The ‘Mohammedans’ of Sioux Falls, 1900 – 1920: From Peddlers to Grocers

A Public Lecture* by Stephen R. Cusulos

Thursday, October 24, 2013
7:00 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Gilbert Science Center, Room 100
Augustana College
Free and open to the public

This presentation will explore the growth and development of the Syrian/Lebanese community of Sioux Falls, a community that had its beginnings over one hundred years ago. This community was unified to some degree by a common language (Arabic), a common homeland (the area of the Middle East that is now Lebanon), common customs (food, music, “a gift for gab”), common occupational proclivities (from peddlers to grocers). And it would appear these common roots led to common bonds; this despite the fact that the community was bifurcated religiously. On one hand, there were families with roots in Christianity (primarily in the Eastern Orthodox Church); on the other, there were those whose religious lineage was “Mohammedan” (an antiquated term then used instead of “Muslim”). The focus of The ‘Mohammedans’ of Sioux Falls will be on those for whom the Koran was the common book of prayer. But given the commonalities within the community, the discussion will sometimes make reference to the larger community of “peddlers and grocers”.

A Presentation Preview:

Census documents from 1900 reveal Sioux Falls experienced what might best be described as An Invasion of the Peddlers. Over fifty were recorded. According to the census documents, all seemed to have been recent immigrants. And under “place of birth”, we find Syrian, Assyrian, and Turkey. By South Dakota standards, their names were somewhat odd: Mohamed Chmme, Mohamed Hash, Abraham Salem, Joseph Alex, Joseph Odga, Ameal Abella, Assam Hammond, and Azine Farris, among others (and magnified by the fact that the spelling is sometimes hard to decipher). What is also somewhat odd is that most of these persons whom we’ve identified as peddlers seem to have been “Mohammedans.” (A fact that can be evidenced through various kinds of cross-referencing with primary source documents). And there is something else that might seem a little odd: in 1903, six of the thirteen dry-goods stores located in downtown were owned by individuals from the Middle-East, and of those six stores, four were owned by persons whom we can indelibly as being “Mohammedans”: The Dahroug Bros.; Hassen Kareeb; Mahadere & Assamk & Rashed Swidin.

David Nemir in front of the Pay Building (Photograph courtesy of Rob Nemir)

Over time, business directories document the “migration” of “Mohammedan” immigrants into other occupational niches. For example, the Hass Directory of 1913 records a Sam Mridn as proprietor of the Cozy Café, 325 North Phillips. And in the Polk-Avery Directory of the same year, we find movement into the retail grocery business with stores owned by Hasen Alack, Samuel Amide, Assam Hammad, Alex Hammad, Hagem & Mazraha, Hallick & Side (The Basket Shop); Maini Bros., Sam Nattar; and Mohamed Swiden (who is also listed as owning a billiard parlor). Using city maps, we can determine that most of these particular groceries were located in neighborhoods that were then predominantly working-class. Though well represented, not all individuals of this community were involved in small businesses firms. In fact, state census cards of 1915 list over a hundred individual “laborers” living within Sioux Falls who can be identified as “Mohammedans”. And using various source documents, we learn that a fair number of these individuals worked in the quarries and in the railroad yards.

To find out more about this lesser known ethnic community and its richness and diversity, you are invited to attend the October 24 presentation on The Mohammedans of Sioux Falls. Power-point will be used to illustrate some of the primary research documents, including numerous historical photographs, pages from city business directories and historic maps of the downtown area (which show not only the grid of city streets, but also the addresses of individual buildings and the “building footprints”). Ample time will be set aside at the end of the program for questions and discussion.

Note: The information and analysis developed for this lecture are drawn from a broader research project tentatively entitled Integration, Assimilation & Diversity. This broader project is designed to gain a better understanding of the growth and development of lesser known ethnic communities rooted in South Dakota’s history including not only the Syrian/Lebanese but also Greeks, Jews, Italians, “Persons of Color” (African-Americans), Chinese, and Irish Catholic and ethnic Turks, Albanians and Bulgarians.

*The lecture is organized under the auspices of Augustana College’s Co-Curriculum Council (Sam Ogdie, Coordinator) and is part of a series of programs for the 2013-14 academic year entitled Islam in the Community: Past and Present.