

The Milwaukee Syrians

History in Milwaukee

Early in the 20th century a small Middle Eastern community built the St. George Melkite Catholic Churchⁱ on West State Street near 16th in Milwaukee's Avenues West neighborhood and settled nearby. These Syrian Christians from the Melkite Sect tended to make their living as peddlers in and around Milwaukee. Many of them worked for Greek and Italian merchants when they first arrived, and after they learned the trade, peddled for themselves. The wives often prepared the goods—usually notions and fabrics.

Many families expanded their territories into the towns of Watertown, Green Bay, Oshkosh, and Fond du Lac, where some eventually took up permanent residence.

An organization arises

Back in Milwaukee, a group of Syrian families formed the American Syrian-Lebanese Ladies Club of Milwaukee. Dating back more than 100 years, it originally included both men and women. It was set up as a social and charitable organization that continued to promote Syria's rich heritage and support various charity projects such as St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The Ladies Club is a member of the Midwest Federation of American Syrian Lebanese Clubs, Inc. (MFASLC), founded in 1936 to foster better relations between those of Middle Eastern heritage and other Americans. The non-political federation provides an environment for members to meet socially, to speak in a strong united voice on issues of culture, heritage, scholarship, and humanitarianism. Every year the American Syrian-Lebanese Ladies Club of Milwaukee holds an anniversary event, a Christmas Party, a family event, and many others.

Dispersal of early Syrian Americans

Some Syrian families moved into the West Town neighborhood that bordered the original settlement in Avenues West. In the 1920s, Louis H. Herro opened the Louis H. Herro Confectionary Shop at 732 W.



“The Arab people started moving to the United States maybe 100 years ago. It started with the Syrians and the Lebanese. I can't tell you why they all came other than opportunity. The original Arabs that traveled over here were actually Christians. The first wave were Christians. . . The Christian Arabs assimilated into society more so than the Muslims. The Muslim immigrants are more recent. The Christians were able to assimilate more because there were more common things in what was acceptable. The Muslim faith forbids drinking alcohol. A big part of socializing and networking involves going out and having a drink. You won't find that as much with the Muslim community. They'll go out and socialize, but they won't drink. Whether you're accepted for not drinking or not, there's still that- a little bit of a divide there. The more recent Muslim community travelled here because of political conflicts overseas, and some of them traveled here for opportunities. I think that the political conflicts and economy overseas are the main reason though. Some people came here for school.”

Quotes of Middle Eastern informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Grand Avenue (later Wisconsin Avenue). The immigrant lived on Highland Avenue where other Syrians had settled. He had completed the 8th grade, and by 1940 he operated a tavern.

Other Syrians moved further west. See the example of the Saddy family in the Valley Forge neighborhood below.

Meet your past Syrian neighbor

Fred and Ethel Saddyⁱⁱ

Fred and Ethel Saddy lived at 5815 Valley Forge Drive by 1949—a sparsely settled area in today’s Valley Forge neighborhood. The address may have been a destination move for the couple.

Frederick Joseph Saddy was born in Syria in 1896. He arrived in America at age 8 with his parents and became a naturalized citizen in 1924. Despite his immigrant status and only completing the 8th grade in school, he had a successful career. By 1930 he was the physical director of the Eagles Club and by 1940 he was a staff member of the Boxing Commission.

Ethel Dorothy Saddy (nee Pinnell) was born in Illinois in 1899, the daughter of a Welsh immigrant father. She became a naturalized citizen in 1941. After completing

two years of high school, she took a job selling cosmetics in a department store. The couple lived on State Street in the 1920s.

Fred and Ethel had a daughter, Shirley Ann Saddy, who was born in 1936, when the parents were in their late 30s. Shirley Ann married a man named Braeger and the two moved to the far northwest side.



Recent history in Milwaukee

Milwaukee experienced a trickle of Syrian immigration since World War Two. Most arrivals have been family members of those already established in the city or individuals seeking an American education. Some have been refugees. Organizations such as Neighborhood House of Milwaukee and Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan have assisted refugees settle in the city.

Most of this stopped in 2011 with the Syrian Civil War, an ongoing, multi-sided war. The conflict had been fought between the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his domestic and foreign allies, and a number of domestic and foreign forces opposing both the Syrian government and each other in varying combinations.

“They were basically traveling salesmen. But then I think a lot of them got into the convenience store business. Since, over the years, I think there’s such a spread of different occupations. I think a lot are in the professional field, there’s a lot of blue collar- it’s a mixture of everything. If you look at the numbers overall, you’ll see that—this is going back 10 years—85 percent of Arab Americans had a high school diploma, 40 percent has a bachelors, and I think like 20 percent had further—beyond bachelor’s degrees. You’ll see a lot of professionals. Education is emphasized in the Arab community. So, you’ll see this gradual move in terms of generation to generation to educate themselves better. The people who started in convenience stores came because a lot of political problems overseas. They didn’t have the education. They didn’t know any better. They got into something that others got into so they could get help. A lot of them have gotten into larger businesses and into professional fields now.”

“Like in Milwaukee, there’s a predominantly Palestinian population here, although there are large numbers of Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, and Moroccans. You know there’s a variety coming, though I’d say the majority are Palestinian. So, depending on what type of an event is going on, I don’t think we segregate ourselves. I think people socialize freely. But as individuals I think people feel closer- tend to have that bond of nationality only because they may know each other from overseas or have some type of relation or connection. I think pretty much everyone is treated equally and there really aren’t any borders, if you want to say it like that—amongst the people.”

Quotes of Middle Eastern informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban

The long civil war in Syria has severely disrupted the nation's population. A recent Amnesty International report stated that nearly five million refugees from Syria have fled to the five countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Already half of the country has been displaced from their homes. Over three-quarters of Syria's 17 million population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, but the United States has allowed few Syrians to enter the country since the crisis began. And until very recently, Milwaukee had shut its doors to the current Middle Eastern crisis. In June, 2016, the *Milwaukee Independent* quoted Dr. Tarif Bakdash at Milwaukee World Refugee Day that zero Syrian refugee families had been placed in Milwaukee.

Some exceptions have occurred recently.

Recent arrivals

Rihan Silan and Abdul Abadeh arrived in Milwaukee in September of 2017, having fled Syria. This was during the time when several federal judges had struck down the Trump executive order banning travelers from Syria and other majority-Muslim nations. Previously, they'd spent three years in a Jordanian

refugee camp. The couple and their three children were assisted by a Milwaukee physician, Dr. Ahmad Nasef, who helped them resettle here. Dr. Nasef knew the family. He also knew of their culinary skills.

The couple had their calling. After considering other locations for a Syrian restaurant, Abdul and Rihan decided on a location at 807 W. Historic Mitchell, formerly occupied by Salas

Burgers. Damascus Gates opened in January of 2019 and features Middle Eastern dishes such as muhalaya, hummus, falafel, kefta kabab, as well as some more familiar specialties such as pizza. The restaurant's website says the following about its name:

The name of the restaurant is also reflective of its will and commitment to empower Syrian refugees and giving them a chance to prosper after their arrival in the US from war torn Syria. For that reason, Syrian refugees are actively involved in the management and operation of our restaurant.

"There's a lot of interaction amongst all the different Arab countries. Not to say that there aren't the little cliques. There definitely are. There's a Syrian community. There's a clique of Syrian individuals that socialize a lot with one another. But once again, when they have a social gathering, you'll see people from all different ethnic backgrounds. The whole border issue- there really isn't any within the Arab community here."

"I think people tend to group more along their- for instance, the Muslim community here tends to group around the Islamic Center. That's kind of like the center point. You have people from all over the world there. I mean, every country is represented and once again there aren't those borders or boundaries. Sometimes there are language barriers, but if you're Arab, obviously everyone speaks Arabic. There are different dialects, but for the most part everyone can understand one another. I would say for the Muslim community as a whole, the Islamic Center has been a center point for people to start from and then go from there."

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ⁱⁱ Photo from public records at Ancestry.com