

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

A Countian's tour of the Holy Lands in 1900, Part I
Carroll County Times article for 2 September 1990
By Jay A. Graybeal

For the past several weeks world attention has focused on yet another Middle-East crisis. The present turmoil reminds us of the centuries of regional strife over religion, commerce and power and the ebb and flow of great civilizations. In more peaceful times, the Holy Lands have attracted countless religious pilgrims, and other visitors to view the monuments of once powerful civilizations.

The Historical Society's collection contains several objects linking local residents with the region. The accompanying photograph taken in Egypt is a typical souvenir. Of greater historical interest is an autograph book carried by George W. Yeiser of Union Mills when he visited the Holy Lands in 1900. Mr. Yeiser closed his store in early February and spent the next five months traveling in Egypt, Syria, Greece, Italy and Switzerland. During his trip he wrote a series of letters as a correspondent for the Westminster Democratic Advocate. His letters provide interesting and occasionally humorous commentary on travel, accommodations and local social customs.

"CAIRO, EGYPT, March 1, 1900

Dear Readers: - When our party arrived at Alexandria the first thing that met us was a grand carnival parade, which attracted thousands of people to the city.

It is very interesting for a tourist, used to Western customs and civilization, to be ushered into an Eastern city. The Eastern costume, the streets filled with donkeys, the camel with his burden, the women with their water pitchers or other burdens on their heads, the harem women with their faces veiled, the wealthy Arabs attired in costly silk gowns moving through the streets barefooted, people lying about in streets half naked and filthy, the blacksmith, tinsmith and others sitting on the floor to work instead of standing. But when these people try to be interesting and come out in a street parade for that purpose, and streets filled with an agglomeration or mixture of Arabs, English, Scotch, Armenians, Dutch, Greek, French and Italians, all attired in costumes, and colors peculiar to their nation's customs and fancies, it presents a street scene that I shall not attempt to describe.

Alexandria is a large and interesting city. There are manufactures controlled by English capitalists. There are few beggars, and the people seem to be prosperous. There are many things to interest the tourist in this ancient city. All around the city are the gardens of the wealthy, open to tourists. Those who never visited a tropical clime can form no conception how beautiful they are. Thousands of acres are set apart in Date Palm and Banana farms. A date palm tree yields nearly a bushel of dates annually, a banana stalk one bunch. Wages paid for labor in this community is about six Piastres or 30c in U. S. Currency.

From Alexandria to Cairo we go by rail 130 miles over the Delta of the Nile, the most fertile spot of land in the world.

The farmers all live in villages. The dwellings are all made of mud, about 6 feet high, have a hole about two by four feet for a door, and nearly all are covered with straw or weeds. The huts are seldom

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more than 8 by 10 feet. This is the home of the Egyptian farmer. He is now busy cutting the clover and vegetables and taking them to market.

Farms are separated by shallow furrows, which serve as a land mark. This is the only fence I saw in Egypt thus far. When the farmer goes out to work on his far, which is seldom more than one or two acres, he take his wife, all his children, all his goats, donkeys and camels along, and I believe his chickens follow him sometimes. In passing from Alexandria to Cairo the fields were practically covered with people and animals. The Egyptian people are the slowest people in the world. They sit down to mow the grass, to rake the grass, they make the camel lie down and he sits down to load him, then he sits on top of the load to go to market. The animals seem to be just as slow, and the camel would stand on his side of the land mark and starve before he would reach across the line.

CAIRO. - Here we find the extreme of Eastern customs mixed with modern improvements and fashion. The hotel accommodations are modern and first-class. A tourist can travel two days in modern Cairo and would not find a narrow street or a dilapidated building, also beautiful flowing fountains and public parks neatly kept. When he enters old Cairo he finds the streets very narrow and oriental life in its extreme. The bazaars are old and muddy, but are filled with the finest weaves of oriental work in the East. The writer saw a beautiful oriental scarf costing 8000 plastres or \$400.00 in U. S. currency. Well, I believe I will not take it along this time. Good-Bye.

Our party was taken through the streets of the poor. These streets are only five feet wide and the dwellings three to four stories high. We were admitted into some of the dwellings. There are not doors, no windows, no furniture of any description. For a bed room, where the whole family sleeps, a little straw on the floor serves as a bed. In a few minutes we were surrounded by hosts of little beggars, "Baksheesh," "Baksheesh," and this time the party gave liberally.

The places of interest in the city that were visited by our party are the Mosques, the toms of the Khalifs, Joseph's well, and other places.

In the environs, the ruins of the Temple of the Sun at On, the tree and the well of Joseph and Mary, and the Island of Roda. These places were visited and are all very interesting.

Today the pyramids and sphinx were visited. When the writer had his Kodak ready to photograph the large face that kept silent watch over the desert for thousands of years, a 'donkey' boy wanted 'baksheesh' and then he would stand before the 'sphinx.' When he had the 'baksheesh' he and his donkey passed on and the writer was the victim; so the picture is robed of the attraction.

PORT SAID, EGYPT, March 15, 1900.

DEAR READERS: - Since I wrote my last letter I traveled nearly 1500 miles in the 'land of the Pharaohs' I looked upon all the principal ruins and tombs, so far as they are discovered, as they appear today; once the pride and splendor of the Pharaohs, today only a reflection of their past greatness. Where once stood proud and magnificent cities, with enormous temples of granite, today there remain only ruins

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and desolation. Where once stood the palaces and courts of the Pharaohs, today grass and wheat grows.

'From Cairo to the First Cataract.'

We entered the tomb of the sacred bull, 1200 feet deep, cut out of a solid rock, with the walls beautifully decorated with hieroglyphics, with 24 of the large granite sarcophagi 13 by 8 by 12 feet still in the tomb. The tombs of the Pharaohs, including that of Seti I and Rameses II, the Pharaohs of the oppression. Here they rested 3300 years, but now the mummies are lying in a curiosity shop at Cairo.

The ruins of many granite temples cover from 5 to 200 acres. The largest of these temples is a Karnak. In this temple about 500 columns are still standing, from 30 to 36 feet in circumference, and about 60 feet high. On top of these pillars are stone girders about 12 feet square. Among the ruins are hundreds of sphinxes, with ram's heads and lion's heads.

At Edfu, 616 miles up the river, our party went to the top of the tower of the temple, 112 feet high. All around the temple, where the ancient city stood, there is a native village with a population of about 3000. The hut of the native is about 8 feet square, and has no roof, as it never rains here. From the top of the tower our party could look direct into the habitation of these people. No furniture, no stove, nothing but a little straw in one corner of the hut for a bed, children naked and covered with flies. Oh! what a God forsaken people. What a contrast between the ancient "land of the Pharaohs" and Egypt of today. When we got back to the river host of women were standing in the river washing. It was wash day, and I am sure the clothes needed all the rubbing they got. Out of this same river the water is taken that our party drinks from day to day. How would you like that, reader? Perhaps this is why it is called 'The sweet waters of the Nile.'

From Cairo to Ishmalia we passed through the land of Goshen. From Ishmali to Port Said I saw the most interesting sight of my life. On one side the Suez Canal, on the other the Egyptian sun setting behind the horizon of an inlet off the Mediterranean Sea, and the beautiful scene obscured by millions of ducks. For over twenty miles this body of water was practically covered by these interesting birds. Thousands were within thirty yards of our train and were not disturbed in the least. I lost all interest in the canal. I wished for my gun, plenty of shells, a bush-whacker boat and a friend, a crack live bird shot of Carroll who carries about one hundred and fifty pounds superfluous avoirdupois, would have been a very interesting companion. Here two of the members of the Westminster Gun Club could have made full scores. Quite a record for any member of that organization.

Two words I learned in Egypt that I shall never forget. Here they are - 'Rameses' and 'Backsheesh'."

Part II will appear next week and will pick up Yeiser's tour in "Beyrout, Syria". In 1900 the holy city of Jerusalem was in this country.

Photo Caption: Carroll Countian Miss M. Madeline Shriver (on left) posed on a camel with her Baltimore friend Miss Elizabeth Barry during a 1929 tour of Egyptian sights. On the back of a copy of this

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photograph sent back to Union Mills, she wrote, "Wind was blowing a gale. I am sorry that my skirt appears so short."