



At Home in the Smithsonian

MY TURN/CLAYTON FARIS NAFF

Good old Aunt Alixa, the very best of eccentric aunts. She really pulled one off this time.

Not long ago, I left work early and set out for Washington, D.C., a grumpy disbeliever. My Aunt Alixa had used every arrow in her quiver of guilt to draw me to her "big event," but I was so skeptical I didn't even bring a camera. What occasion was Alixa billing as more important than her funeral? Why, nothing less than the opening of the "Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection" at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

I suppose the Rockefeller kids and the duPont offspring get blisters on their fingers

just counting the times they've snoozed through this sort of event, but for the Naff family this was the biggest deal since my grandfather Faris paid deck passage from Lebanon in 1895.

Fired up by my grandmother's typical immigrant ambitions, most Naffs went to college and entered professions. Our only wealth was a treasure of immigrant stories saved up by my aunts and uncles. Oh, and all those pictures, postcards, books and records; kitchen gadgets, knives and hatchets; tools, jewels, textiles and clothes; letters and notes—all that junk Alixa piled up over the years.

So imagine how it was when I walked into the Smithsonian on a muggy summer after-

noon to look for these same pieces transformed into a collection of Arab-American history. Moving in step with hundreds of other tourists, I shuffled toward the famous pendulum in the center of the building, the one that swings back and forth in a never-changing line knocking over little pegs as the museum turns beneath it. (Now that's historical perspective, I thought.) Then, to my left, no more than 20 paces from the pendulum, I saw our exhibit.

Visions: Not a roomful, not a wall full; actually, it's just one case with the dimensions of a morgue slab. Above it a large tan placard with a family portrait of my forebears in Lebanon announces the exhibit. And the display of our visions. Visions of

my peddler grandfather, treading his route from Ft. Wayne to Montreal and back again. Visions of Yamna's sisters and brother, leaving troubles in Rashaya, Lebanon, to the safety of Spring Valley, Ill. Visions of Faris and Yamna opening a grocery store in Detroit. I smiled at the tourists in a proprietary way, elbow resting on the counter, the way my grandfather might have when strangers entered his store.

Then the others arrived. Relatives I had never met before rushed over the red-leather cordon surrounding the case to point out familiar brass trays and remembered photographs. Later, when the ceremonies were over and we sat in my aunt's kitchen eating *labni* and *zaytoon* (white cheese and olives), the American daughters of Yamna and her sisters conjured up another world.

Heroism: "Your Aunt Wedad came into this country rolled up in a carpet. Your grandfather had been through Ellis Island before; he knew they would throw her out if they saw her eye problem, so he rolled her up in a carpet and carried her on his back. It took hours. They thought she would die."

I suspect that's how it is with all family and ethnic history. It takes a certain inspiration to draw out the stories of individual heroism and humor; of family struggle and achievement that are the organic

chemicals of our so-called melting pot.

By the way, that opening reception had everything from power steering to white-walls. The director of the museum pontificated a bit about the museum's pride in such small exhibits. And in a private room with fireplace and chandelier, there was an official photographer, quantities of white wine, Brie cheese, paté and shrimp; a brace of PR people; reporters, a pair of ambassa-

One family's history on display in a museum case suggests the experience of many Arab-Americans.

dors and a dazed mass of Naffs, Ayubs and Ghantouses who heard not a word but applauded enthusiastically my dear aunt's remarks all the same.

Aunt Alixa is our self-appointed family historian, but more than that, she is a self-made expert in Arab-American history, and more than that, she is stubborn. While gradually earning her doctorate in history

from UCLA, she traveled all over the United States collecting objects and recording interviews with Arab-Americans and their children, writing articles and, eventually, a book about their experiences. Brushed aside by the academic establishment, which has never shown a profound interest in making professors out of middle-aged females, she persevered.

At 60, she began to worry over the fate of her collection. Our family lacked the assets to fund a trust for its preservation, so she resolved to have the Smithsonian accept it.

Dignity: Now our family mementos are a part of the permanent collection at the National Museum of American History. Next time you're there, please take a look. Possibly the stuff has no great cash value. Perhaps it lacks overpowering charm. But in it you just might see that Arab-American history is another sparkling facet on the gem of American-immigrant lore, one that at times has been merely unpolished, but more often encrusted with ugly stereotypes. For Arab-Americans who have struggled to balance an uncertain ethnic identity with great pride as Americans, that little case holds a powerful lot of dignity. Good work, Alixa.

A free-lance writer, Naff advises foreign students at the University of Pennsylvania.