IN MEMORIAM
ALIXA NAFF (1919-2013)

Social historian Alixa Naff, considered “the mother” of Arab American Studies, died on June 1, 2013 in Bowie Maryland. She was born September 15, 1919 in Rashayya al-Wadi, a village in the Anti-Lebanon, the western mountain range of the former Syrian province in what today is Lebanon. Her parents Faris and Yamna Naff immigrated to the United States in 1921 and arrived in Spring Valley, Illinois on January 1, 1922. Alixa’s father, Faris, was familiar with the town because of a previous episode as a peddler in the United States from 1895 to 1913. He returned to peddling through the Midwest during the 1920s using Spring Valley as a base.

Alixa recalled how during her childhood in Spring Valley her parents would encourage her to attend American Protestant churches, in addition to their own St. George’s Syrian Orthodox Church, in order to learn English. In 1929, the family moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana to open a grocery store. A few months later Alixa was sent away to live with a family member in Detroit, and there she developed a habit for clipping papers and for collecting various writings, pictures, and other intriguing objects. In June 1931, her father brought the full family to Detroit, where he launched a series of challenging stabs at the grocery business.

Alixa wrote how her eclectic habits of “daydreaming and reading” led her to diverge from expectations for Syrian women in America, and she developed a special interest in English literature in school. In an essay in the Arab Detroit collection published in 2000, Naff described her life in Detroit during the Great Depression and the family’s home at 57 Tennyson Avenue in Highland Park, Michigan, which they moved into in 1942. She worked for Western Union for several years in Detroit, and she credited this experience for broadening her horizons for independent career options, but she was forced to shift back to managing the family grocery store during World War II as her brothers were involved in the war effort.

Her brothers did not wish to return to Detroit to continue the family grocery business, and, sadly, her mother died rather suddenly and quite young in April 1949. Alixa instigated the selling of the family grocery, and she and her father moved to California in 1950. She encouraged her father, Faris, to process his mourning by writing his life story in Arabic in a brown spiral-bound notebook. This artifact is a treasured piece in the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, established in 1984.
As Alixa improved her Arabic later on she eventually translated it into English. It begins: “My father died in 1872 and left my mother with nothing.”

After a decade of business administration work in the private sector, Naff enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles to obtain a BA degree in the late 1950s. During her senior year, she was required to write a paper for an American history seminar on immigration, and she chose the subject of the Arabs in America. She recalled that, because of the lack of scholarship, the paper was largely “based on conversations with my parents’ friends, because there was little on library shelves.” This difficult experience intrigued her professor, who facilitated a grant for her to collect Arab oral histories and folklore.

During the summer of 1962, with $1,000, her tape recorder (now housed at the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan), and her blue Volkswagen beetle, Naff visited 16 communities with Arab immigrants in the United States and eastern Canada, and interviewed 87 people, the last surviving members of the “pioneer” generation. In an 1985 article, Naff told how during this “summer of discovery” she, “in mining their minds for folklore,… discovered the mother lode of Arab life histories, a record of the vitality of their ethnic life in America.” She said, “Their experiences and their delight in relating them… fascinated and captivated me.”

During this trip, she began to collect other objects that would eventually anchor the Naff collection at the Smithsonian. “These people would give me artifacts, newspapers or pictures which I kept without fully appreciating their real value.”

After completing her fieldwork, Naff persisted to earn a master’s and a PhD degree in 1972, writing her dissertation on “The Social History of Zahle, the Principal Market Town in Nineteenth-Century Lebanon.” Naff then taught at the college level at California State University, Chico, and the University of Colorado at Boulder. However, in 1977, she left academic teaching at a time when “anti-Arab feeling was at a pitch” and decided to initiate a more active role in collecting Arab American materials and having a national impact on countering anti-Arab stereotypes with accurate information. She recalled messaging The Washington Post, The New York Times, and various members of Congress with the question: “Where are you getting your information about Arab Americans?”

Alixa wrote about how the 1967 war between the Arabs and Israelis affected the development of her identity. “I was in my office when I first heard about the war,” she said. “A friend came in and said ‘Alixa, you better go home, they’re out to get you’. I didn’t understand. At that time, I ate the [Arab] food and I loved the dancing, but I was an American. All of a sudden, we all became Arabs.”

In 1977, Alixa moved to Washington, DC to work as a consultant on a documentary film about the Arab experience in the United States, and this project only further emphasized the lack of basic material. She sometimes blamed Arab
immigrants themselves, who “neglected to study themselves.” She worried they saw “[t]he history of their American experience [as] too insignificant and too fleeting to warrant recording.” Aware from her earlier travels that family members often threw away papers, artifacts, and photographs, Naff began to bolster her collection while initiating a full study on the history of Arab immigrants.

In 1979, Alixa met Gino Baroni, an undersecretary at the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and the founder of the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs. His center facilitated grants for her work from the National Endowment for the Humanities and gave her an office. This period nurtured her book *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, which was published by Southern Illinois University Press in 1985. Simultaneously, Richard Ahlborn, curator of the Smithsonian’s Community Life Division, persuaded Alixa to donate her growing collection of materials to the Smithsonian. The collection was inaugurated with a ceremonial event in 1984. She joked that the opening of her collection in 1984 was “more important than her funeral.”

Alixa required explicitly that the collection would be preserved, expanded, made available to students and scholars, and exhibited periodically to the public. However, she soon realized that much of this work would require her own hand, and so for decades she became a volunteer archivist of her own collection, a constant and colorful presence at the Smithsonian. She was also helped by an array of volunteers who helped her with assorted tasks.

The collection is quite large: 500 artifacts (including instruments and music recordings) and at least 120 cubic feet of documents, including 450 oral history interviews (which focus especially on the sociology of assimilation) and more than 2,000 photos. The tapes have been largely transcribed (although she hoped for their eventually digitization). Alixa also collected a wide variety of articles, newspapers, dissertations, and books, including on important contemporary topics such as discrimination against Arab Americans and on the historical roles of Arab American women. She frequently travelled the country to give lectures about the collection and her work, persistently and energetically attempting to gain artifacts when opportunities arose.

Alixa’s greatest hope was that the collection would be used by a new generation of researchers and that “someone will come along and use this and write the next chapter.” Her passing is definitely a great loss not only to her family, but to Arab Americans and Arab American Studies. She need not worry as many Arab American researchers have already enriched and continue to expand the field of Arab American Studies.

The Editors