

Tape 1, Side 1

CH This is an interview with Governor Vic Atiyeh at his office in Portland, Oregon. The interviewer, for the Oregon Historical Society, is Clark Hansen. The date is November 24, 1992, and this is Tape 1, Side 1.

I thought maybe we'd first begin with a background of your family. Maybe you could state your full name. I noticed the G, and I never saw what the...

VA What that G is all about? George.

CH After your father.

VA Yeah.

CH So it's Victor George Atiyeh, then?

VA That's right.

CH Maybe you could first tell me a little bit about your family in Syria, where in Syria they came from, and as much as you know about their background.

VA My father came from a village called Amar el-Hosn, A-m-a-r, and, then, e-l dash H-o-s-n. It's a ^{small town} village up on a hill - you wouldn't really call it up on a mountain - which would be out of Homs, H-o-m-s. It's a large city in Syria, north of Damascus. I'm trying to remember how long it takes to drive, but, oh, I don't know, two hours or two and a half hours to Homs, or something like that, maybe three-, three and a half hours to the village. Incidentally, that's another thing that's hard for Americans to understand. The geography in some cases is not very large. When we're talking about the country of Lebanon or the country of Palestine or Israel, now, we're not talking about a

lot of geography there. You could cover that whole country in just a short time. But anyway, the family home is still there, and I've visited now twice in recent years. The first time I visited was when I was six years old.

My father and uncle came to this country prior to 1900. When I put it the way I just did, I'm not quite certain about all of that. I think my uncle may have come first, shortly followed by my father, or they may have come together. I don't really know. But in any event, they settled in South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and that, incidentally, is really almost part of Allentown, Pennsylvania. That's all that whole area. And the best understanding that I have is that they were selling goods to pedlars, and there was a lot of pedlars in those days.

CH Do you happen to know how they came from Syria, what their mode of transportation was?

VA It would have to be a boat. There was no other way to do that.

CH Did they travel through Europe or did they come across the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic?

VA I have no idea.

CH They never told you stories?

VA I never asked the question and they never told me the story. I can tell you, at another chronological stage, how we did it, when as a six-year old we went, but I don't know how they came.

CH When they came, did they come through New York?

VA They came through Ellis Island.

CH Everybody did, didn't they, back then?

VA Yeah. And, I don't know, just not too long ago, two or three years ago, you could give them some money, and their name goes on the wall, so my father's name - my brothers and I all put some money in - that is for the restoration of Ellis Island - and my dad's name is on the wall. My uncle, I presume my cousins have done the same thing. In any event, that's what happened.

CH Do you know why they went to South Bethlehem?

VA I have no idea.

CH That's a steel area, isn't it?

VA Steel, ^{NO, NOT REALLY} ~~that's~~ right. How they got there, I don't know. I didn't ask that question either. I asked the question of my father, How come you came from South Bethlehem to Portland, Oregon. I asked that question, but the previous question just didn't occur to me. Anyway, this was all prior to 1900, sometime prior to 1900. Now, whether that was 1897 or 1896 or 1898, I'm not quite sure, but it's all prior to 1900.

Then, now, speaking to the trip as a six year old, we went to Syria - we went to, actually, Beirut, spent time there, then went to this town of Amar. As a little youngster I can remember bits and pieces of my visit there. I think the reason I asked the question, How come Portland, Oregon, as I got a little bit older and got a little better sense of history of Portland and what it was like in 1900, all of a sudden I said to my self, you know, this little, dinky village in Amar, Syria, how come they came to Portland, Oregon. You know, you think of New York and Chicago and Detroit and Philadelphia and Boston. Portland, Oregon? But somebody apparently had come through and said that this area was a good place to sell Oriental rugs. "You put up half, I'll put up half, and I'll go out and sell them." And

apparently - this is the story my dad tells me - this guy didn't put up his half. So my uncle came out to protect his interest, and apparently liked what he saw, and they closed up shop and came to Portland in 1900. The business at that time was known as A. Atiyeh and Brother.

CH Did he come by train?

VA Yeah.

CH Did he ever tell you anything about his journey in 1900?

VA No. I say yes. I'm making that presumption, for that's the only way, really, you could do it. They were not covered wagon people. I don't think they were doing covered wagons in 1900.

But A. Atiyeh and Brother, Brother being my father; A. Atiyeh being my uncle, which is Aziz, A-z-i-z. I can't tell you the time, and I only learned it, actually, years later, but my father had married someone by the name of Victoria Hat^{HATTOON}une [sp?], and apparently she got ill. She may have been an Egyptian - how he met her, I can't tell you any of that, either, because I don't know. I just found out years later that that was the case - and, anyway, ^{SHE} passed away in Egypt. In nineteen - early 1921, I guess it would be, my father went back to the old country to get a bride. Now, I've asked the question, How did my father meet my mother, how did this happen, and I very recently was in Allentown for the first time. I went to Bethlehem, South Bethlehem, and took pictures, although I don't know exactly where they were located. There's a lot of people that are from the village or from the Atiyeh family in Allentown now, including some woman that's well over ninety years old who remember me when I went there as a six year old, actually was in the village when my father married, I guess, beginning a honeymoon and went to the village in Amar, because she gave me a photograph of my mother and father in the village. But I even asked her, you know, how

did my father meet my mother? I still don't have an answer, and obviously I'm never going to get one. But anyway, met my mother, they were married in Beirut, which in those days, in 1920, would have been Syria. That was all part of Syria. Anyway, came back, and just a short version is that my twin brothers were born in October of '21, and I was born in February of '23.

CH Going back to your father's marrying your mother, was there an importance placed on your father going back to Syria to find a wife, rather than finding one in Portland, or why the long journey? What kind of meaning did this have?

VA Well, I'm going to have to do some guessing, but it's probably correct, that there was this feeling that you marry someone of your own ethnic background. You marry a Syrian. And in later years it didn't make much difference. None of us, my brothers or I, married anyone that ~~was~~^{has} any Arabic background. It made no difference at all. And, yet, I do know that my cousin, who is older than I am, went through a very tormenting time with my uncle - and he did marry a non-Syrian - because he was going with, and was going to marry, someone that was not a Syrian, with my uncle, and that would have been, you know, in the later thirties. So I have to guess that back there, in nineteen and twenty, that still was a prevalent feeling, maybe, with my father at that time, although he wasn't nearly as keen, or my mother - as a matter of fact, there was no problem at all with any of us marrying non-Syrians, so I have to presume that that was it. It wasn't a matter of choosing somebody here, he had to go find a Syrian girl.

CH Your father was born where?

VA In Syria. My mother too.

CH Was there much emphasis, that you could tell when you were a

child, about preserving cultural values or customs or - you know, sociologists have this theory that it takes three generations to fully assimilate into our society, and you're the - I don't know whether you'd be considered the second or the third generation, because your father also came from Syria, but your uncle and your father were the ones that came over.

VA That's right.

CH So that you would be the second generation. I was wondering whether there was an emphasis, when you were a child, on preserving some of the customs, speaking any of the language, any of that?

VA Actually, it was the opposite. My relatives, and others when I get over to the Middle East, ask if I speak Arabic, and my answer is no, because my father said, You're an American; you don't need to learn the language. Now, my mother and father spoke in Arabic with some frequency. Not all the time. They would take us, as children, to go visit friends and some relatives that are around in Portland, and it would be really a Syrian event. We'd have dinner, and there was a club, but there was no effort, really, to make us other than Americans. It was just entirely the opposite. We never did learn the language.

CH When your father and your uncle spoke, did they speak in English?

VA They would speak in English to each other, although I - by the time I was born, my uncle already was in New York. He left in, again, the early twenties and took his family, and he went to - this was retail rugs here in Portland - and started a business of importing and wholesaling in New York City. So I really saw very little of my father and uncle together. But my mother and father would speak Arabic, argue in Arabic, too, at great length

[laughter].

CH Was that to keep it from the children, so to speak?

VA It's hard to tell, or it was just easier to argue in Arabic.

CH So, then, the store was opened up here in 1900?

VA Yes.

CH And I had read that there was a - in 1905, when the exposition was here, that your business, your family's business carpets won a major prize, which was the first of many that you received.

VA Yes. We had a display at the Lewis & Clark Fair in 1905, and we did win - we have our own - they called a medal. It's really not gold, it's bronze, although I've seen some gold, but I think the winners took them and got them gold plated. But we won a gold medal and a certificate, and, as a matter of fact, something additionally interesting, which is a banner, with our name on it and gold medal, and so forth. It says - what's it say? Atiyeh Brothers? I think it was, by then, Atiyeh Brothers. I'm not sure. This was really a big deal. They'd been here five years. I think it's fascinating. I ran across a book that was honoring the Portland Fire Department and Portland fireman. It's a book about eight-by-ten or maybe a little larger; it wasn't a small book. And so here are all the stations and all the firemen and the chiefs and all the rest, and they also sold ads, and right near the back was a full-page ad that did say A. Atiyeh and brother, but it was a full page ad, and the thing that I remember, at the bottom - now, mind you, they're five years old - Portland's exclusive and permanent rug store. Permanent rug store. I thought that was kind of audacious. Yes, they displayed there and got a medal; we did in 1909 the Alaska Yukon

Exposition in Seattle and displayed there and got a medal; the Panama Pacific in San Francisco in 1915, they displayed there; and there was a Panama California - anyway, it was in San Diego the following year, a smaller one, and that was pretty much it in terms of those fairs and expositions.

CH When your uncle or your father first came here, do you know where they lived?

VA My uncle lived in Ladd's Addition. I can't tell you exactly; I can tell you pretty close. What is that street, Twelfth, I think. Twelfth Street runs north and south, and where it crosses Hawthorne, and if I'm heading north now - I have to do it geographically - Ladd's Addition is now on my right, that whole area is on my right, and there's a street that angles in, comes in at an angle, into Twelfth and Hawthorne. It would be down that street a few houses. That's where Uncle lived. If I - and I think I'm pretty correct that my dad - he's a bachelor now - he was living in a hotel, which still is there. I don't remember the name of it. It's on the corner now of - I don't know, it's Thirteenth and Washington. Actually, I was going to say Fourteenth, but the freeway runs through there, but it's just this side - that would be the east side - of the freeway, right at the end of Washington Street. There's a hotel there, and that's where my dad stayed.

CH And he lived there for several years?

VA As far as I know. I do know that I was born and raised at Seventh and Holladay Street.

CH And what was that neighborhood like at that time?

VA Older homes, and as I was growing up - well, I guess - I don't know when Lloyd started to buy, but Lloyd started buying up

the land there, and then he would tear down the houses because it was cheaper to pay property taxes on property than it was on property and a house. So there was a lot of vacant lots, which was good for us as kids, and there were only two houses on our block. We occupied one large-sized lot, and, then, next door - if I were to say it, maybe we had three-fifths of the block, and the next door was two-fifths of the block, but, then, the other half of the block was totally vacant. And Every once - I don't know, I can't remember now, but I do remember somebody would come with horses and a grass cutter, whatever they call those things, and mow down the grass in the back yard, and we'd cut through there on our way to Holladay School, as kids. But there was a lot of vacant lots around there, but it was family residents. At one time, apparently, it was a pretty classy neighborhood. That doesn't mean it wasn't classy when we were there, it was nice, but apparently it was a select neighborhood. I've got a photography, actually, of our home.

CH I'd heard that you had a photograph that you enlarged, and when you enlarged it, you found a picture of yourself as a child.

VA Well, no, I was a little older than that. This would have been in the forties, because in that whole series of pictures - and they're little, tiny pictures, I don't know, two-by-two inches. I'm not sure what the camera was. And my brothers were home on leave. They had their uniforms on, so this would be in the forties, not quite the middle forties, previous - I don't know, '43, '44. And anyway, I thought, gee whiz, there's a picture of the house. I'd really like this - you know it's too tiny, so I got an eight-by-ten, blew it up, and there I am, standing on the front porch. I couldn't see me in that dinky little picture, but there I am, standing on the front porch. The house - my father died, and, then, my mother was there - it's a big house, and we as kids - I got married and my brothers - but anyway, Mother sold the house and moved out to Southwest, and

that's where she lived till she died.

CH You've explained a little bit about your father's background. What about your mother's background? She was from Beirut, wasn't she?

VA Yes. Her maiden name was Asly, A-s-l-y, and the family was in the shipping business, I believe. I know they had something to do with maritime or shipping or something. I think they were - I know they were well off. The family home, I do recall being there, and it was right on the edge of the Mediterranean. We could go to a balcony, and there's the Mediterranean right there. I can recall, when we went there as children, my mother looking from the ship to see the house. I think she was raised in easy circumstances; I would say easier than my father. The family, if I understand - my father's family, raised Arabian horses. That was part of their livelihood.

CH In Syria?

VA In Syria, in Amar. And I guess also olives. But they were less well off than my mother's - her family. I really haven't followed that as well as I should. I have a cousin who lives in North Carolina, I think, or South Carolina - my brother Ed just visited her - from my mother's family. They're living there. And there's still some family in Lebanon. I'd like to visit them someday, but I haven't yet gotten the courage to go to Lebanon, although I know I can, and probably safely, and maybe not even directly. I think the U.S. government still discourages travelers to Lebanon, but I can certainly do it by going to Cyprus and going there or going to Syria. Actually, from my father's home, if I look toward the Mediterranean, which I can see from my father's home, to my left is Lebanon. I mean, I can see it, it's there, that's Lebanon over there. That's where all the smuggling takes place, right on that road that goes from

Lebanon is Homs. A lot of smuggling goes on there.

CH Your mother, then, was Syrian as well?

VA Yes. Now she would be called Lebanese, because it's Lebanon ~~TODAY~~.

CH And what were your parents' religious backgrounds?

VA My father was Presbyterian. Mother, I'm guessing, probably was a - at least some Catholic background, and I do that because I recall her taking us, as kids, to a Catholic church, although I don't recall going there very often, and it was very clear that she shifted gears, and we became Episcopalians as children, and my brothers and I were confirmed Episcopalians. But I'm guessing she came here as a Catholic.

CH And do you know how the family actually got into the selling of rugs? You had mentioned your uncle's deal with this person who fell through, but had there been any activity in that line prior to that arrangement?

VA Nothing of significance. They may have had some rugs. They were small things, I'd guess, to pedlars, although that was not anything that was primary or major. Just sort of maybe more incidental. However, they had a familiarity with that concept, having come from that part of the world. Syria is not a place in which they're known for Oriental rugs, but there's rugs there, there's Turkey, there's some rug making in all the - again, not of - Turkey was more major than Syria, by far, in terms of making rugs, and obviously Iran was the major, but - so, except for having some exposure to that, I don't think they really had any Oriental rug business that they moved from Pennsylvania to Oregon. I think it was this guy that created that business.

CH Did your father say much about his own upbringing, how he grew up?

VA No. Just a few little bits of stories. Apparently - well, Uncle was older than my father, and I know my father went to the American University in Beirut. They talk about - I don't know, this is sort of disjointed, but they would take Arabic bread and some cheese, and that would be their food that they would eat en route, or something. But I never did get much detailed story of my father, his early life, what he did. I never got really into it. My father was thirty-five when I was born, so he would have been - you know, but the time I got to be eight, nine, ten, he would have been.

CH Did they discuss their philosophies of life or political ideas or anything like that when you were growing up?

VA No.

CH Would you describe it as an apolitical family, then?

VA I would, except for I remember there was a big, I would say party, at our house during the election between Roosevelt and Hoover. My dad was for Hoover. Obviously Hoover didn't make it. I remember that event. That's about the only thing I would relate political at all.

CH What about activities that they were involved in? Organizations or...?

VA The only thing I remember is, Mother was interested in the Red Cross, and she spent a lot of time at it, during the war especially. And Dad liked to go to the Elks Club. He never went to meetings, he went to play cards, and he thoroughly enjoyed that. Spent a lot of time there.

CH Did you refer to some kind of a Syrian organization or something that - earlier I thought I heard some remark about getting together as a community.

VA Well, they'd go visit at homes, but there was a club.

CH What kind of club was it?

VA Oh, just - you know, I guess they, like most ethnic groups, had a club. It was the Syrian Club. Now, I say that because in later years they always argued, was it going to be called Syrian-Lebanese or Lebanese-Syrian or are they going to have some other broad-based name or whatever. But it was the Syrian Club then, and it was a small, old building, as best I can recall. I don't recall, really, going to any meetings or anything like that as a child, or taken to it. There may have been a party or two there, but I don't have any strong memories of that.

CH Now, you were born on February 20, 1923, and that was in Portland, wasn't it?

VA Um-hmm

CH And it was fifteen months after your brothers?

VA Sixteen, I think it is. Let's see. Fifteen or sixteen. Anyway, it's from October 2 to February 20, whatever that comes up to.

CH And that was Richard and Edward?

VA Um-hmm.

CH But I had read in the paper that your mother raised you as triplets.

VA Well, she liked to dress us the same. I was bigger than they were, so that would kind of match up - I mean as we get a little bit older - and so she has us - I've seen pictures where we're all three dressed exactly the same. She was very particular about how we looked and how we dressed, and made sure we were clean and neat and that we looked pretty good.

CH What was her intent? I mean, did she have a particular - something in mind for you socially, or was this just a matter of tradition, this was what her...?

VA No, I think this was just the way she was. I think she was kind of proud of the fact that she had three boys and sometimes people would take us as twins and...

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]