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The Michigan Arab American Community

The Greater Detroit area is home to one of the largest, oldest and most diverse Arab American communities in the United States.

Why Did They Come to Michigan?

The first Arab Americans to immigrate to Detroit were the Syrian/Lebanese in the late 1880's. The early wave of Syrian/Lebanese sold goods door-to-door as peddlers and sought jobs in the auto factories when Henry Ford, the pioneering automobile entrepreneur offered \$5.00 a day. A story has been told and passed for generations that a Yemeni sailor met Henry Ford in the early 1900's. That early encounter began a chain migration of Yemenis to Detroit.

Immigration

- The earliest wave dates from 1890 to 1912. As with the national pattern, the earliest Arab migrants to the Detroit area were Syrian/Lebanese Christians. The first Arab immigrants to Detroit were Syrian/Lebanese men seeking employment. Many of them settled and worked on the east side in close proximity to the Jefferson Avenue auto plant.
- The first Muslims settled in Highland Park near the Ford Motor company Model T plant where many of them worked. The first Palestinians arrived between 1908 and 1913 and were Muslim.
- Chaldeans first came to Detroit between 1910 and 1912, before the establishment of modern Iraq as a state.
- Although some Yemenis arrived in the Detroit area as early as 1900, they established a real presence in the Detroit area between 1920-25.

Diversity in the Michigan Arab-American Population

There are 22 Arab countries, including Palestine, which are members of the Arab League and share a common history, language and culture-the immigrants who migrated to America and the Greater Detroit area are from a select group of Arab countries.

Syrian/ Lebanese

The earliest Arab immigrants to Detroit were Syrian/Lebanese Christians from the Mount Lebanon area. The later Lebanese immigrants were Shi'a from villages in the South of Lebanon. The majority of the later Lebanese immigrants come from the villages of Bint Jebail and Tibnin, others from Deir Mimas etc.

Iraqi/ Chalean

Many Chaldeans do not self-identify as Arab Americans but their story as a minority population in the Arab world is very similar to other Arab Americans. Almost all of the Chaldeans that immigrated to the Greater Detroit area came from the village of Tel Kaif and some 16 nearby villages in the mountains of northern Iraq. They are speakers of modern Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus) and the majority belongs to the eastern rite Catholic Chaldean church.

Among the most recent arrivals to Michigan's Arab-American population are sizable numbers of Iraqi refugees. The majority of these refugees are Shi'a from the South and Kurds and others from Northern Iraq. They were expelled from Iraq and many of them found themselves in refugee camps in Turkey and in Saudi Arabia. The United States allowed approximately 3000 new Iraqi immigrants to the US following the first Gulf War, however today it is increasingly difficult for Iraqis to immigrate.

Arab American Origins

- The Arab World includes 22 countries stretching from North Africa in the west to the Arabian Gulf in the east.
- Arabs are ethnically, religiously and politically diverse but descend from a common linguistic and cultural heritage.
- Not all Arabs are Muslim.
- Not all Muslims are Arab.
- Arab Americans began arriving to the United States during the late 19th century and early 20th century.

* This article from Arab America Website

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