



### *No. 3 The Assyrian Colony*

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Walk along East Park street any afternoon. When you reach the corner by the Clarence hotel turn south for half a block and you will see a number of frame houses in the alley, placed indiscriminately upon the ground for a distance of several hundred feet in an easterly direction. Continue your walk on to Mercury street and then go east half way through the block and you will be facing the Assyrian colony, one of the queerest of the queer spots in Butte. It is unique in its way and it is asserted on the best authority that it is the only colony of its kind in the United States.

#### *Rival Factions*

No accurate census of the Assyrian population of Butte is available, but it numbers close to 200 men, women and children. The business of the men, as a general rule, is scavenger work and several of the bosses have a number of teams and it is said are making money out of the distasteful work. Really there are two factions of the Assyrians in Butte and there is considerable business rivalry among them. John Paul is the leader of one clique and Shabin Ferris heads the other. Both have proved to be good business men and their followers trust them implicitly.

#### *Quaint Homes*

The houses which they occupy and which are shown in the several views on this page are among the most dilapidated and ramshackle affairs to be found in



Butte. They are built in no regularity; they have no style or attempt at comfort. They are placed on the ground wherever the fancy of the owner dictated or he could get the ground to build upon. In nearly every case a stable is necessitated by the business of the occupant of the cabin and this stable is as disreputable looking as the house, more so carrying out the comparison of what the two structures should be. The wagons used necessarily cry aloud to the heavens, especially on a warm day, but they worry the Assyrians but little. They are brought as close to the houses as possible for convenience sake and allowed to stand all day long, the work being done during

the night. Evidently the residents of the colony get used to it and like other industries, pay but little attention to the unusual conditions which surround the work.

#### *Americanized*

Taking matters around the colony, a visit to the place shows it to be but little different from any other section of town, judging from the outward appearances and excepting the conditions already named. Playing in the yards and vacant lots will be seen a number of dark-skinned and dark-eyed children. Their games will be the same as are played

by other children of Butte, and if the stranger gazes too long or too earnestly at the spectacle he will be greeted by the cry of “rubber” or the query, “Do you see anything green about here?” Truth compels a person to answer no to this query, for the Assyrian colony is one of the bleakest and most barren spots in the Butte district. The women are apparently always busy with their housework, but it does not seem as if they accomplish much, still they are doing something. The children attend the public schools of Butte and it is said they are bright pupils, quick to learn and grasp the opportunities offered. However, the people are most clannish. They keep well within themselves. They do not mix with the other people of Butte and have few pleasures, such as attending theaters and other amusements. Their language is the only language spoken in the colony. Many of the men and nearly all of the women cannot understand a word of English, or at least they pretend they cannot when placed in a position where it is necessary for them to talk. The leaders are bright and quick to grasp a business point. The men who act as interpreters catch the meaning of their questioners quickly and faithfully. The members of the colony have some pleasures in their own houses; parties and dances such as were in vogue in their country thousands of years ago being still indulged in occasionally, and the fete days and dances of the mother country are never forgotten.



*Ten Years Old*

The colony has been in existence in Butte for about 10 years; away back in their country along the river Jordan, some of the Assyrians heard of the blessings of free America and one of them told the story of his emigration to a Standard man only a little while ago. His English was broken, but his talk was sincere. "I knew only in a \_\_where I wanted to go," he said, "I only knew that America was a country thousands of miles away. I trusted to the agent of a steamship company whom was worthy of trust. Myself and my family, and my friends were there on the steamship together. After days of waiting and watching we sighted the shores of the new country. Eagerly we crowded to the rail to see the land which would give us our fortune someday. We landed and then we learned we had been deceived and instead of America we were in Brazil. We were without money. We did not want to stay in that land, which was little better than the home we left, so we worked day and night, our women and children slaved with us, and finally we had gotten enough coin together to resume our passage, and this time we made no mistake. We landed in New Orleans or Texas, I do not remember which, and finally we came to Butte. Here we have since lived. We have had our share of troubles and woes and have enjoyed prosperity. Almost every man had made some money. Someday we might go back to the old country for the ties are strong which draw us there. There we have no

great prospects of the future, but it is still home. We could go back there and live like princes but it would not be America, as we know it too well. We would have no privileges like we have here; the rulers of the country would swallow up every cent of the money we brought home with us. They would nag at us and persecute us until we yielded and it would be necessary for us to come back to Butte and America and make another stake. Many of us are American citizens and I think the Assyrian colony in Butte will increase from year to year rather than diminish, for many of our people far away across the oceans know we are prospering and I look for them to come to Butte for this city is now known even in the center of Asia as a great place where gold can be earned by the work of the individual and where the customs of the fatherland are preserved in many respects."

*Assyria*

Assyria, the country that was called home by these strange people before they migrated to America and afterwards to Butte, is one of the oldest Asiatic states of history and is frequently referred to in the Old Testament as a dependence of Babylonia. At the time of its greatest power it covered an area of 75,000 square miles, bounded on the north by Armenia, the lower Zaab on the south, the Zagros Mountains on the east and the Euphrates on the west. The name of the country

appears in Genesis, X. 2, and refers to a small country on the left bank of the Tigris. Ancient Assyria was a fertile country and the name was sometimes applied to the whole of Babylonia. The early history of the two countries is interlocked and the conditions of the one are closely related to the conditions of the other. The favorite amusement of the kings of ancient Assyria was lion hunting. According to Genesis, the Assyrians are descendants of Shem and emigrants from Babylon and her religion was also derived from the mother country, as well as its civilization.

### *Ancestry*

A search of the records shows that the Assyrians were brave and warlike and were always aggressive during the ancient times. The Babylonian emigrants established Assyria about 2,000 years before Christ. The first Assyrian rulers of which history deals flourished in 1816 B.C. For the next 300 years nothing is known of the condition of Assyria. In the fifteenth century B.C. Assyria was involved in a war with Babylonia, then under the rule of the non-Semitic Kassites. War continued between the two countries for a long time with varying success, but Assyria finally became supreme, forcing Babylonia to become a vassal state. Between 705 and 681 B.C. Assyria reached the height of her power, King Esarhaddon having by his conquests about that time added to his name the title of king of



upper and lower Egypt and Ethiopia. In 688 B.C. the decline of the Assyrian power began, Assurbanipal being then king. In some respects his reign was most brilliant. It was a golden age of art and literature. The military spirit became comparatively dormant, although the town of Susa was conquered and destroyed. Taking advantage of the apathy shown by the Assyrians and their indulgence in the more peaceful occupations, induced by the awakening of art and literature, the nations which had been conquered awoke to their

opportunities. They rose in their might. Their uprisings were rapid and persistent. Assyria was soon trembling in dismay and the downward path was soon reached. Their soldiers made a rally, repelled the attack of the Medes and Persians and it seemed as if they would regain some of their old-time glory. Then the invaders were in command of Phraortes and they were signally defeated. Seventeen years later the attack was repeated. Cyaxares, in union with Nabopolassar of Babylon, repeated the attack and won. Nineveh of the Assyrians fell and with the end of this battle the power of the Assyrians fell forever. And this was 608 years before Christianity came to the earth with the birth of Christ.

### *Changed Conditions*

Of the later years of the Assyrian history, the books of reference deal but little. In company with many of the other states and provinces of Asia Minor and the Palestine country, the Assyrian have become subjects of the Turkish empire. Its territory is now limited to the valley and plains and mountains on the east side of the Jordan and the Dead Sea. Generally speaking, its area is mountainous, but by no means at a high altitude. Its people are oppressed and many of them are half wild. However, they are loath to leave their homes; they put up with almost any hardship for the privilege of living in peace upon the wild side hills, and the fact that the colony in Butte is said to be the only one of its kind

in the United States is cited as proof of the love these people have for the land which was once gloriously theirs 2,000 years before the Christian Era began.

School boys of years ago can remember the stirring song that was in their readers,

“The Assyrian came down like a wolf on  
the fold,  
And his cohort was gleaming with silver  
and gold.”

Then the story of the bravery of these bold old warriors was recounted until even the school boy was compelled to admire the sturdy men of old.

### *Tame Now*

Now all of their war like spirit was vanished, especially among the Butte colony, although occasionally a fight will take place, and once in awhile they will get into court. The women are just as valiant as the men. Some of them are more so, for the records of a recent court case tell where a woman, over 70 years old, took a hand in a fight and held a man who was trying to run away while her son got a gun and shot him.

Take it all in all, while the Assyrians make fairly good citizens and attend strictly to their own businesses and fight only among themselves, they have

gladly degenerated, and the Butte colony, although descendents of the men who helped make song and story with their deeds of valor in pre-Christian days, have had an awful fall and are now the scavengers of the greatest mining camp on earth and they are all making some little money from the business too.

## *Assyrian Colony of Butte*

Benjamin Trigona-Harany

In the minds of most North Americans, the basic divisions of Christianity are quite simple—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—but the Middle East is home to a myriad of other denominations with their own theologies, hierarchies, and traditions. The late eighteenth century saw the beginning of immigration to the United States by some of these Christians, bringing their peculiar religious practices and unintelligible languages with them. It is no surprise, then, that when a group of Arabic-speaking Maronites from the village of Hadchit in the mountains of Lebanon appeared in Butte, Montana, at the turn of the twentieth century, they should have been the subject of some mystery to the local residents. It is also not surprising that the *Anaconda Standard* should have confused the exact identity of these settlers when we consider the complexities of Middle Eastern Christianity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, much of the Middle East was still part of the Ottoman Empire, a five-hundred-year-old state that would finally disintegrate at the end of the First World War. Determining the identities of individual Ottomans can be challenging in that the administrative system recorded only the religion of its citizens. Ottoman historians are therefore forced to rely on religion,

names, and place of residence to determine the specific community to which individuals belonged, something which is very much an imperfect practice. The difficulties are compounded when researching immigrant communities since names are often obscured by imperfect transcription of other languages and the lack of information for place of birth other than “the Ottoman Empire” or, as it was often known, “Turkey.” The case of Butte exemplifies this very problem: the turn-of-the-century censuses include names that are identifiably Armenian, Serb, and Arab.

The latter case is particularly problematic since Muslims, Christians, and Jews of various affiliations all would have been found using Arab names but in the *Anaconda Standard* they were described as “Assyrians.” That this was an error is not surprising, though a short exploration of Middle Eastern Christianity is required to fully appreciate the problem at hand.

The theological differences among each group go back to the early centuries of the church when ecumenical councils seeking to establish the basic tenets of the faith resulted in deep splits between the official Christianity supported by the Roman Empire and beliefs that it considered heretical. Long before the schism that created Catholics and Orthodox out of a single church, the independent Church of the East (more often called the Nestorian Church) established itself in the fifth century inside what is today’s Iraq.

This was followed shortly thereafter by a more serious split that saw separate Armenian, Coptic, and Syrian churches break away with a common theological position. For our purposes here, we can leave the Armenians in Asia Minor (Anatolia) and the Copts in Egypt aside and focus on the Syrian, better known as the Jacobite, Church.

The first point is that not all Christians in Syria followed the Jacobite Church in rejecting the Roman Empire's official doctrine. Those who remained loyal, the Melkites ("royalists"), later themselves split into separate Greek Orthodox and Catholic Churches after the Great Schism in 1054. These slowly became Arabized in the centuries following the Arab conquests of the Middle East and today constitute the majority of the Christian populations of Syria, Palestine, and Jordan. In Lebanon, the Maronites, a separate faction allied to the Catholic Church but with its own tradition, predominates.

The Jacobite Church established its theological center farther east in upper Mesopotamia, present-day southern Turkey. Although the Nestorian and Jacobite churches differed fundamentally in their Christian beliefs, they did share a common liturgical language, Syriac (a form of Aramaic). Modern dialects of Syriac are still spoken today in some parts of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, but by the nineteenth century, many of these communities had adopted the predominant

local language, be it Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, or Kurdish. They also often lived close to one another in Mesopotamia, although the Nestorians were generally situated farther east and the Jacobites farther west.

Like the Melkites, both churches experienced conversion to Catholicism; Nestorians who became Catholics are known as Chaldeans. It should be noted that Chaldeans are Catholics but not Roman Catholics, since they use Syriac as a liturgical language and have their own non-Latin rites and traditions. Today, they constitute by far the largest Christian group in Iraq, with their spiritual leader resident in Baghdad and a heavy concentration of their communities located in and around Mosul. By contrast, the Jacobite and Nestorian churches used to be centered in present-day Turkey, but after the First World War both relocated, the former to Damascus and the latter to Chicago.

In the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries also arrived in the Ottoman Empire and Iran, and although the scale of conversion was much less than that to Catholicism, the American and British missionaries had a profound impact by introducing the notion that the Nestorians, Chaldeans, and Jacobites were all the descendants of the ancient Assyrians. Although almost all Nestorians and Chaldeans have embraced this identity, the Assyrian thesis is highly controversial today, with many Jacobites rejecting it outright.

Returning to Butte, we are confronted with the idea that the local Arabic-speaking population was an “Assyrian colony.” This, however, may well be a misunderstanding by the author of the article in the *Anaconda Standard*. There was a natural confusion between immigrants from “Syria” and “Syrian Christians,” but it must be remembered that most Christians from Syria were *not* Syrian Christians but, rather, Greek Orthodox, Catholic Melkites or Maronites, which is exactly who we know to have settled in Butte.

This does not, however, preclude the possibility that there were also Assyrians residing in Montana. Across the border, a group of Nestorian converts to Protestantism from western Iran had settled in Saskatchewan at the turn of the century, though

they—along with Chaldeans and Jacobites—were to be found in their greatest numbers along the eastern seaboard and in California. It is entirely possible that the centuries-old religious discord among the various Middle Eastern Christian groups lay behind the emergence of the “two rival factions” in the small Butte community; certainly such “internal” disputes were a fact of life in the Ottoman Empire.

This one small case demonstrates how complex stories of immigrants to the United States may be hidden behind census records indicating birth in “Turkey” rather than “the Ottoman Empire.” It also helps shed some light on the various Christian churches that still exist across the Middle East but that have also firmly established themselves across North America.