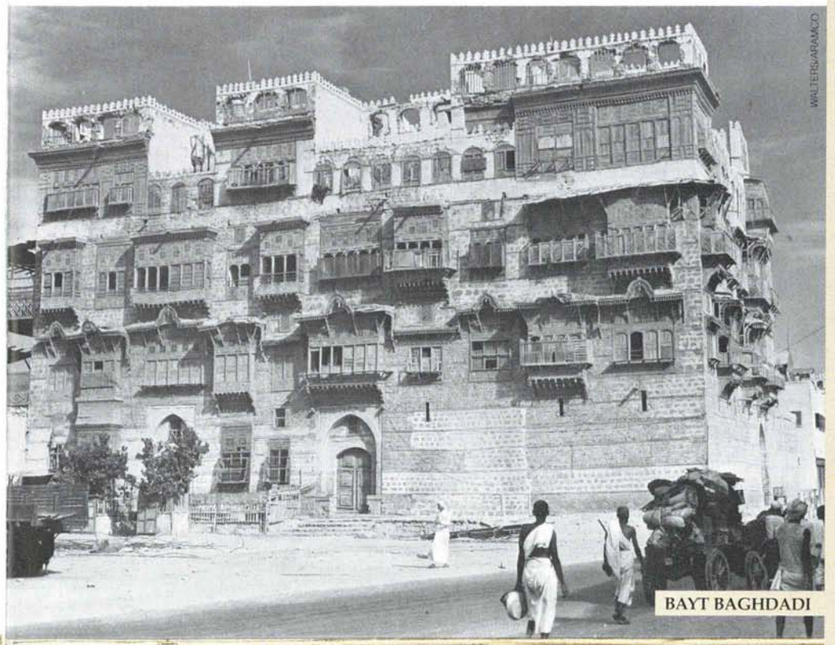
Richard Sanger waxed equally eloquent in his description of Bayt Amrikani in his The Arabian Peninsula.

It leans hardly at all from the perpendicular . . . . Its tiers of brown balconies have a New Orleans flavor about their carved grillwork . . . . The rooms are air cooled, the commissary is well stocked, and the whole atmosphere makes a visit to Bayt Amrikani on a steaming Jiddah morning as refreshing as a trip to the mountains of Lebanon.

When in 1942 James S. Moose, Jr., opened the American Legation in Jiddah as chargé d'affaires, *he was given accommodations by Aramco in Bayt Amrikani until he located a building for his chancery and living quarters. A few years later, when Aramco vacated Bayt Amrikani for larger quarters, the building was taken over by the United States government for staff housing.*

The years have not dealt too kindly with Bayt Amrikani. When I last saw it in 1977, however, it was still showing vestiges of its earlier charm, and I understand that it is still standing today, though derelict and empty.

BAYT AMRIKANI



BAYT BAGHDADI

The program of preservation and conservation was not all plain sailing. "The building boom was still in progress," recalls Zaki Farsi, a member of the technical team set up at Al-Balad. "There was very little incentive for the owners of the old buildings to think of preservation. Redevelopment of central town sites in Jiddah could, and did, make large fortunes for individual owners. Asking them to retain and maintain old buildings, which were very expensive to keep in good condition, was asking them to forgo enormous financial opportunities."

Owners of buildings could not be simply ordered to carry out repairs and renovations, and, on the other hand, the major developments of the city as a whole could not be halted or diverted. But much was achieved by Mayor Farsi and other believers in the preservation program, who used their acknowledged personal prestige and influence to persuade owners to support the program. The city's planning authority was also deployed in the cause, in some cases allowing the ground floors of selected historic houses to be used for commercial purposes. This not only produced respectable incomes for the owners of the buildings but also revitalized the area's economic situation. The vision of a living Old Jiddah began to be recognized by a wider circle as a commercially viable prospect, as well as a socially desirable one.

The structures of Old Jiddah were a particular expression of long-established regional building traditions. As well as Jiddah, other ports on both sides of the Red Sea – Yanbu' (see page 17), Hodeida, Massawa, Assab and Suwakin – once displayed similar architectural styles, developed in response to the harsh climate of hot and humid summers, brief winters and sparse rainfall. Hardly any examples of the period have survived in most of those cities.

Suwakin, for instance, once Sudan's premier port, was totally abandoned by its population many years ago, and its splendid buildings are degenerating into heaps of rubble beyond repair or restoration.

But in Old Jiddah the traditional buildings did survive. In the narrow streets and alleys of the town, cramped by the encompassing city walls, the traditional houses were built cheek by jowl to use every square meter of precious land; the bigger houses were three or four stories high, creating deep and welcome shadows in the pedestrian passageways below. It was, as T. E. Lawrence called it in *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, "a remarkable town."

Built of local coral limestone hand-hewn into square-cut blocks and laid in lime mortar, reinforced with timber beams and faced with white or tinted plaster, the

houses displayed a marvelous symmetry. The windows of the buildings were masked by elaborately carved wooden shutters and latticed screens. These bay windows (*rawasheen*, singular *roshan*) were the most distinguishing feature of the houses, projecting well beyond the walls of the building to catch every passing breath of wind.

The focus of social life in the house, the *rawasheen* were large enough for a small group of people to take their ease in cool comfort behind the privacy of the screens. On some of the finer houses the bay windows are linked horizontally by decorated canopies and catwalks; some vertically linked examples form a single huge *roshan* two or three stories in height. The elegant carvings and decorations were not confined to the teakwood panels and grills. The external plasterwork covering the coral blocks was richly incised with geometric patterns and, sometimes, inlaid with decorative stones and pebbles.

There was not, of course, any local timber available that was suitable for the wooden facades and balconies; most of it, teak or other hardwoods, was imported from India. Craftsmen to work on the buildings were plentiful, however. Thanks to Jiddah's position as an international transshipment port, the city sustained a large work force of masons, carpenters, metalworkers, plasterers, woodcarvers and locksmiths.

The master builder, usually a local man, laid out the construction of a new building by a deceptively simple system. No drawings were ever prepared for the structure to be built. The master mason set out the floor plan using a traditional measure, the *qiddah* – equal to about 58 centimeters (23 inches) – which divided into eighteen *qirat*. With no tools other than a measuring board, the master builder would mark out the positions of walls, windows, doors, supporting beams and so on. The *qiddah* measure was used throughout the Red Sea region, and the common use of this system is one reason for the consistent architectural harmony that characterizes Old Jiddah. The system may have looked simple, but it needed a high degree of skill and experience to make its application a success.

One of the most famous of the city's merchants' dwellings is the house of the Nasif family. As well as being a classic example of the traditional house, with some fifty ornately decorated rooms on four floors, the outside of the Nasif house boasted the only tree in Jiddah. Letters for the Nasif family marked "the house by the tree" were certain of delivery. The tree stands to this day, and the Nasif house – a gift to the nation by the Nasif family – is

BAYT NOORWALI

ROBERT AZZI

BAYT SHARBATLY

open to the public and looked after by the Ministry of Education. Full of exquisite workmanship beautifully restored, the house also holds the noted Islamic library of 6,000 volumes collected by Shaykh Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasif.

Other notable houses, such as Bayt Sharbatly and Bayt Jughda, have become local museums and thus have a new lease on life. The Noorwali house is considered to represent the ultimate in the local traditional builder's art, its monumental overall dimensions perfectly balanced yet showing great delicacy in detail.

The conservation projects in Old Jiddah were not without occasional setbacks. Several fine traditional buildings fell to the demolition machinery of the developers. Among them was Bayt Baghdadi, once the residence of the former Ottoman governor, later the home of the famed British explorer of Arabia, H. St. John Philby, and subsequently Aramco's first office building in the city. In 1982 a serious fire in the heart of Old Jiddah totally destroyed more than a dozen traditional buildings. Some losses have been suffered by structural collapse and accidental damage, and the problems of maintenance and repair on remaining buildings have not yet been entirely solved.

Nevertheless, the main objectives of the preservation and enhancement of the Old Jiddah area have by and large been reached. The meteoric growth of the city has not obliterated Old Jiddah, and revised regulations and development controls are now in force that afford some protection to its architectural heritage. The area, refurbished by careful landscaping and sympathetic improvements – including the creation of shady public open spaces with seats and fountains, to be used as social and leisure meeting places – has awakened Jiddah's citizens to the virtues and advantages of conservation.

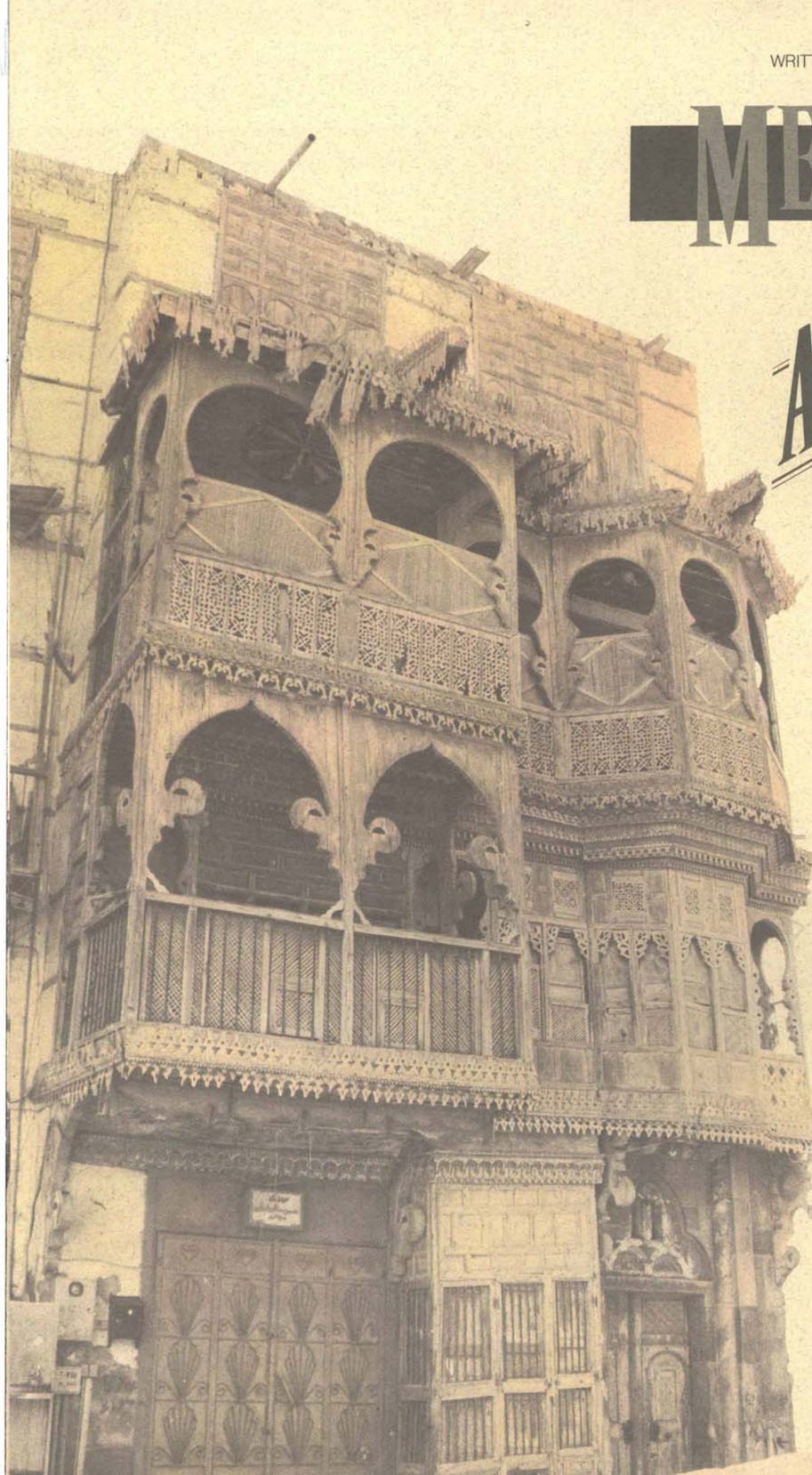
More valuable still, Jiddah's initiative and example has alerted other cities in Saudi Arabia to reflect on ways to safeguard their own examples of local heritage. In a 1982 interview with a Saudi newspaper about the Old Jiddah project, Mayor Muhammad Sa'id Farsi said, "We want future generations of Saudis to see what our fathers did before us."

Whether they will or not is for a future time to say; but in any event, a magnificent beginning has been made. The present generation may count itself fortunate that a heritage has been safeguarded and its examples cherished.

John Christie, OBE, served 17 years as a British diplomat in Jiddah and other cities of the Arab world. He is a director of the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce in London and edits Gulf States Newsletter *on Arabian Gulf affairs.*

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY
JANE WALDRON GRUTZ

MEMORIES of Another Age



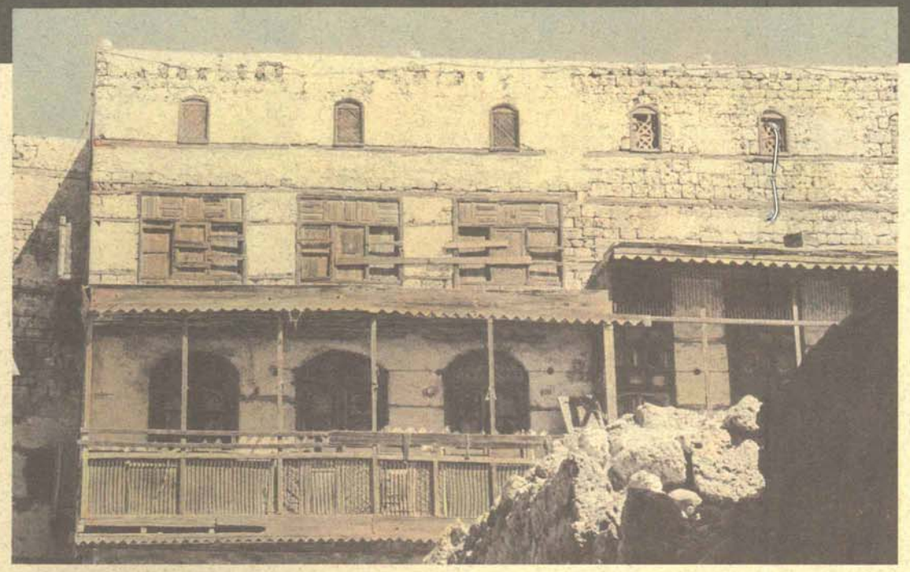
The elegant old town houses of Yanbu' al-Bahr are quiet now. The families that built them have long since departed for the suburbs that surround the city. Even the foreign workers who later lived in these cool, high-ceilinged rooms have drifted away. For the most part, only the handsome facades remain, reminders of an age when Yanbu' al-Bahr – Yanbu' by the Sea, 320 kilometers (200 miles) northwest of Jiddah – was one of the greatest of the Red Sea ports, with a merchant class wealthy enough to build some of the largest and most beautifully decorated houses in western Saudi Arabia.

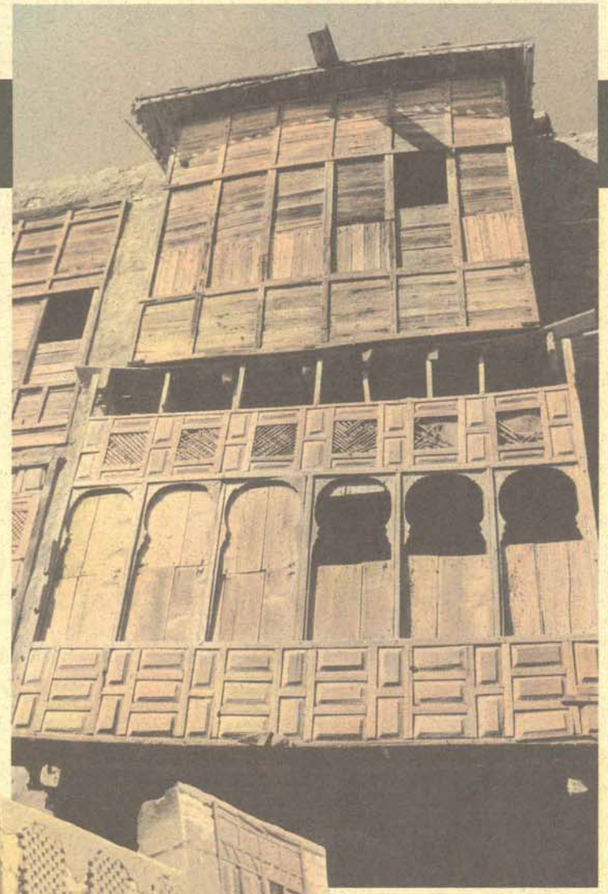
The wealth came from trade with ports like Hodeida (North Yemen), Hadramut (South Yemen), Mogadishu (Somalia), and Suez. Peanuts and sesame came from the Sudan, textiles and vegetables from Egypt, sheep from Somalia, coffee, wheat, sorghum and sultanas from Yemen. Hundreds of dhows docked every day to unload or transship goods.

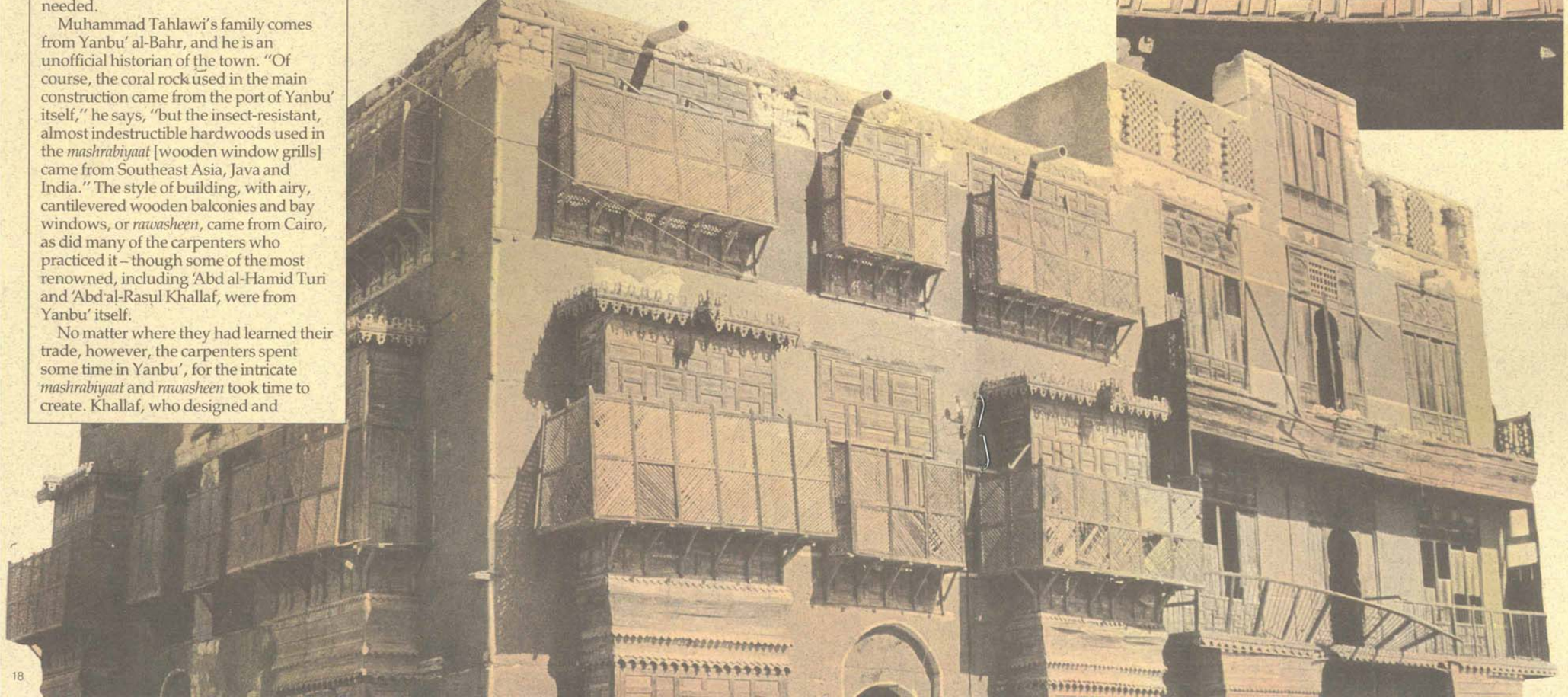
Trade prospered greatly in the late 19th century, and so did the merchants of the community. As traders, they thought little of importing the building materials they needed.

Muhammad Tahlawi's family comes from Yanbu' al-Bahr, and he is an unofficial historian of the town. "Of course, the coral rock used in the main construction came from the port of Yanbu' itself," he says, "but the insect-resistant, almost indestructible hardwoods used in the *mashrabiyaat* [wooden window grills] came from Southeast Asia, Java and India." The style of building, with airy, cantilevered wooden balconies and bay windows, or *rawasheen*, came from Cairo, as did many of the carpenters who practiced it – though some of the most renowned, including 'Abd al-Hamid Turi and 'Abd al-Rasul Khallaf, were from Yanbu' itself.

No matter where they had learned their trade, however, the carpenters spent some time in Yanbu', for the intricate *mashrabiyaat* and *rawasheen* took time to create. Khallaf, who designed and constructed those on the most beautiful and famous town house of all, that of Salim Babutayn, is said to have worked on them from sunrise to sunset for three years, for which he was paid 1.25 riyals a day – about 30 cents at today's rates.







"In those days, 50 to 100 years ago, every house was covered with *mashrabiyaat*," says Tahlawi, "and whole families lived together. When a son married, he brought his wife to his family home and of course they would take a bedroom, and usually another room as well. And when the children arrived, more rooms would be requisitioned."

If the family outgrew the house, an addition would be built or a nearby house rented or purchased. The Babutayn house was twice expanded in this way to engulf neighboring properties, Tahlawi says, with some party walls removed to make a unified floor plan.

Sometimes a new house was built, with more stories, more rooms and probably more decoration than the one before. The principal decoration, of course – and the element that makes the Babutayn house so special – were the magnificent wooden *rawasheen*.

"They were more than just bay windows. Often they jutted a meter and a half [five feet] into the street," says Tahlawi. In the fresh breezes that wafted through the lattice-work screens, family members worked or socialized, the men in one *roshan*, the women in another.

The upper floors of the typically four-story buildings were cooled by passing breezes, the lower floors more by the drafts created by the town's narrow streets, which were often only two to three meters (six to 10 feet) wide and deeply shaded as a result. And because the streets were such busy places, most houses were windowless at street level: Simple air holes served to ventilate the kitchen or other ground-floor rooms, with the windows and the *rawasheen* beginning on the first or second floor, and becoming larger and more elaborate on each successive story.

The doors, too, were objects of great craftsmanship. Often set in an arched casement, they were usually of teak and often carved in elaborate geometric patterns. They opened directly onto a reception area whose stone floor was frequently sprinkled with water for coolness. Rooms opening directly off the hall typically served as reception rooms for the men, with women's reception rooms on the higher floors.

Most rooms were simple. Cupboards were built into the walls, but the other furnishings, beds included, were usually portable and could be moved into the coolest or most comfortable room in the building. Any room in the house might thus be used for dining, sleeping or socializing and, normally, different rooms were used for different purposes at different times of the year. Rooms that faced north, for example, might be used in the summer, while those that faced south would be used in the winter, or one room might be used in the heat of the day and another in the cool of the evening.

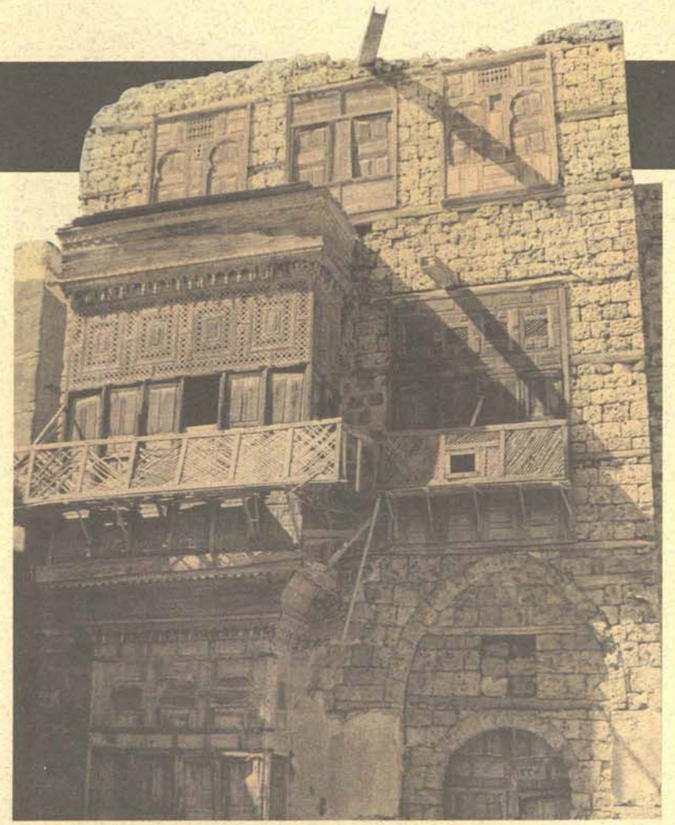
As the rooms on the top floor were the coolest and airiest in the house, it was there that most of the family slept on hot summer nights. But summer or winter, there was always much coming and going of relatives, friends and acquaintances.

"There were few outside entertainments, and people socialized a great deal," explains Tahlawi, who speaks with some sadness of the passing of those days and of the construction, in the mid-1970's, of several new roads that left Yanbu' al-Bahr a backwater.

Nonetheless, many of the old town houses remain today: the former home of 'Abd Allah Ashur, once mayor of Yanbu'; the house of the al-Nahhas, a well-known seafaring family; the home of 'Ali Husayn Zari, known for his great interest in education. Some, like the Babutayn house, are in excellent condition; others are beyond repair. But there is still hope that at least a few of these homes can be saved in Yanbu' as they were in Jiddah. Muhammad Tahlawi hopes so.

"This is a personal wish," he says. "It is my wish that these beautiful old houses be preserved. They are a treasure that should never be lost."

Jane Waldron Grutz wrote television commercials in New York and London before moving to Saudi Arabia in 1971, where she writes for and edits The Arabian Sun.



Black tulle is base cloth for this festive finery from Najd.

The Fabric of Tradition

WRITTEN BY
HEATHER
COLYER ROSS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
ROBERT AZZI

Western model in clothing of southwestern Arabia (left) wears striped shawl at waist. Townswomen from Hijaz once wore sheer overgowns (right) over blouse, long trousers and kaftan-cut dress.

The story of Arabian costume is an ancient one, though for the most part it is undocumented. We do know, however, that from earliest times fine cloth and beautiful adornments have been woven into the fabric of Arabian tradition.

From classical times, nearly 3,000 years ago, through the golden ages of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, the Arabian Peninsula was near the center of the Old World's stage. Two natural resources, frankincense and myrhh, tree resins from the southern desert mountains, were much prized in the empires of Greece and Rome. Somewhat like petroleum today, they were the basis of a number of popular commodities, and – again like petroleum – they brought the Peninsula into commercial contact with the rest of the world then known. They also, for a time, brought great wealth.

Later, after the resin market had collapsed, Arab seamen boldly sailed the monsoon winds to supplant the long-established overland caravan trade network and channel the goods of East Africa and the luxuries of Southeast Asia

Dramatic shape of this dress from Shafa in southern Hijaz comes from wedge-shaped side panels.

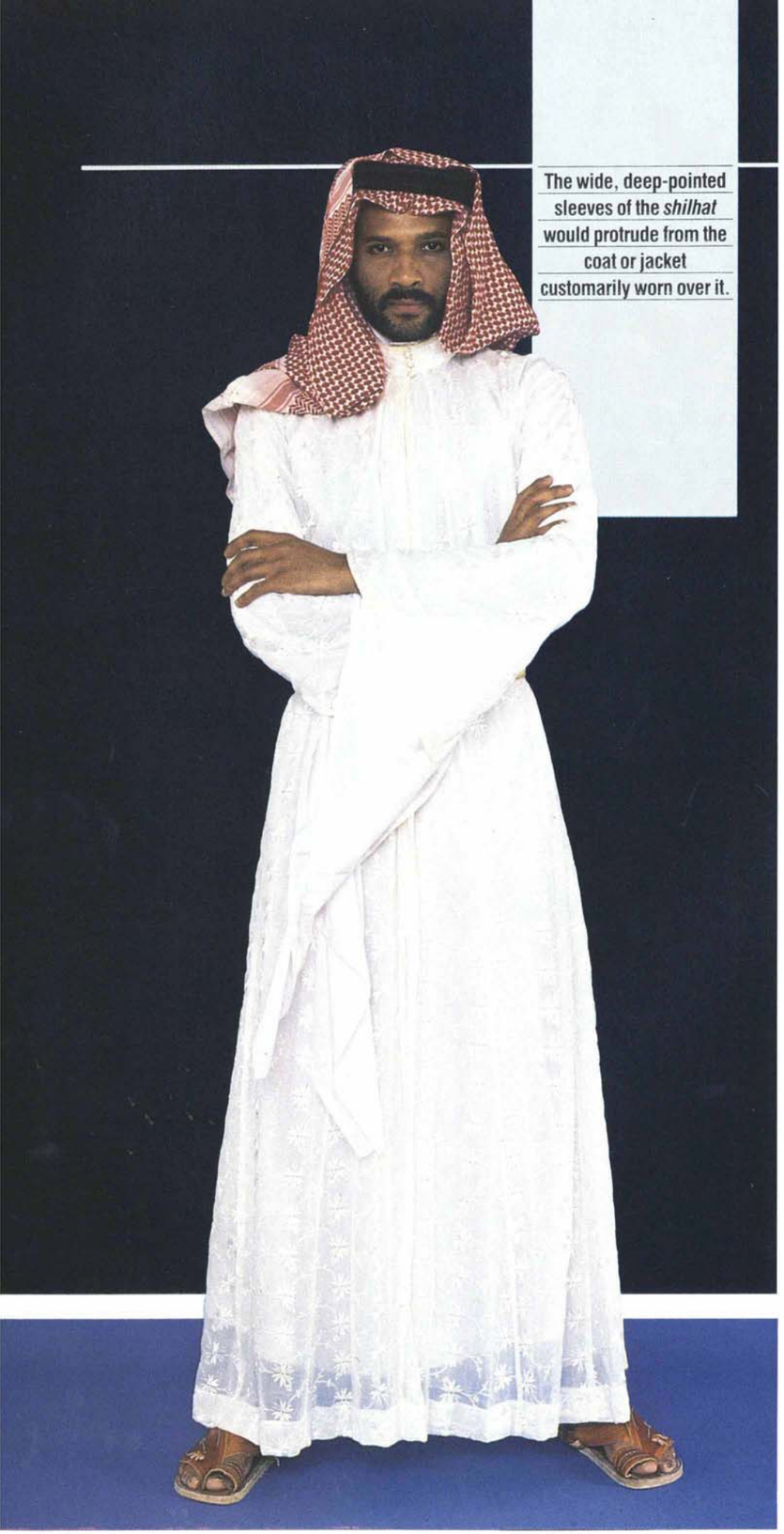
and the Far East through Arabia's market centers to medieval Europe. The powerful trade monopoly that resulted brought fabulous textiles, perfumes and jewels to the tribes and townspeople of the Peninsula.

But influences other than history and fashion affected the development of traditional Arabian clothing. First there was the harsh reality of the desert climate, hot and – except in the humid coastal regions – extremely dry. Clothing had to protect its wearer from the sun and wind, and had to catch cool breezes while yet conserving body moisture essential for life itself. On a different plane, there was the cultural and religious injunction to modesty in behavior and dress.

The combination of these various factors resulted in clothing of practicality, simplicity and natural grace in everyday wear, with fine, often elegant and occasionally spectacular detailing on ceremonial and holiday garments. Thus the best of traditional Arabian costume is a blend of artfulness – skillful and ingenious design – with art – beautiful and intricate tailoring and decoration.

In modern times, oil wealth has swept away a great deal of traditional life. While to the Western visitor Arab clothing may appear both exotic and timeless, in fact it bears only superficial similarity today to its earlier origins. Over the past 50 years alone, for example, the introduction of synthetic fibers – and air conditioning – have led to slimmer cuts in both men's and women's attire, especially in the fitted sleeves. Men's bodyshirts now have both cuffs and pockets and women's dresses utilize zippers. Also, of course, men frequently wear business suits or jackets and their wives often turn to Western fashions beneath their outer cloaks.

Until recently, it was possible to find Bedouin dresses that were hand-sewn and hand-embroidered, and occasionally one would turn up which was made of homespun, locally-dyed textile. Today imports from textile centers such as Damascus and Bombay cater to the tastes of townswomen, while local tailors machine-stitch and embroider most of the tribal dresses found in the markets of Ta'if, Abha and Najran. Too often, the decoration is on a cheap and gaudy power-loomed synthetic base.



The wide, deep-pointed sleeves of the *shilhat* would protrude from the coat or jacket customarily worn over it.

While traditional clothing has retained popularity, especially for ceremonial occasions such as wedding parties or men's traditional dancing, truly authentic old costumes have now become a rarity in the *suqs* of Arabia's cities. When tourists and casual souvenir hunters began buying the best remaining examples in recent years, serious collectors and devotees of traditional arts and crafts, both foreigners and Saudis, became concerned.

One influential Saudi couple working to increase awareness of this aspect of Arabia's cultural legacy, and to help preserve Saudi handwork for future generations to appreciate and enjoy, is Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar ibn Sultan, and his wife, Princess Haifa bint Faysal, a daughter of the late King Faysal. In Washington, D.C., last year the ambassador and his lady were hosts at a reception and fashion show for 500 distinguished guests at which models presented some 64 dresses – both the sequined, diaphanous, floating chiffon kaftans of the Arabian townswoman, and the embroidered and appliquéd solid textile dresses of the Bedouin woman – all bedecked with traditional jewelry.

Shortly thereafter, 23 of the costumes, both men's and women's, were featured in a four-week exhibition at the Textile Museum in Washington, giving the city's residents and visitors a taste of the grace and glamour of Arabia's times past. A broader selection of the costumes, in an exhibition called "Palms and Pomegranates: Traditional Dress of Saudi Arabia," will tour U.S. cities beginning this November in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the conclusion of the American tour the collection will return to Saudi Arabia for permanent display in a proposed costume museum there.

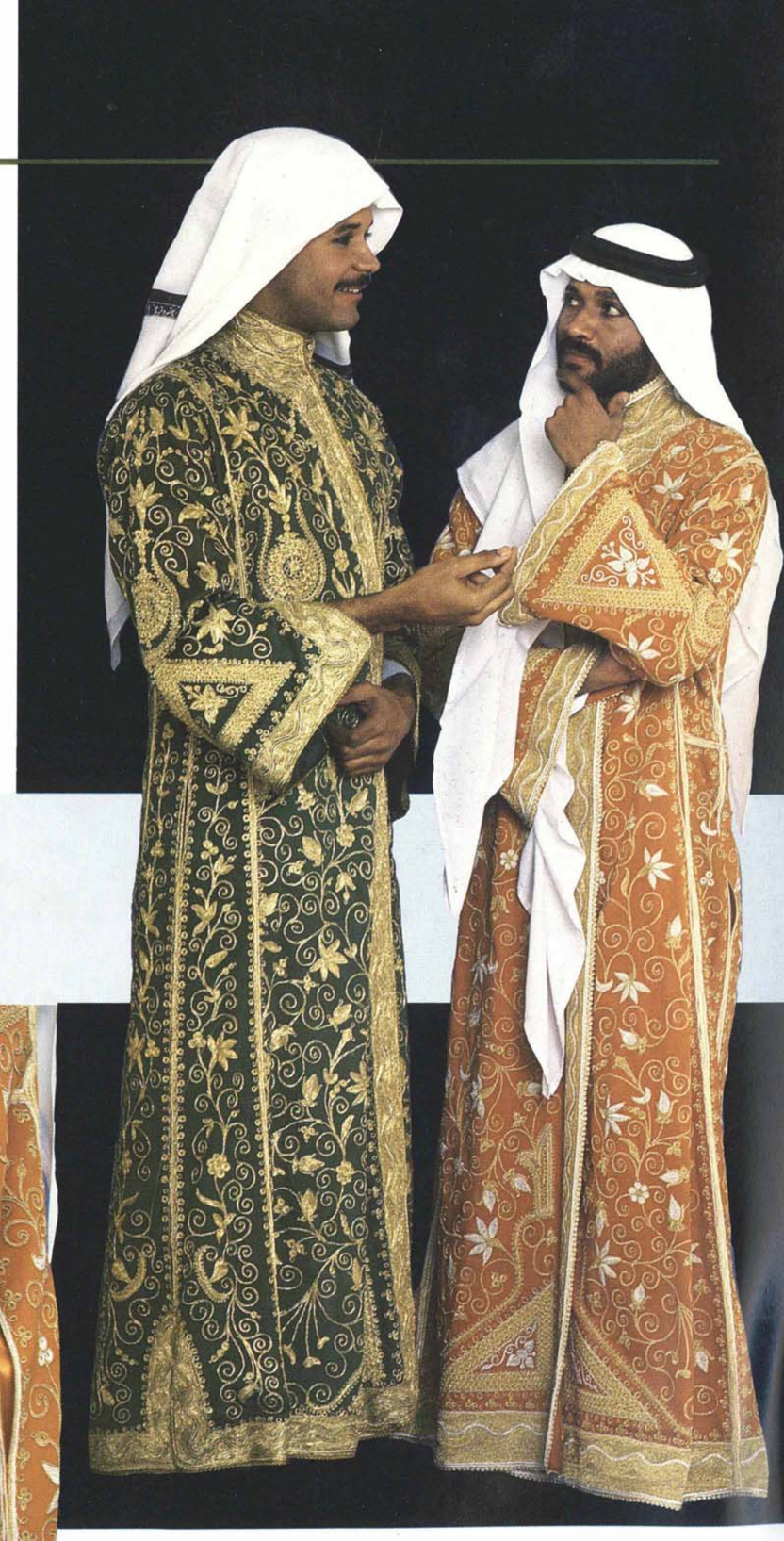
A number of features of traditional Arabian clothing are worth elaborating. These include the basic similarity of men's and women's garments, regional variations due to climate and altitude, tribal distinctions in stylistic or decorative details, and speculations on certain subtle influences which may have found their way abroad.

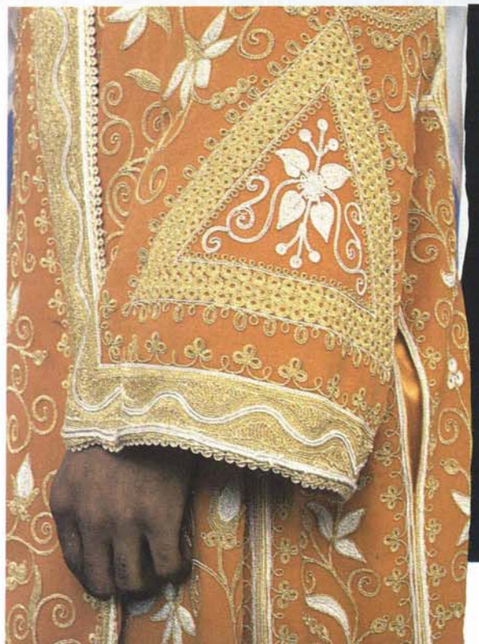
For both men and women, every item of traditional apparel was designed for protection against the relentless desert sun. Folds and layering were the unifying factors, both for insulation and to retain body moisture. The head was always covered, and headcloths were held in place by a practical circlet made of either cloth, leather, fiber or metal, and sometimes a combination of these. Both men and women drew the headcloth about the face to exclude dust and blowing sand and to shade the eyes from glare.

There was very little difference between the cut of garments worn by men and women in traditional Arabia. It was usually the textile or the style in which the garment was made which indicated whether it belonged to a man or woman. Even today, the cloaks (*bisht* for men and *'abaya* for women) look quite similar in shape. Women wear the *'abaya* draped from the crown of the head and men wear the *bisht* hanging from their shoulders.

The basic traditional garment, the bodyshirt, is generally known as *thawb* for men. A variation of the *thawb*, with large, open sleeves, is called a *shilhat*. The bodyshirt probably took its final, classical shape long ago, and has survived because it is the ideal garment for all people at all times, being comfortable, modest and flattering.

Men's long coats of the past were often of Damascus manufacture, brocaded or heavily couched in arabesque or floral patterns.





In the Bedouin lifestyle, sitting cross-legged or reclining on carpets and bolsters is the form, and loose and unrevealing clothing is essential. Although the head covering, the outer cloak and the bodyshirt all no doubt evolved before the revelation of Islam, Islam has preserved these ancient costumes and left an indelible mark upon their styling. Although rich and colorful textiles were traditionally worn by menfolk in Arabia until early this century, for example, particularly devout Muslim men generally preferred to wear white or discreet shades of gray, blue or green.

The proportions of the bodyshirt's cut vary in different regions of the Peninsula according to temperature and terrain. The largest garments are from the Najd, the hot central region of Arabia. They have enormously wide sleeves which catch a breeze, and deep folds to trap body moisture. As large and seemingly shapeless as this women's festive garment appears, it retains all the basic pattern components, including the underarm gusset, which in a Western garment is a purely functional segment that ensures ease of movement when the sleeves and the bodice – the portion of the dress above the waist – are form-fitting. In the Najdi dress, this triangular segment is usually fashioned from a contrasting, alternative textile, or it is embellished with braid, metal-thread work, sequins and embroidery.

Embroidered yoke, underarm gusset and sequined sleeve cuffs are features of this Najdi tulle dress.

By contrast, women living in the Sarawat Mountain range wear almost form-fitting clothing. This region of highlands reaches from the southern part of the Hijaz in western Arabia, extending parallel to the Red Sea through the 'Asir district in the southwest to the peaks of neighboring North Yemen. In this more temperate land, dresses are slimmer cut and the sleeves are fitted, yet the garment still drops easily over the head and is full enough to be worn by a woman throughout her pregnancy.

Townswomen of lowland coastal Hijaz, living in the urban centers of Makkah, Medina and Jiddah in times past, wore unique Arabian costumes with exotic overtones which became the mark of their regional dress. Many gowns had sleeves so closely fitted that the lady had to be stitched into them.

The colors of the dresses of eastern Arabia, on the opposite coast of the Peninsula, were influenced by the shades worn in India, where many textiles and embroideries were traditionally custom-made for Gulf women. Sheer base cloths of many colors were richly worked in gold thread. For the most part, Bedouin women, semi-Bedouins and townswomen all wore strikingly different dresses in times past, and those dresses were different again depending on whether the wearer came from rural Hijaz, 'Asir, the Najd or eastern Arabia.

Western visitors to the Peninsula often focus on the fact that the Arab women they encounter in the streets and markets are uniformly draped in black. They fail to realize that in the privacy of their homes women indulge in vividly hued textiles often with the additional sparkle of metalthread work, sequins, braid-work, appliqué and embroidery. The black cloak is drawn over these attractive and colorful dresses in public to preserve modesty. Not too many years ago, in fact, custom permitted women to venture forth in cloaks which were richly embellished with gold thread, albeit in textiles of conservative colors. Although Bedouin and semi-Bedouin women of an earlier time generally wore locally-dyed indigo cloth, their garments were vivid with silk patches, colorful embroidery and other embellishments such as brass, silver, shells and mother-of-pearl.

Today dress seams and pattern segments are still reinforced and outlined with embroidery. Embroidery motifs reflect an Islamic precept which discouraged the representation of the human form and led to the development of arabesque, an Islamic form of decorative art. Dresses display arabesque's geometric shapes and flowing curvilinear designs, sometimes incorporating stylized trees, plants and flowers.

Lavish beadwork on both dress and mask are typical of west-coast Arabian costumes. Normal headcovering has been omitted here to show how mask is worn. All photography was done in United States on Western models.

The differences in placement of appliqué and embellishment once indicated tribe and sub-tribe of the wearer. In dresses from eastern Arabia, for example, all outer edges are embroidered with gold metal thread. Tiny "seed" beads are used lavishly on garments worn along Arabia's west coast, and large silver balls enhance sleeve cuffs from central Arabia.

In the south dresses are somewhat shorter, and the long full-cut trousers which are an essential part of both men's and women's traditional dress become a visible part of the costume. Alois Musil, one of the few early Western travelers in Arabia to give any worthwhile costume descriptions, noted that the northern Ruwala tribe's womenfolk wore home-made gowns much longer than the wearer's body. These dresses were sparsely embroidered, if at all, and took their color from bright, hand-woven belts which were used to hitch up the lengthy skirts in a deep fold at the waist, to provide freedom of movement.

Bedouin dresses among other tribes are remarkable for their huge, wide sleeves with deep lappets, or flaps, reaching almost to the hemline. Women customarily knotted the ends of these sleeves together behind their backs to free their hands for work. Such dresses bear a remarkable similarity to the costumes of Western medieval women and modern ecclesiastical dress, perhaps due to European contacts with the East in the time of the Crusades.

In the Hijaz region one Bedouin embroidery stitch is reminiscent of the "spider's web" stitch found in Western embroidery. It is possible that this stitch originated in the Arabian Peninsula or India, and found its way to the West by way of Islamic Spain. Another such link may exist in certain jewelry patterns that exist both in Arabia and in America's Southwest: They may have reached the New World via Spain's Mexican connection.

The traditions of Arabian costume are rich and ancient. Exhibitions of collections such as the series this autumn in the United States, and the museum proposed in Saudi Arabia, will help to preserve priceless examples of the craft. But much of the history and lore associated with regional and tribal variations, and much knowledge of the techniques and symbolism of embroidery patterns, are today at risk. It would be a worthwhile work of cultural preservation to assemble competent research teams – ideally of female anthropologists – to interview those elderly women among the Peninsula's Bedouins whose memories are the last storehouse of this unique folk heritage. Soon those memories will be lost to their modern granddaughters, and to future generations.

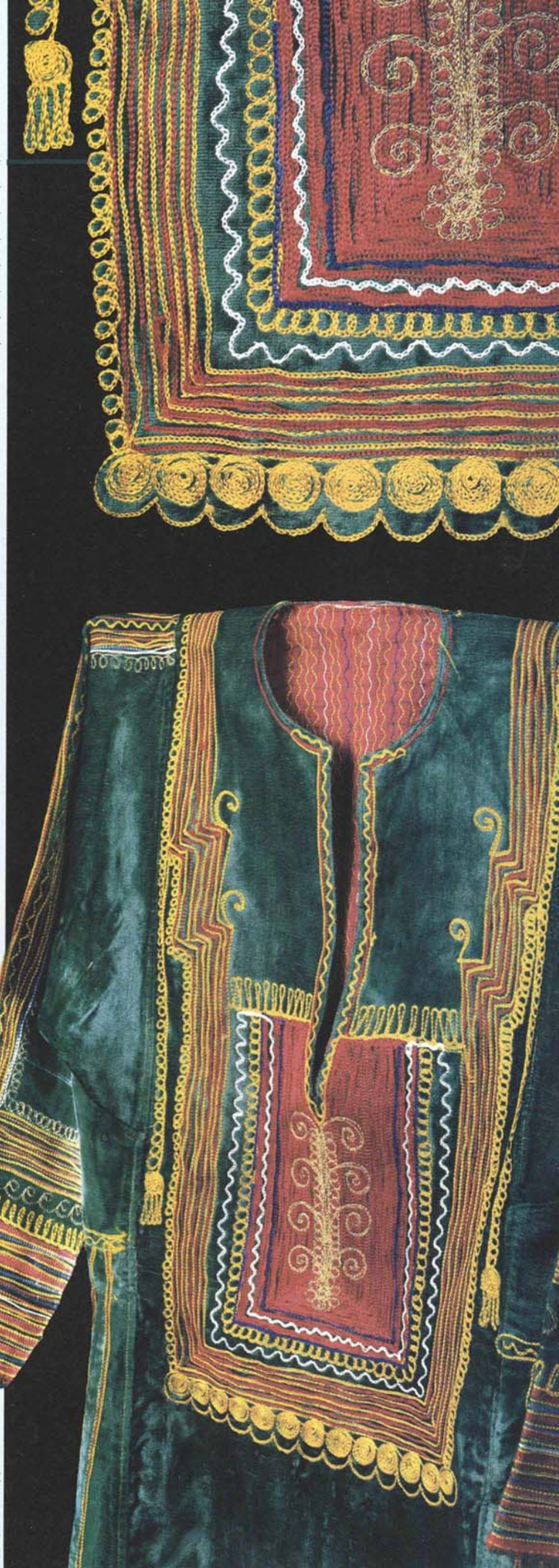
Cowrie shells, silk tassels, mother-of-pearl buttons (left) and cloth appliqué may all decorate hoods of Hijazi tribeswomen. An atypical Hijazi mask (below) features silver coins and bells.

PAUL ROCHELEAU (2)

The Saudi costume exhibition is scheduled to open November 1 at Harvard University's Semitic Museum and June 1 at the Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington in Seattle. It will also appear at the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, the San Antonio Art Museum and other U.S. venues.

Heather Colyer Ross, an Australian, has collected, exhibited, lectured and written about Arabian-Peninsula Bedouin jewelry and costume for some 15 years. She is the author of three books including The Art of Bedouin Jewellery *and* The Art of Arabian Costume, *published by Arabesque, Fribourg, Switzerland.*

Machine chain-stitch in silk is decoration of this modern green-velvet dress from Ta'if. Green and black appear to be historically favored colors.



PAUL ROCHELEAU (2)

Skilled Hands Designing Hearts

WRITTEN BY JOHN TOPHAM PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM CALLAHAN

FROM *TRADITIONAL CRAFTS OF SAUDI ARABIA*,
PUBLISHED BY STACEY INTERNATIONAL, LONDON

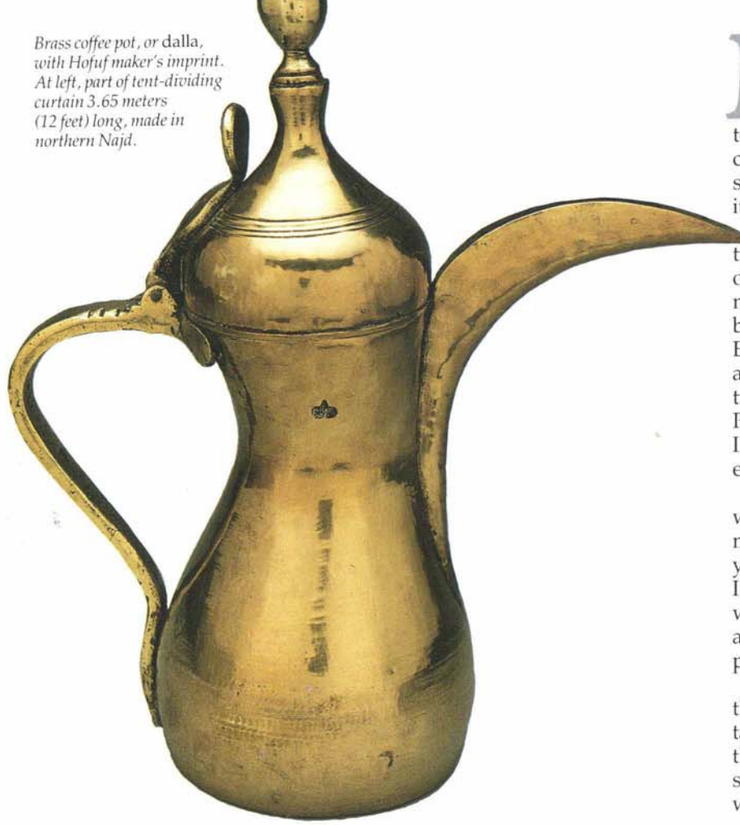
Topham selects weavings from his collection for a current exhibition at the Art and Cultural Center in Hollywood, Florida.

EARL KAGE/MUSEOGRAPHICS

Saudi Arabia's traditional culture produced woven, wooden, leather and metal objects whose great beauty sprang from their everyday usefulness and the tastes of their makers. Over the past few decades, however, most of these objects have been displaced from people's lives by mass-produced substitutes and by the changes in life-style brought by prosperity. The old-fashioned, the inconvenient, soon became uncommon.

In the course of only a few years in Saudi Arabia, John Topham assembled and organized a large collection of these traditional village and Bedouin crafts. He compiled what he learned into a comprehensive and beautiful book and, later, a traveling exhibition that **The Washington Post** *said "captures and preserves some of the most beautiful achievements of this vanishing culture…[and] reflects vividly the artistic tradition of …Arabia, in which artwork and artifact are one." Here, Topham writes about putting together his collection.*

Brass coffee pot, or dalla, *with Hofuf maker's imprint. At left, part of tent-dividing curtain 3.65 meters (12 feet) long, made in northern Najd.*



My work as a construction manager and consultant took me to eastern Saudi Arabia in 1977. I was one of thousands – possibly tens of thousands – of foreigners who came to the kingdom under like circumstances during the years Saudi Arabia laid its economic foundations.

I was very eager to learn about the country. For many years I had been a collector of old maps and of descriptive travel journals, so my curiosity about this new, stark but – to me – romantic country was great. En route to Saudi Arabia, I had bought a few of the books by such great European travelers and writers as H. St. John B. Philby and Alois Musil, and in Dhahran I read them as I found time, increasing my eagerness to learn more.

I also had an interest in crafts, especially weavings, since one of my artist daughters makes wonderful tapestries. Over the years, I had built a small collection of rugs. I developed a special interest in nomad weavings and owned some good *kilims* and Navajos – flat-weave rugs that have practical value in everyday use.

My first purchase in Saudi Arabia was in the teeming babble of the fruit and vegetable *suq* in Dammam. A little way off from the crates of Lebanese apples and the stacked bunches of local radishes, there were some Bedouin women selling rugs of

Pile-woven pillow cover from al-Jouf, chemically dyed, shows both Bedouin and Middle Eastern influence in its design.

their own or their friends' making. They were somewhat loosely woven striped pieces 120 to 240 centimeters (four to eight feet) long, and I bought several to soften my linoleum-lined house. Later, I discovered that used goods were sold in a walled *suq* elsewhere in Dammam, and I searched through it whenever I found it open. I bought a fine wool lady's cloak there, with gold embroidery, and my first Arab coffee pot. With their narrow-waisted shape and tapering, curved spouts, these *dallas* are brass symbols of Arabian hospitality, and almost every visitor acquires at least one.

I learned only a few polite greetings in Arabic and some essential descriptive words, but negotiating and buying were not difficult. English is widely taught in Arabia, and I often had eight- or 10-year-old children translating for me, or an adult with English would appoint himself negotiator, graciously looking after my own interests as well as the seller's. Sometimes, when no interpreter could be found, the sellers – usually old ladies – would negotiate by folding down my fingers one by one, each finger representing 100 riyals – then $31 or $32. When they approached my maximum price, I would resist the pressure to fold the next finger down, and often we settled at a half or quarter finger. I bargained less and less as I acquired some feeling for prices and more knowledge of what good quality was: The item was either worth the asking price – to me – or it wasn't. No doubt I disappointed many a seller, for bargaining is a much-loved art, and surely I sometimes grossly overpaid, but some of my best things cost the least. I paid only about 700 riyals ($220) for a very old *mubarrid*, a wooden container used to cool coffee beans between roasting and grinding. It is now my favorite item in the entire collection.

After several months I was able to expand my explorations to old Hofuf in the al-Hasa Oasis. Some strip rugs turned up there, finely woven in a twill technique that produces a herringbone-patterned face. Though the designs of such rugs are similar to Bedouin designs, they were ordinarily woven only in the more settled areas because they require a more complex loom that is less easily transported.

To find this kind of distinction between similar products, and understand its reasons, was fascinating to me. I wrote to knowledgeable friends in England and the States to locate books on Arab crafts, but they found very little. On a trip home I looked more deeply and found that there was next to nothing in any organized form, beyond H. R. P. Dickson's sketches and description in his book, *The Arab of the Desert*. The use of the artifacts, and the light they shed on the culture that produced them, were loosely covered in travelers' journals, but even the great Philby and Musil did not provide accurate descriptions, make tribal identifications, or show variations. I resolved that it would be my hobby while I remained in Arabia to put together a comprehensive collection of the crafts, especially the weavings, and publish a book with superior photographs that would lay the basis for a reasonably accurate picture of Saudi traditional crafts.

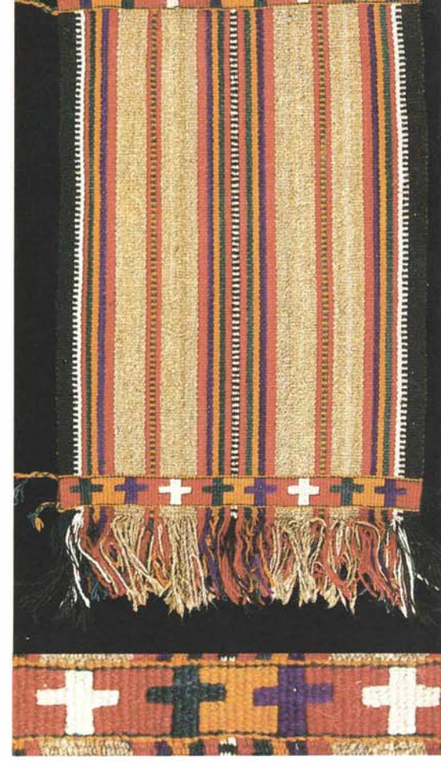
In early 1978 I took an opportunity to work in Jiddah, moved onto the ninth floor of the Kaki Hotel, and located the old rug *suq* about a half mile away. On its wide sidewalk – used by the merchants both to display their goods and as the site of a lot of important socializing – I found a miscellany of African-made objects, Saudi and Yemeni daggers, and Bedouin jewelry from all over the Peninsula, and during the working week I spent most of my evenings there. In time, I became a good friend of Abdullah al-Zahrani and his family, owners of the *suq*'s most considerable shop. Saudi weaving of any quality – rugs, tent pieces or camel gear – was rare in that *suq*, but Abdullah must be one of the most

Coffee-bean bags from Ta'if are made of synthetically-dyed cotton in a slit tapestry weave.

Percussion cap rifle, made about 1850 in Europe and modified in Saudi Arabia. Metal pins hammered in geometric patterns on the stock are typical of older Bedouin decoration. Property of Ann Rhea.

Above, double camel saddle bag of naturally-dyed sheep's wool and white cotton. Above, right, woman's head-piece decorated with red glass, coral beads and bells, and silver-and-coral bracelets from Najran. Below, fins on brass mortars kept them from rotating in use. Larger mortar was for coffee; smaller may have been used to grind cardamom.

Eastern Province rug, two panels of warp-faced fabric sewn together, is typical of rugs woven today.



knowledgeable men in all of Arabia on rugs and the traditional crafts, and – translated by his sons – he gave me much information and great help.

It was during my stay in Jiddah that I decided to try to get an organized sampling of jewelry, costume, leather work and woodenware, as well as weaving. The al-Zahranis were especially helpful, particularly when they came across a group of very old, finely crafted bracelets and other pieces of jewelry that had undoubtedly been made in Najran. They had the opportunity to buy the entire group, but recognized that, because it was expensive, their customers were unlikely to take more than single pieces. They felt that a group of this quality should not be broken up, and they gave me the opportunity to buy it directly from the seller, thereby passing up a considerable profit for themselves.

I found more help in the old *suqs* of Ta'if, in the hills 150 kilometers (95 miles) east of Jiddah, where I was soon spending almost every Friday morning and evening. One shop in the rug *suq* dealt primarily in Bedouin weavings – the only such shop I ran across in my travels in Arabia. It was run by a kind older gentleman who became my very good friend and who made his shop my Ta'if home. I bought my best *qita* – one of the interior walls of a tent – from him. My Jiddah hotel room began to fill.

But accumulating objects was not my primary goal. I wanted to learn regional and tribal identifications of the patterns, symbols and colors in the weavings and other craft items I was buying, to be able to associate certain objects with certain places and, ultimately, with the people – their skilled hands and designing instincts – who made them. But such identifications were hard to come by, and few things I bought came with attributions. I made Polaroid photographs of the weavings and other objects I had acquired, then made photocopies of the photos, and carried both around with me to show to potential informants. I wrote down their information – and speculation – on the photocopies, and by the time I left Saudi Arabia these papers were covered with all kinds of notions. I had to sort out the more likely and the statistically dominant ones, and gradually I became confident of some tribal identifications and certain of regional ones. And though the identifications in my book are cautious, I have run into Saudis of various tribes since publication who, looking at the book with me, have confirmed most of the attributions.

Pulley wheel, of tamarisk wood held together with rawhide, used to draw water from wells.

I traveled in Saudi Arabia as much as work permitted in search of handicrafts, and one of my pleasures when I returned to Jiddah from those forays was to show Abdullah al-Zahrani my purchases and watch his reactions: When he tried to buy them from me I knew I had been pretty successful. His greatest compliment came when I returned from 'Asir with the unique lidded *mubarrid* with its handmade brass studs. Abdullah nursed and patted the box for a long time, and after he gave up trying to buy it from me, he patted me on the shoulder and pointed approvingly to my eye.

By early 1979 my searches in and around Jiddah were becoming less productive, and I had an opportunity to move to Riyadh. In the Ministry of Information there I saw a picture of a pile rug said to have been made in the al-Jouf region, and since I had seen no Saudi pile weaving anywhere, I was eager to look for it there. When the opportunity came to get away for a week, I simply flew to Sakaka, in al-Jouf, and went to the amir's office. Prince Sultan al-Sudairi was presiding at the *majlis* – the daily public reception – representing his father the amir, and he acted with typical Saudi hospitality and kindness. He fed and housed me, and arranged for an Englishman on the amir's staff and a young Saudi engineer of the Shararat tribe

Decorative hanging or window cover of sheep's wool and goat hair using traditional designs in a variety of weaves.

to take me about. I visited in tents, went to feasts in the desert and had a thoroughly good time. Prince Sultan gave me a camel-hair pile rug of simple pattern, woven locally, and a day or two later, while visiting at an encampment, some children led me to an old lady who was making a similar rug on a ground loom – the only weaving I was to see in progress during my whole stay in Saudi Arabia. She told me that pile weaving was a recent skill: She and some other ladies had decided to try it some fifteen years earlier. They were apparently good at it, for when the weavings were examined later by Tony Landreau, a well-known expert on nomadic weaving, he found they had locked their pile in with extra warp twining, and had made perhaps the most substantial pile rugs he had ever seen.

While visiting in a tent near Sakaka I showed my host and his friends some pictures of rugs that I had in the States, including Navajos. He asked if he could show the pictures to his wife, and when he told me how much she had enjoyed them I urged him to have her select any that she wanted to keep. She kept the photos of the Navajos, and sent back by him as a gift to me a cushion with a pile-woven cover which she had made. The colors were chemical dyes and almost gaudy, but it is a very effective design and a well-made piece of work.

That cushion was one of several items I acquired as gifts. In Riyadh I got to know a wonderfully entertaining poet and writer, 'Abd Allah al-Zamil. He was knowledgeable in Bedouin culture and had a varied collection of Bedouin artifacts of his own. He gave me a small door with colored incised patterns that had come from his family home in 'Unayzah, in the country's central al-Qasim region. Because it was an interior door, it had retained its original colors although it was over 150 years old.

On another search for Saudi pile rugs, I went to Tabuk, in Saudi Arabia's northwest corner, to hunt for the shag rugs I had heard were made there. Though the amir of that region also received me with great hospitality, the only shag rugs I saw were in his coffee room: I could find no others anywhere. Three years later, in the States, I visited Colorado Springs with the exhibition that resulted from publication of my book. There, an ex-Army colonel who had once been posted in Tabuk invited me to his house to see some of the things he had brought from there. Out of a bag tumbled two exemplary shag pile rugs of Tabuk manufacture. I got him to show them in the Saudi crafts exhibit at the Textile Museum in Washington, and eventually I acquired one of them myself – so that particular search led from Riyadh to Tabuk to Colorado.

Those trips to al-Jouf and Tabuk, like all my travels and searches in Saudi Arabia, were full of the excitement of discovery, full of difficulties, and filled even more with the pleasure of the generosity and hospitality of the Saudis. From prince to "commoner" – and the commoners behaved like princes! – they were open and friendly and interested in my efforts to collect and catalogue this significant part of their country's heritage. The book that was finally published – after considerably more work than I had anticipated – will, I suspect, never pay for itself in money terms, but the collection that it documents, supplemented with objects lent by other collectors, has been exhibited in 10 museums around the United States. So I have had the satisfaction of helping a wide audience understand the high technical and esthetic quality of Saudi crafts, and, in a way, of repaying my Saudi hosts with a gift of their own devising.

John Topham lives near Rochester, New York. His book, Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia, *is distributed in the United States by the University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.*

Basket for carrying liquids, made of tightly coiled grass fibers caulked with clay. At right, 79-centimeter-high (31-inch) storeroom door, with geometric patterns incised and painted.