

Arab Migration to the New World

There is no recorded evidence of exactly when Arabs emigrated to North America, however, several stories from the United States have placed Arabs in North America as far back as 1668 when a Father Elias from Mosul Iraq visited the United States. Other names include an Arab named Estevan the Moor who reached Florida in 1528. Estevan embarked on an eleven year adventure, exploring the area where the present day states of New Mexico and Arizona are located.

The best documentation of Arabs entering Canada was in the late 1800's. At the time when the pioneers came to Canada, there were only a small number of independent Arab countries. Today, the Arab countries number over twenty and they include Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, the Yemen Arab Republic and South Yemen.

The obstacles faced by new Arab Canadians were common to most immigrants: learning a foreign language, coping with solitude and pangs of nostalgia for the homeland they knew and loved, braving the unexpectedly harsh Canadian winters and worst of all, suffering hurtful stereotypes and discrimination.

Out of all these countries it is present day countries of Lebanon and Syria which sent out the most of the early immigrants to Canada. The first period of early Arab immigration to Canada occurred approximately between the years 1882 and 1914. By 1900, there were about 2000 Arabs in Canada with the majority of them living in Eastern Canada, mainly in the Montreal area.

By the turn of the 19th century, the face of Canada was changing dramatically. The old order of Anglo-Saxon Canadians watched a heavy inflow of immigrants coming to their country from Eastern Europe and Asia. This sparked heated public debates about the impact of immigration on Canadian culture and the desirability of different types of immigrant groups.

New Canadians of Arab origin were often the object of stereotyping, where certain perceived qualities of a person's character were accentuated or exaggerated, and depicted as unfavorable in the public consciousness.

An early study of Canadian immigration done by J.S. Woodsworth in 1909 quotes several examples of the negative assessments of Arab immigrants who "usually become itinerant merchants or factory hands"; they were thought to "carry contagious and loathsome diseases... which constitute serious threat to communities in which these aliens are absorbed." It was also observed that "the mental processes of these people have an Oriental subtlety. Centuries of subjection, where existence was only possible through intrigue, deceit, and servility, have left their mark, and, through force of habit, they lie most naturally and by preference, and only tell the truth when it will serve their purpose best."

These cruel stereotypes affected Canada's immigration policy, which in 1908 was changed to restrict the entrance of the "less desirable" ethnic groups. Immigrants were required to have at least \$200 in their pockets before they were allowed into Canada -- a fortune for people who were fleeing lives of destitution. As a result, the arrival of newcomers from Arab and Syrian origin was reduced to virtually nothing until after WWII.

Arab immigrants already established in Canada were prevented from sponsoring relatives. They made numerous pleas to political leaders, requesting that their ethnic group be exempted from the restrictive policies. It was not until the 1950s, however, that the Canadian government began to gradually open up their immigration law and discard the discriminatory policies.

So Why Did they Choose Canada?

Well, if the weather really didn't play such a great part in the movement of the pioneers to Canada, what were some of the factors that could have influenced the minds of these courageous people who came to this new land?

One reason why they came lies in the fact that many of the countries the pioneers lived in were under the control of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Many of the parents of these pioneers feared that their sons would be conscripted into the military. One of the alternatives to avoid conscription was to send their children, many of them in their teens to other countries such as Canada.

Others came because they heard stories of other fellow countrymen living in Canada who were happy with their lives and that it would be worthwhile for young Arabs to come to the New World to start a new life. After their long journey across the Atlantic and upon arrival in North America, their ships would dock in the port cities of Eastern Canada or in other port cities in the United States. Many of these young immigrants were forced to stop in Europe to supplement the price of their ticket, since they originally had enough fare to get them as far as places like France or Spain where these youngsters would work for up six months to pay for the rest of their Atlantic voyage.

Many of these immigrants settled in places like Montreal, Windsor and London Ontario while others stayed in Halifax or Charlottetown. Newcomers who later followed these early immigrants were often helped by their fellow countrymen until they were able to care for themselves, then dispersing to other parts of Canada.

Moving West

The Pioneers, who did not stay in Eastern Canada, moved westward into the province of Manitoba where they settled mainly in Winnipeg or Brandon. It was at these places that many Arab pioneers became peddlers, even though they spoke very little English. They would purchase most of their merchandise from friends they had in Eastern Canada, and these goods were shipped West by train.

With their goods now available for distribution, they started to pack those goods into cases, which served as backpacks, and they would carry them on their backs and travel from farm to farm. From the farms they would go into small towns and villages in order to sell their supplies of needles, threads, pins, ribbons, lace, mirrors, yard goods, scissors and buttons. Some peddlers also sold fine linens and leather goods. The peddlers not only had to have very strong backs but also their legs had to be very powerful because they did most of their sales by walking from place to place. Most of all they had a strong will and desire to work hard to get ahead in life.

The desire to succeed made it possible for some peddlers to make enough money in order to advance their standard of living. The peddlers knew they were making progress when they were able to sell their merchandise from horse drawn wagons. From Manitoba, some Arabs moved into Saskatchewan where some remained as peddlers and storekeepers while others became farmers.

Other Arabs continued on with their journey and eventually reached Alberta. Here the early Arabs settled in centers like Edmonton and Lac La Biche while others were far more adventurous and became involved in the fur trade, setting up trading posts in Ft. Chipewyan (Hamdon & Alley), and Ft. Fitzgerald.

Furs were transported south to Edmonton via Lac La Biche on dog sleds in the winter and by barge to Athabasca Landing and then over land in the summer months.