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Memories of an American Missionary Family in the Persian Gulf

by Timothy S. Harrison

The water of Muscat Bay was like glass when our ship arrived there on November 20, 1932. As it came to anchor in the harbor, three cannons on shore fired a welcome, which was answered by our steamer's whistle. This is one of my earliest memories. I was five years old. Starting from New York, we had come across the Atlantic and, eventually, via the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, to Muscat, the capital city of Oman on the Arabian Sea.

To explain who “we” were, a bit of background is in order. In 1910, my father, Paul Wilberforce Harrison, set out to be a medical missionary in the Arab world under the auspices of the Dutch Reformed Church. In the twenty years that followed, Dad, with an MD degree from Johns Hopkins and a year's internship in surgery at the Massachusetts General Hospital, learned Arabic in Iraq, worked in the Persian Gulf countries of Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman—places which were almost unknown at the time. In 1916, Dad and my mother were married; they had four children of whom I was the youngest. Mother died in 1930. Almost at the same time, Henry Bilkert, a fellow missionary and friend of my parents, also died leaving his widow, Anna Monteith Bilkert, and four children. Anna Bilkert and Dad were married in 1931 and decided to return to the Persian Gulf, taking with them the four youngest children—the twins, Bobbe and Ginny Bilkert, my sister Dee and myself.¹ Dad was to return to Oman where he had begun medical work in 1927.

That is how we came to be in Muscat harbor on November 20, 1932. We knew Dad was a doctor and that we were going to Oman so he could take care of people there. We had no real idea, though,

what that meant and only gradually understood how much Dad's whole life and training fitted him for it.

Dad's work before going to Oman

Dad decided he would be a medical missionary in the Persian Gulf while he was still in medical school because that seemed to him the place doctors were needed the most. His first assignment was in Kuwait, where he and Dr. Eleanor Calverley,² another new missionary, were the first resident doctors; the pioneers who, with Eleanor's husband, Edwin Calverley,³ established the Arabian mission as a permanent presence there.

When they arrived in Kuwait at the beginning of 1912, few westerners had even heard of the place or could have pointed to it on a map. With the discovery of oil still twenty-five years in the future,⁴ Kuwait was a seemingly out-of-the-way spot, a small town stretched along the shore in the northwest corner of the Persian Gulf.⁵ It was nevertheless important as the terminus—or the start, depending on one's vantage point—of the routes connecting the coast to the interior of Arabia, known as *Nejd*,⁶ over which long camel caravans, the truck traffic of the desert, constantly traveled.

Those routes to the interior were one reason the American missionaries wanted to open a station in Kuwait—they hoped

to go inland to make converts among the Moslems in central and western Arabia. They recognized that this was the most difficult challenge imaginable, however, and so spoke of access to Arabia as “the goal of our heart's desire.”⁷



Paul W. Harrison

(Continued on page 2)

From the Director



This issue of the *Quarterly* contains excerpts from the book *Before Oil: Memories of an American Missionary Family in the Persian Gulf, 1910-1939* by Timothy S. Harrison. It is humorous, informative, and written like the fond memory of an adult reflecting on his childhood, when things were simple and not muddled with world conflict, financial crisis or other adult concerns. I think you will find it as fun to read as I did, while learning about a region that concerns us every day.

Information on ordering the book is at the end of the article, and I encourage you to obtain a copy for yourself.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Memories (continued from page 1)

The ruler of Kuwait, Mubarrak al Sabah, had seized power in 1896 by slaying one or two of his brothers. Known as *al Kabeer* (The Great), Mubarrak was clever, powerful and feared, as well as respected. By the time Dad and the Calverleys arrived, Mubarrak was already familiar with the Arabian Mission's medical work in Basra and, satisfied that the American doctors were trustworthy, he encouraged the Mission to send doctors to Kuwait on a permanent basis.⁸ Since the missionaries often had to overcome hostility and suspicion in places where they proposed to work, such encouragement was enormously important.

The only other foreigner living in Kuwait in those early days was an Englishman, Captain Shakespear—William Shakespear, that is. Speaking good Arabic and having been the first to explore parts of the interior of Arabia, he was appointed British Political Agent, the official representative of the British government for Kuwait in 1913. Most important, he became an intimate friend and advisor of Abdul Aziz ibn Sa'ud, who twenty years later became the King of Saudi Arabia.⁹

When Shakespear and Dad were in Kuwait, however, Abdul Aziz was still relatively young and unknown. His family, the al Sa'ud, had been driven out of Riyadh, their home base in Central Arabia, by their rivals, the Rashids. Left poor and apparently without prospect of regaining their territory, the al Sa'ud were given refuge in Kuwait by Sheikh Mubarrak. Mubarrak noticed Abdul Aziz and became his patron and mentor. Few others took him very seriously.

Shakespear did, though, and so did Shakespear's boss, Sir Percy Cox.¹⁰ They were two of only a handful of Englishmen who realized that Abdul Aziz, though he was not yet forty, was intelligent and an exceptional leader, in addition to being personally attractive and charming. Dad and his colleague Dr. Stanley Mylrea came to the same conclusion.¹¹ As they watched Abdul Aziz's actions and

came to know him personally, the two Americans, Mylrea and Dad, were among the very first to understand that Abdul Aziz was a new and important force in the region and that he might well emerge as the ruler of Arabia.

How a Goat Nearly Spoiled the Party

Since there were so very few Europeans or Americans around, it was fortunate that Shakespear and the Americans got along well together. There was one evening in 1912 which became famous in both families, when the Calverleys and Dad invited Shakespear to a formal dinner at their house in Kuwait. Such occasions, hosted by Shakespear at the British Consulate or by the Americans at the house they shared, were always good for their morale, according to Eleanor Calverley. They wore evening clothes—the men, including Dad, appearing in tuxedos! They laughed; talked over the world news. On this particular evening, when the time came, everything was in order for Shakespear's reception—except that a goat was bleating noisily outside and would not stop. Dad had the solution: morphine injected into a large vein in the goat's ear fixed the problem just before the affair began. The goat lived and a good time was had by all.¹²



One of the typical black wool bedouin tents

They Came From Afar

Many of the patients who came to the first little hospital Dad and Dr. Calverley set up in Kuwait were bedouin. There was almost always a "fringe" of bedouin tents—at some seasons there were hundreds of them—around the city wall. They came in from the desert to trade brushwood, skins, wool, sheep or clarified butter in exchange for rice, tea, coffee, sugar and sturdy cotton cloth which, interestingly, was shipped from far away mills in Massachusetts. "There were men from as far south as Hadramaut [in Yemen], from many regions where no white man has ever been," Dad wrote. "To have a man tell you that he has been on the march for the best part of a month, for no other purpose than to see you and be treated by you, is enough to put a man on his mettle."¹³

I am certain that Dad was listening and storing up information about the geography, customs, politics and languages of the different parts of Arabia. What he heard fed a growing desire to learn as much as possible about the Arabic-speaking areas of the Gulf and to push as far, and as soon as he could, into Arabia.

Exploring the Gulf

In 1918, Sheikh Hamadan of Abu Dhabi, seeing that so many of his people were going all the way to Bahrain for medical care, finally requested Dad to go Abu Dhabi to care for sick people there. The visit went well, but Dad could never persuade the Sheikh to allow a mission doctor to live there permanently. I think Dad loved it anyway—he liked sitting in Sheikh Hamadan’s *mejlis*¹⁴ with Arabs, “each carrying a rifle much as we wear a necktie. A man without it is not dressed for public appearance.”¹⁵

Dad went to Abu Dhabi by sailboat. He enjoyed the whole scene and traveled “deck class” whenever he could. Everyone slept in the open in the midst of chickens and children and piles of firewood. “Life on board an Arab sailboat is a very democratic affair,” Dad said. “Your fellow passengers sleep next to you and the smaller they are the ‘nexter’ they get.”

The Arab captain was “not at all enthusiastic” about taking Dad, probably because many Moslems did not want to associate with Christians in those days. Dad never gave up trying to gain their trust and, more often than not, he and the other missionaries were treated with exceptional courtesy. In this case, the captain “warmed up after a while and became really very friendly. We shared the ship’s food and they shared our tea, etc.” This was quite unusual—many Moslems, at that time, would not eat with a non-Moslem.¹⁶

As to the medical work, “Patients came by hundreds and requests for operations multiplied exceedingly.” Some masters first sent their slaves to be operated on, Dad said, and then came themselves when things went well. Crowds gathered to “watch the proceedings.” When more than two hundred people came to the clinics on some days, he said that with “such enormous crowds, all that can be said is that we did the best we could.”¹⁷

The plight of the slaves in the region disturbed Dad, and I believe it was one of the reasons he wanted a missionary doctor to go there as soon as possible. He explained that “perhaps the largest slave community in the world is to be found there. Not all are negroes; many are from Baluchistan, intellectually and morally sometimes the superiors of their masters.”¹⁸ Who, he asked, could “listen unmoved when these men tell of hopes long deferred, of manumission papers stolen, of oppression and cruelty, of affection for wife and children that keeps them from trying to get away or brings them back after a successful escape”?¹⁹

Across the Desert to Riyadh

Completely overshadowing everything else in Dad’s early years in the Persian Gulf were two visits he made to Riyadh, Abdul Aziz ibn Sa’ud’s capital in central Arabia. These visits—the first in 1917, the second in 1919—were truly historic, Riyadh having been virtually closed to westerners or non-Moslems until then. Dad was privileged to meet Abdul Aziz and to know Riyadh before the changes which, a short time later, began to transform traditional life in Arabia. Dad’s descriptions of his experiences in Arabia and his subsequent assessment of what he learned may have helped to draw westerners’ attention to Abdul Aziz’s extraordinary talents and growing importance in the Middle East. On the other hand,

the success of the trips to Riyadh raised the American missionaries’ hopes that inland Arabia would soon be open to them and those hopes were never fulfilled.

Abdul Aziz’s invitation to go to Riyadh came as a surprise in the summer of 1917. A desert Arab appeared at the American Hospital in Bahrain where Dad was working, with a letter from Abdul Aziz ibn Sa’ud inviting Dad to go to his capital, Riyadh, to treat his people.

The invitation seemed to come as the answer to the missionaries’ prayers as they had always hoped someday to reach the distant and isolated city of Riyadh. In fact, the statement, “Our ultimate object is to occupy the interior of Arabia,” was incorporated into the Mission’s plan.²⁰

“Ride, ride, ride! And May Allah Protect You!”

It is hard for us now to understand the magnitude of what Dad undertook when he went to Riyadh. First of all, he was going “into a territory convulsed by the most fanatical” Moslems, who considered Christians infidels. Second, the desert which he was about to cross was a dangerous place. As Dad was about to start for Riyadh, Abdul Aziz’s official camel man said to him, “Remember. Death travels just behind you on this trip. Even if you are sick, or completely exhausted, and feel that further travel is impossible, you must still keep on going, for nothing must stand in the way of getting to the end of the journey where water is.” The official continued, “So ride, ride, ride! And may Allah protect you.”²¹



The trip took five days, traveling by camel. Dad traveled with a small caravan consisting of seven people—among them the caravan leader, a merchant and his son, Dad, wearing Arab clothes,²² and his assistant—and nine camels. One of the camels carried Dad’s medical supplies. Dad furnished his own food—bread, dates and water in goatskin bags. With his own personal brand of understatement, Dad said, “It was mid-summer, and none of us suffered from chilblains or had his ears frozen.”²³

“We rested for something like three hours at noon, for an hour or thereabouts at sundown and for perhaps two hours just before

dawn. The rest of the time was spent in the saddle, for the five days of the trip.

“One of my fellow travelers was greatly troubled that I did not join in the daily prayers of the caravan. He came to the guide in great concern. ‘That man,’ he whispered, ‘doesn’t pray.’ ‘Oh well,’ said his more sophisticated companion, ‘Never mind he is on his way to Bin Saud and he is a great doctor.’ ‘I tell you,’ said the old patriarch, ‘that he does not pray!’ The old man was greatly perturbed.

“At noon when we were resting, I found him trying to mend his torn robe without needle or thread, and I brought him a fine thick needle, and a long strong thread, and he was delighted. He mended that hole, and various others which he discovered. His thread had to be replenished several times, and the matter of the neglected prayers ceased to trouble his mind. I used to give his small boy, who was traveling with him, some of my bread and after that I had two firm friends in the caravan, at least. In fact, by the time we reached Riyadh, we were all the best of friends and parted with real regret.”

Abdul Aziz ibn Sa’ud

Dad, who had not met Abdul Aziz before this, was tremendously impressed. Abdul Aziz inspired “a loyalty that is beyond description,” he said.²⁴ He was “a man whose personality and character stamp him as one of the world’s kings. Never perhaps since the days of the Prophet himself has Arabia been united as it is now, and no one marvels who meets the man who has united them. I have never been entertained by a more courteous and gracious host anywhere, and have never seen, I think, a man of more perfect democracy of spirit. A small child does not fear to speak to him.”²⁵

Abdul Aziz provided Dad and his assistant a place to stay and a house to use as a hospital. The need for medical care was literally overwhelming. “We stayed there for twenty days. We were invited to stay longer but our stock of medicines was exhausted much sooner than we anticipated. The people came in great crowds. Some days over three hundred were fighting for an entrance. It was impossible to maintain order, and sometimes the results were interesting. However we treated all that we could, and the next time we hope to take another assistant and accomplish more.”²⁶

Dad’s trip to Riyadh in the summer of 1917 was an epoch-marking one, even though the American missionaries were not able to establish a continuing presence in Arabia. Dad was the first American, and may have been only the second westerner—Captain Shakespear being the first—whom Abdul Aziz had invited to Riyadh. The trip gave Dad an invaluable first-hand look at the ruler and the people of a virtually unknown part of the world. What Dad saw and learned during his trip was of particular interest since Abdul Aziz was an increasingly powerful force in Arabia. Nowadays, it is hard to realize how extraordinary an opportunity that was.

Our Life in Oman, 1932-1939

It took a certain kind of determination to think of living and working in Oman, but Dad had it. He had spent some months in Oman in

1911 and remembered the Omanis’ friendliness and tolerance, as well as their dire need for medical care. So, he persuaded the Mission to assign him to work there in spite of the appalling heat and isolation that he knew it would involve. Muscat, the capital city, and Muttrah, the nearby town where we were to live, were both surrounded by mountains “bare of any blade of grass or other green thing.” Dad wrote, that “the bare rocks seem to retain the sun’s heat through the whole night and blasts of hot air sweep down on the [towns].²⁷ A cool summer temperature might be 100° Fahrenheit!

The people of Oman, though they had formerly been prosperous, were extremely poor by the end of the 1920s. “Extreme drought” over eight years had “so reduced the water available for irrigation,” Dad reported, that as many as a third of the famous date gardens along the coast had been abandoned.²⁸ Many of the people did not have enough to eat and, as a result, had “very low resistance to every form of disease.”²⁹ Those who came to the hospital in Muttrah were often so poor they could not even bring the usual mattress to lie on; “a thin bit of cloth was all that lay between the patient and the hard floor.”³⁰

The New Hospital and a Parking Lot for the Camels

By 1932, when we arrived in Oman, so many people were seeking medical care that a new hospital, larger than the little building Dad had started with, was under construction just outside the city wall near the main gate. A separate doctor’s residence was also being built. At the time, it was a perfect place to put the hospital compound because there was plenty of open land to build on. Its chief charm for me, however, was that the camel caravans coming from and starting off into the interior of Oman went right by the front of the new hospital. A *wadi*,³¹ the Arabic word for a dry river bed, was their main “highway” and brought them up to the city gate so the area in front of the gate became the camel parking lot. Sometimes there were camels by the hundreds—that’s what interested me.



I had a great view of the traffic on this busy thoroughfare, lying on top of the wall in front of the hospital. Until you have lain on your tummy and watched it, a camel caravan arriving from the desert interior is hard to imagine. Two or three hundred camels, single file, loaded, moving fast, beautifully graceful, would go by. No motor cars, absolutely noiseless. It was awe inspiring. There were no riders on the freight camels, but each carried six or seven heavy,

invariably burlap sacks, every one of which weighed more than most Arab passengers. The sacks were filled with dates on their way to foreign markets from gardens as much as seventy miles away,

Our New Home

When we first moved into it, our new house seemed huge and confusing to me. There were corridors that seemed to go on forever. In fact, the house was very large. The ground floor was designed mainly for business: Dad had a large office there where he did his writing and talked with visitors. The room also served as his *mejlis*, or reception room, where large numbers of people came in the evenings to talk and visit. Likewise, there was a room set aside, with a separate entrance, for the women's *mejlis*. The rest of the ground floor, as I will explain, was taken up by the kitchen area and two dining rooms.



We lived upstairs and, actually, it was a good thing. The higher you were, the more breeze you could get. On the second floor, there were two large living rooms with high ceilings from which you could go out onto wide verandahs on two sides of the house. They were screened and also had bamboo shades that could be pulled up or let down according to how much sunlight was wanted. Once we settled in, we ended up playing there a lot and had tea there every afternoon.

There were enough bedrooms for us all. Mine was at the end of a hall by the stairs that led down to the ground floor, near the kitchen. Sometimes, when it was hot, I slept on a cot in the hallway where there might be a bit of breeze. If I woke up in the early pre-dawn, the goblins and giants were there for sure, beside my bed. If I didn't make any noise, though, the giant's shape would begin to change and the early light of a new day would reassure me. After all, the ghosts turned out to be only shadows made by the screen on the verandah or the round post at the top of the stairs. Eventually, though, I felt at home. We loved the house because it was just for us and wonderfully spacious.

The Singing Well and The Call to Prayer — Music to My Ears

Behind our house, on the other side of the wall which marked the edge of our compound, was quite a big garden, where several families cultivated fruits and vegetables like pomegranates, radishes and cucumbers, as well as alfalfa to feed their animals.³² Water

was hauled up from the well in goatskins sewed together to make a sort of "bucket." Two bullocks, guided by a man, plodded endlessly down and back up a long ramp which was dug into the ground, pulling a rope which went up and through a pulley over the well and then down into the water with the goatskin "bucket" attached to it. As the bullocks went down the ramp, the goatskin, full of water, came up out of the well. When it got high enough, another rope tipped it, pouring the water into the pool. Then the bullocks were turned slowly at the bottom and ambled back up the ramp to do the whole thing all over again.³³

As the rope went over the pulley, it made a sound that was musical to me. Starting quietly as a little whine, the sound became louder as the rope stretched while pulling the heavy goatskin out of the well and became fortissimo as the bag got high enough, tipped (thank God—I always wondered if it would) and, with a great whoosh, dumped the water into the pool. I loved the sound. Late at night, I could sometimes hear the sound of two or three wells at a time. They sang me to sleep!

It was music, too, when at the barest suggestion of daylight, so early, I heard the call to prayer. "Alla'hu akbar. Allaaaa'hu akbar," as the *muezzin*³⁴ stretched out the syllables. Again and again it came, at first from one mosque. Then one after the other, all the mosques in town joined in. Sometimes one *muezzin* almost seemed to be talking back and forth with another. In the early light, if I tried hard, I could see the one in the mosque near us contemplating the morning scene from his platform toward the top of the minaret. No public address system or recording distorted this music, as happens nowadays.

Sword Dances: The View From My Window

The Moslem festivals, *eids* in Arabic, were always fascinating times for us and, much later when I went back to the Middle East, I realized how much of the feeling and tone of the festivals we had absorbed. I felt entirely at home.

As children, we knew from everyone around us that Moslems fasted every day, from dawn to dusk, throughout the Moslem month of Ramadan. I remember that bell ringers walked through the paths and streets of Muttrah at daybreak to announce another day of fasting, and I think we understood how hard it was, especially in the hot weather, for people not to eat or drink anything until evening.³⁵ The end of Ramadan was, and of course still is, celebrated by *eid al fitr*, literally the festival of breaking the fast. It lasted for three days, and we saw and felt the joy of the occasion as families passed by our house and the hospital on their way to visit friends and relatives.

That was fun, but *eid al adha*, which was the other major Moslem festival, was the one I liked the best. That was because during the three days of feasting and celebration, there would be sword dances right in back of our house.³⁶

These took place in the lush, green truck garden that I could see from my bedroom window. While the women gathered around the edges, dressed in bright colors, the dancers, men dressed in white robes, would form lines which would sway forward and back.

Chanting as different kinds of drums thumped away, they would leap into the air, again and again, brandishing their swords. The dance would seem to go on forever and we were glued to the window—watching, totally exhausted at the end.

The Windmills

The water from our well was pumped by wind power. There were two windmills—the parts had been shipped from the United States. Since they were the first and only windmills anywhere around, and so tall you could see them from all over Muttrah, they became a local landmark which helped many people find our house and the hospital. They were still there in the 1990s.

The water was pumped up into storage tanks high in the towers of the windmills and then delivered by gravity, through pipes laid a few inches above ground, to our house and to the hospital. We had running water in a western style bathroom; more remarkably perhaps, there were bathrooms and running water in the hospital.

Through unusual ingenuity of Dad and, more particularly, his colleague Dirk Dykstra, we also had electricity. One of the windmills turned a small generator by means of wires that stretched, more than 100 yards, from it to the kitchen. There they were attached—at least as I remember it—to about sixteen automobile batteries lined up in rows on the kitchen floor. The direct current this produced made it through insulated wires to the operating room in the hospital and to each room in our house, even our bedrooms and Dad's mejlis downstairs. That gave us enough, though dim, light to read with at night.

Our Daily Routines

I should explain that a big part of our lives was spent in India! Bobbe, Ginny, Dee and I went to school in South India in the beautiful hill station Kodaikanal—that was the only school in the “neighborhood.” Our parents had a bungalow there where we lived during their vacations; otherwise we boarded at school. But we always went home to Oman when the school closed for the long vacation, which was the equivalent of summer vacation in the United States, though somewhat longer. Fortunately, the vacation coincided with Oman's cooler months, roughly October to early February. Since there was no school for us to go to in Oman, our days were quite free and unscheduled, but we did have certain routines which gave our days some structure.

Each day began at 7 a.m. with morning mejlis, our gathering for prayers in the huge room downstairs that also served as Dad's office. Twenty or so from the hospital community, most of them Moslems, would usually be there along with the six of us Bilkerts and Harrisons. We would sing hymns in Arabic, and there would be scripture, prayers, and a story or short message from Dad. It was over in ten or fifteen minutes maximum.

Our children's breakfast followed in our own dining room next to Abdallah's kitchen.³⁷ After breakfast, we would usually go upstairs to play and read on the huge screened verandah. The living room had three or four comfortable chairs and magazine racks filled with copies of *Collier's*, the *Readers Digest*, the *Saturday Evening*



The girls in Arab mode

Post and so on. Someone must have been sending them to us from the United States, and I spent a lot of time reading them.

We had a Victrola, the old kind you had to wind up with a handle on the side. It had records with military marches. We played them, stomping gleefully around the house. Now and then we played fierce games of Monopoly, usually in the afternoon after our naps. The bargaining was intense and the games went on for days.

The days went by quickly, as I remember it, even though we were pretty much on our own for amusement.

The Tennis Court and Other Adventures with Dad

Dad was a big part of our lives, even though he was at the hospital so much of the time. We looked forward—mostly—to seeing what he would drum up next.

It was thanks to Dad, for instance, that we learned to play tennis. He had a court built by our house—it may have been a “first” in Oman, along with the washing machine and the windmills. It was such a novelty that Dad and Mother had to find the correct measurements for the court in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and at first used a fishing net for the tennis net.³⁸ We had wonderful fun. Mother was a really good player and Dad played too, so the four of us children learned a lot from them, and then we continued to play at school in India. Mobarrak and Mohammed, the two older el Mas brothers, also learned to play. They were said to be powerful, if unorthodox, players. Mobarrak even started a tennis club in Muttrah.

The court was put along the wall of our compound, right where there was an opening that led to the houses and gardens on the other side. Since there was no gate, goats and cats and donkeys sometimes ambled through, once or twice right onto the court. To my surprise, when I went to look at our old house in the 1990s, the tennis court was still there, even the net posts!

Quinine and Arithmetic

Dad even managed to turn taking our daily dose of quinine into a game. Malaria was a serious problem in the Gulf, for everyone. Almost all the missionaries had it at one time or another, including Dad and my own mother. Naturally, every effort was made to keep us from getting it. Quinine worked, there was no doubt about that, and none of us were infected in seven years. There was quinine

syrup and there were quinine pills. But how to take the notoriously bitter stuff? We could swallow the syrup if we tried, but I remember taking it only once. Dad must have come to the rescue by making a game of swallowing the pills. We'd line up at a distance and open our mouths. Then he would try to toss a pill into each one.

Dad's arithmetic lessons were not such a hit. Twice a season or so, he took time away from the hospital to give us lessons on a blackboard. Since we didn't go to school when we were in Oman, maybe he worried that we would forget what we had learned at school in India. Probably he just wanted to be with us. At any rate, this really never worked well for me. Dad went too fast and I was sure that his facts would never stick. I didn't understand the plan as I would have at our school in Kodai. I remember percentage signs going by much too fast. What on earth were percentages, anyway? In the end, Dad's good facts stuck, they really did! And we understood that he loved us and wanted to try.

Clinics in the Open Air

One day a week was set aside for Dad to hold a clinic in one of the towns at some distance from Muttrah. Mohammed el Mas, one of three talented brothers who worked at the hospital, usually drove Dad and was his assistant. Mohammed knew all about engines and took care of the specially built six-wheeled Ford car that some of Dad's friends had made for desert driving. Those days were wonderful for me because I was allowed to go with them.³⁹



Paul Harrison (2nd from right) with key members of the hospital staff

We would leave Muttrah between 7:30 and 8:00 a.m. in the six-wheeler with Mohammed at the wheel, and most of the time we arrived at the village-of-the-day about ten. That is, we did if there was no mishap as we drove on beaches, donkey tracks and wadis to get there. The lack of a real road made it impossible to reach out very far, forty or fifty miles was a long trip.⁴⁰ Still, even in the relatively small geographic area the hospital team could get to, the number of people needing medical care was enormous, and the American doctors were the only people available to provide it.

Qumbar el Mas, Mohammed's brother, who traveled around the towns and villages distributing quinine and other simple remedies, would have sized up the patients and selected a shady place with a little space around it where they would be seen. The six-wheeler's trunk would have been packed the night before with medicines and supplies. That way, all that had to be done when we arrived was to let down the door of the trunk so that it served as a table and spread out the simple clinic supplies. Everyone expected to be seen first. Qumbar's job was to organize a queue and then business could begin; Mohammed helped Dad. I think I would usually stick around for an hour or so. After that, I was allowed to go off on my own until lunch time.

Towns like Seeb and Barka are right on the coast, so when we went there I wandered to the seashore by myself. It was all full of life—fishermen, their nets spread out on the beach to dry, their boats pulled up on the shore, their catch laid out on the sand for buyers to choose from.

Lunch was likely to be a grand affair, or at least I thought it was grand. The local sheikh or a prominent person would provide it. Once I remember we sat around a heavenly pool in the shade of a date garden. Washed banana palm leaves were our plates as we dined from a friendly mountain of rice in which a sheep, upside down with its feet sticking out was buried, along with several chickens plus plenty of cooked fish. I sat on my left hand to remind myself not to use it. My right hand was more than adequate especially since several guests helped me get little pieces of good things.

When Dad and Mohammed had finished seeing the patients for the day, Dad might want to pay a call on the local *wali*, the governor of the district. He and Dad would either be friends already, or Dad would be trying to turn him into one. After that, we would be on our way home to Muttrah, sometimes—perhaps only occasionally—arriving in time for tea.

Back to School

When vacation was over and it was time to leave Oman and go back to school, we always had mixed feelings. We loved Oman, but then we loved Kodai, too, even though we missed Mother and Dad. At least we escaped the worst of Oman's hot weather. Just how hot it actually got we could only guess, because Dad absolutely forbade thermometers of any kind. That was because some western visitors, of whom there were always a few, tended to become preoccupied with the temperature during the hot season—which, in fact, was a good part of the year. I, however, figured out that the water tanks, which were outside, were just as good as a thermometer. In October, at the beginning of our long vacation, when we returned to Oman from India, our bathroom water started off cool in the morning and was comfortably warm by bedtime. But when the bath water was unbearably hot by evening, then we knew Oman's relatively cool season—and our school vacation—was over. This happened about early-February. After that, we would be off to the cool hills of South India.

My New World

We all came back to the United States in 1939 when it was time for our parents to have a year's furlough. We children knew that we would not go back to Oman with them when their furlough was over. Rather, we would stay and finish school in this country.



Aunt Madaline Riemersma with Paul (r.) and Clinton (l.)

At some point it was determined that I would go to Holland, Michigan, to live with "Uncle" Jock and "Aunt" Madaline Riemersma, the remarkable couple who had been all but parents to my brothers since 1930. The Riemersmas had never seen me nor had I met them, but they seem to have thought that if they had Paul and Clinton, they might as well have me, too. So, at the end of the summer, they drove from Holland to Catonsville, Maryland, to pick me up at our aunt and uncle's house and take me back with them.⁴¹

In early September 1939, I entered 7th grade at the Holland Junior High School. Clinton was just starting as a freshman at Hope College, but as the Riemersma's house on River Avenue was very close to the campus, he was often around. He looked out for me in many ways; it was good to have him there. Soon after school started he proclaimed, "We must get Tim some other clothes." My Kodai stuff, especially the khaki shorts and knickers, were not the usual attire in Holland! They disappeared, and Clinton took me down to the Lokker-Rutgers Clothing store on 8th Street, where I was outfitted with long pants.

That was just part of my shake-down cruise. After all, the only time I had ever been in America was in 1930-31, when I was only three or four years old. We children were so accustomed to our world in the Gulf and India that, coming home on the *Queen Mary*, we thought it was strange to hear everyone speaking English! Thus unprepared, and having no way of knowing what Holland would be like, I embarked on the second stage of my life.

After junior high school, I went happily through Holland High School, where Uncle Jock Riemersma was principal, and continued on from there to Hope College. As World War II was still on, I went into the Navy. Then, after being discharged, I finished Hope, moved on to medical school at Johns Hopkins and trained as a surgeon at Hopkins and in Boston. So, for twenty years, starting in 1939 when I first went to live in Holland, my whole experience was thoroughly American except for one wonderful year at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. I knew I wanted to teach surgery

and do research, and assumed that I would do that in the United States, but I had not forgotten the Middle East. Dad continued working in the Persian Gulf throughout the war and until the 1950s, so we were aware of what was going on there. More than that, all my early memories of Oman and India were so much a part of me that they couldn't possibly have been erased, even by life in middle America. Still, I did not think of going back there.

So it was much to my surprise that, over a period of almost thirty years, I had the privilege of teaching in Beirut and Karachi, of traveling in the Persian Gulf and Saudi Arabia, and finally of returning to Oman as a surgeon in the outstanding government health service which that country now has. As the Arabic expression has it, the Middle East must have been "written on my forehead."

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(Endnotes)

¹ Margaret and Monteith Bilkert went to live with family members in Kalamazoo, Michigan. My brothers, Paul and Clinton, went to Holland, Michigan, to live with Jock and Madaline Riemersma.

² Eleanor Taylor Calverley grew up in York, Pennsylvania, and graduated from the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia. As the first woman doctor in Kuwait, she built trust and successfully developed facilities for women's medical care over a period of twenty years. See Eleanor T. Calverley, *My Arabian Days and Nights* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1958).

³ Edwin Calverley was a distinguished scholar of the Arabic language, Arab history and Islam. He later became a professor at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut.

⁴ While there were already enough stories of oil seeping up through the sand to suggest that there was oil, the first producing well did not come until 1938.

⁵ Although today it is sometimes called Kuwait City, the town was then known simply as Kuwait. The ruler of Kuwait also claimed control of a few small oasis villages and a substantial but, until 1922, undefined area of the surrounding desert.

⁶ Also *Najd*.

⁷ Report of the Arabian Mission for 1914, *Neglected Arabia* #93 (April - June, 1915): 10.

⁸ Gerrit J. Pennings, "Work at Kuwait Reopened," *Neglected Arabia* #74 (July - September, 1910): 11.

⁹ Shakespear was killed in 1915 while fighting, somewhat recklessly, for Abdul Aziz at the battle of Jarab. See R.V. F. Winstone, *Captain Shakespear* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 199-208.

¹⁰ Percy Cox (1864-1937), after service as an officer in the British Army, entered the Political Department of the (British) Government of India in 1899. Most of his subsequent, distinguished career was spent, however, in the Persian Gulf and present-day Iraq rather than in India. His first post was as the British Political Agent in Muscat, 1899-1904, where he became a good friend of James Cantine of the American mission. He also knew Samuel Zwemer, who even then was recognized as a “distinguished Arabist.” Cox was, on the whole, a quiet supporter of the mission’s work and used his “good offices” to help the missionaries. After Muscat, Cox was Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, with his headquarters in Bushire, Persia, until 1914. He was knighted in 1911. During World War I, he was Chief Political Officer of the British Mesopotamian Expeditionary forces; then British Minister in Teheran, 1918-1920; and finally High Commissioner in Iraq under the British Mandate, 1920-1923. Philip Graves, *The Life of Sir Percy Cox* (London and Melbourne: Hutchinson and Co., 1941), 65, 339-340, and *passim*.

¹¹ Mylrea met Abdul Aziz in Kuwait in 1914. Dad met him when Abdul Aziz invited him to Riyadh in 1917. That visit and personal acquaintance only strengthened Dad’s sense of Abdul Aziz’s importance and greatness.

¹² Eleanor Calverley, *My Arabian Days and Nights*: 53-57.

¹³ Harrison, “Medicine and the Bedouin of Kuwait,” *Neglected Arabia* #92: 12.

¹⁴ A *mejlis* can be both a gathering (or meeting or reception) and the place (a room or a tent, for example) where it is held. In this instance, it refers to the place where the sheikh received his followers and visitors. *Mejlis* also means a council, or assembly or legislative body.

¹⁵ P. W. Harrison, “A Tour to the Pirate Coast,” *Neglected Arabia* #109 (April - June, 1919): 4. Abu Dhabi, now one of the United Arab Emirates on the western coast of the Musandam Peninsula, at the southern end of the Persian Gulf, was part of what was known as the Pirate Coast until well into the 19th century. The name was well deserved and the reputation of the pirates so widespread that the name, Pirate Coast, was still used in the early 20th century, long after the pirates were gone.

¹⁶ Harrison, “A Tour to the Pirate Coast,” *Neglected Arabia* #109: 4.

¹⁷ Harrison, “A Tour to the Pirate Coast,” *Neglected Arabia* #109: 4-5.

¹⁸ Not surprisingly, there was a good deal of contact across the Gulf between Baluchistan (in present day Pakistan and Iran) and eastern Arabia. Some of it was legitimate trade and normal migration of people looking for jobs. The darker side was an active trade in slaves from Baluchistan to places on the western side of the Gulf. Some Baluchis are said to have been captured and sold by their own people. In our family, we were all too familiar with this problem. Nubi, one of the most important people at the hospital in Muttrah, during the 1930s, had been sold into slavery as a very young child.

¹⁹ Harrison, “A Tour to the Pirate Coast,” *Neglected Arabia* #109: 3-6.

²⁰ Rev. Shafer, “Dr. Harrison’s Visit to Riyadh”: 12.

²¹ P. W. Harrison, “Early Medical Touring,” *Neglected Arabia* #182 (July - September, 1938): 19; A. M. Harrison, *Tool in His Hand*: 75.

²² Harrison, “The Capital City,” *Neglected Arabia* #105: 22.

²³ This and the quotations in the following paragraphs are from Dad’s account, “The Capital City of the Empire of Mohammed,”

Neglected Arabia #105: 20-21.

²⁴ Harrison, *The Arab at Home*: 131.

²⁵ Harrison, “The Capital City,” *Neglected Arabia* #105: 22.

²⁶ Harrison, “The Capital City,” *Neglected Arabia* #105: 23

²⁷ P. W. Harrison, “The Outlook in Oman,” *Neglected Arabia* #147 (October - December, 1928): 6.

²⁸ Annual Report of the Arabian Mission, 1928, *Neglected Arabia* #148 (January - March, 1929): 13.

²⁹ Annual Report of the Arabian Mission, 1929, *Neglected Arabia* #152 (January - March, 1930): 11.

³⁰ A. M. Harrison, *Tool in His Hand*: 96.

³¹ There are many *wadis* in Oman, some wide, some not so wide. There is so little rainfall that they have been used for centuries as roads. However, when it does rain, flash floods occur and can be very dangerous.

³² The owner of the land probably rented out plots with the right to draw specific amounts of well water to irrigate the crops grown on them.

³³ This was a common type of well. When Congresswoman Frances Bolton of Ohio was invited to Riyadh by King Abdul Aziz in the 1940s, she saw and heard the same sort of wells there. She said they squeaked. Thomas W. Lippman, *Inside the Mirage, America’s Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), 36. See also Harrison, *Doctor in Arabia*: 173-4.

³⁴ The man who calls faithful Moslems to prayer, five times a day, from the minaret of a mosque.

³⁵ As the month of Ramadan is determined according to the lunar calendar, it occurs at a different time each year. When it falls during the very hot times of year, maintaining the fast is particularly hard and exhausting.

³⁶ I am quite sure I did not understand that *eid al adha* celebrates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to God, nor did I know that it always comes at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Nevertheless, it was clear to me that everyone had a great time.

³⁷ We also ate our lunch and usually our supper in that little dining room. Since Dad and Mother often ate supper later than we did, and sometimes went to parties in Muttrah or Muscat, that was the time we were usually all together.

³⁸ A. M. Harrison, *Tool in His Hand*: 112.

³⁹ The girls never came with us, no doubt because it would have been completely against Omani custom.

⁴⁰ The political situation in Oman also limited how far the American missionaries could travel since, during substantial periods between 1900 and 1970, the Sultan of Muscat’s power was confined to a relatively small area near the coast. Beyond that, the missionaries in Dad’s time were seldom able to go, much to their intense frustration.

⁴¹ They made that trip several times over the next years, taking one or the other of us back and forth. The Pennsylvania Turnpike had not been built, so they would drive down through Ohio, spending the night at a boarding house run by a Quaker family along the way. I think they enjoyed the trip and, in addition, they and Aunt Irma and Uncle Bowie always had a good time together.



The Muscat waterfront with the Sultan's palace to the right and the British Consulate to the left