

**THE
FAMILIES
OF
HARDEEN**

"El awal kan Issah aawad Nadder, aawad El Khoury, aawad Dagheer."

Those were the opening lines pertaining to the history of Hardeen, in a book called "Tareekh Dijaah el Lebnan", copyright 1903, by the author Georjius Bey Karam.

- 1. The Year of Issah's arrival in Hardeen was 280 AD.*
- 2. First there was Issah, then Nadder, then Khoury, then Dagheer.*
- 3. The village was called "Harrat el Deen", which means courtyard of religion.*
- 4. Kerrset el Butrakeeyeh was in Hardeen until 1640 A.D. (The seat of the patriarch).*
- 5. The author even took the time to describe the character of the villagers for having a reputation of ("fee el Karimeh wah el fezhoor"), generosity, hospitality, and quick hot tempers).*

The history of Hardeen was one chapter in this book that chronicled the histories of the other ancient cities of Lebanon, - Byblos, Beirut, Tyre, Saida, Tripoli, Baalbek, etc.

My earliest recollections of the village of Hardeen, Lebanon, came from my mother, Mariam, the daughter of Butrus Issah. She would proudly say that her family, "Beit Issah", were the first Christian settlers in Hardeen. She was quick to tell you that the reputation of the villagers for being extremely generous and hospitable was well known in Northern Lebanon. The other side of the coin was a reputation for a temper that was quickly aroused. Being a deeply religious person, she would also point out that there were seventeen churches (shrines) in Hardeen. She also told me of natural sights in Lebanon that seemed wondrous to her. She recited them in a sort of rhyme. Nahar Jazeen, Jabal Sineen, ain Beit e deen, Blahted Hardeen.

- Nahar Jazzine - The River at Jazzine originates in North Lebanon and flows southward creating a beautiful waterfall at Jazzine.
- Jabal Sineen - The Mountain of Sineen is the highest mountain in the Province of Kisserwan.
- Ain Beit e deen - The Spring at Beit e deen is where spring water flows from a grotto.
- Blahted Hardeen - The Rock of Hardeen is a flat glacial rock which extends from the highest part of the village, to the other end and beyond.

Issah, (assem el irzak), allotted the land in Hardeen. Nadder and Dagheer were allotted land for their people, and El Khoury was allotted enough land to eventually have a church, monastery, convent, and school. The overseer for these lands was always an Issah. My grandfather, Butrus Issah was the last overseer. It is possible that cousin Elias Romanus has that right today. These families, like all large extended families, became "Clans".

After 1700 years of inter-marriages, the Issah clan became known as "Beit el Biadyeh." Nadder is still known as "Beit Nadder" Dagheer is still known as "Beit Dagheer" and El Khoury is still "Beit el Khoury". The first branch of Beit Issah was Saiffeh, which means summer. According to what the old-timers told me, Saiffeh would leave Hardeen in the cold winter months (and his winter chores) for the milder climate below in Koura. To make Saiffeh understand that his leaving the village was a concern of the whole community, Issah appointed Nadder as a spokesman. Nadder explained to Saiffeh that he must remain in Hardeen to share in the chores or stay in Koura. Saiffeh agreed to stay in Hardeen during the winter months.

Beit Issah was given a nickname, Biadyeh, which means white. Biadyeh became the clan name. All the branches, Saiffeh, Zaher, Shinah, Leywoon, Barakat, etc., including the Issah family belong to Beit el Biadyeh clan.

When I was a little boy my mother told me her grandmother, Antoinette, wife of Hannah, was a very saintly woman. She told me this story as proof of her purity. One dark night, my great grandmother heard a noise at the door. She went to investigate, and found a wolf sitting on his haunches with one paw raised. She approached the wolf, bent over, and gently took the paw in her hand. She saw that the paw was inflamed and festering due to a large splinter, which was wedged deeply into it. She went back into the house for water, or whatever ointments they used

in those days, while the wolf sat patiently. When she returned, she removed the splinter and applied whatever ointments were available. The wolf limped away looking back and it seemed he was nodding his head in thanks. A week or two later, in the dark of the night, she, once again, heard something at the door. It was the wolf. He laid a young lamb at her feet and walked away looking back and nodding his head.

Without my asking for it, this story was told to me again thirty years later by Tony (Antonius) Zater. Since we had no photographs of any member of the family in Hardeen, I always pictured her dressed in the manner of St. Francis of Assisi.

While on the subject of saints, Khoury Naomtallah el Hardeen, who was beatified two or three years ago by Pope John Paul II, is another highlight in the history of Hardeen.

My grandfather, Butrus Issah, was caretaker for all the church properties in Hardeen as was his father, Hanah. This was true back through ancient times. He was also a quarryman and was the person in charge of the explosives. I guess he was the explosives expert in those days. He was also a stone mason and carpenter. It is also possible he was a blacksmith since my mother tells me the villagers brought their pots and pans for him to repair and clean. He had a large indentation in the temple on one side of his head due to a fall. I am not sure if it was at the quarry or somewhere else that this happened. He married Zina who was from a village or county called Ibkasseen. She was from the Khoury clan of that area. The same clan from which came Georjius el Khoury who drafted the Lebanese constitution. My mother said she was "sumrah" which means she was dark complexioned and had black hair and brown eyes. I don't know much about her except that she taught my mother many proverbs. At certain times my mother would say "Immey canit oulee" (my mother used to tell me) then she would recite a proverb. Sometimes these proverbs would contradict one another and I would tell my mother so. She would say, "that's all right, use the one that suits the situation." That certainly proved the infallibility of my grandmother and I wasn't about to argue that point.

Butrus Issah had blue eyes and reddish blond hair. Butrus and Zina had eight children, Mariam, Warrid, Liza, Saaidey, Badiaah, Antonius, Yusef and Annouah, in that order. Mariam, my mother, had black wavy hair, brown eyes, and was ruddy complexioned. My mother was a giant perpetual motion machine at 4'11" in height. She married Abraham Isbir (Esper - my father) from Latakia, Syria. They were married in New Castle Pennsylvania in 1918. A daughter was born to them in 1919, Genevieve (Genny). A second child was born who was baptized and named Esper Esper. He died at several months of age from crib death. A son was born in 1926 in Michigan City, Indiana, Anthony (Tony).

My aunt Rose (Warrid) had blue eyes and golden hair. Warrid left Hardeen in 1906, when she eloped with Antonius, Michael Romanos from Beit Ossie. They used his father's first name, Michael, as their surname. They had seven children. Francis, Sady, Lucy, Philomena, Joseph, Zina and Frank

Aunt Liza had blue eyes and reddish brown hair (Auburn). Liza married Najib Dumit, who was from the village of Metreet. He had steel blue eyes. He was very handsome. They were married in the old country and settled in his family home in Metreet. They had no children. They came to America for a short while and returned to Metreet. He left there for Argentina to seek his fortune. I understand he became successful dealing in furs. He never returned to Lebanon. He died in Argentina. Liza died, while residing in Metreet, in a hospital in Beirut. Warrid and Liza were the only ones I actually saw of my mother's brothers and sisters.

Saaidy married Butrus Daaybis. I am told she had black hair, a light complexion, and hazel eyes. When they came to this country the name Daaybis became Davis. They had three children, Matilda (Tilly), and Haleem (Bill) and Zina. Butrus was very feisty and had an aggressive nature. I am told he would beat her and verbally abuse her in public. Aunt Sady left him three times. The last time she left him was with Abdullah Isbir, (my paternal uncle), whom she had fallen in love with, and he with her. They left Michigan City for Pueblo Colorado and then migrated to Lafayette Louisiana. Albert and Saaidy Esper had two children, Josephine and Anthony (Tony).

Badiaah was married and settled in Lebanon with a man from Neha. I do not know his first name but he was from Beit el Swaid. I was told he was a heavy drinker and was very abusive to her. She had four daughters and a son. She left him with three daughters and a son and took the infant daughter with her to Argentina. She resides in Cordoba Argentina. At our last correspondence she said she recalled my mother (her sister) sitting at the sewing machine in the evening with a lamp to see by. As of our last correspondence to Lebanon, we know that one daughter lives in Metreet. She is married to a judge, Yousef Obeid. Two daughters live in Beirut; one is married to a soldier. Badiaah's three daughters in Lebanon are Victoria, Hanney, and Tamineh.

About 1913 my grandfather, Butrus, and my grandmother, Zina, were residing in Hardeen and received correspondence stating that Aunt Saaidy had left her husband, Butrus Daaybis (Pete Davis). In those days you were married one time, forever. He considered this an outrage to his family name. He decided to send his eldest child, Mariam (my mother), to reconcile them. My mother left Hardeen in 1914 never to return or see her parents again. She traveled by ship. There was a newlywed couple from the neighboring village of Nehah, Georjios Moosah and his wife Lateefey. The Moses family live in Richmond, and she and my mother saw a lot of each other. On ship they came in the lowest classification of travel known as steerage.

In 1914 when the great World War broke out, Lebanon, the Middle East and the Balkan countries were under the control of the Ottoman Turks, as it was for the past six hundred years. Below the eastern slopes of Lebanon, the British (later joined by the Arabs) were locked in battle with the Turks. The Turks were confiscating the produce and products from the Bekaa Valley. Below the western slopes, the Mediterranean Ports were controlled by one navy and then another (or army), causing it to be unsafe to leave the refuge of the mountain. By this time, also, all the

young able bodied men and women had left Hardeen to seek their fortune in America. The biggest majority of Haradney settled in Wilkes Barre Pennsylvania. There were so many Lebanese in Wilkes Barre that three churches were necessary to accommodate them. Two of those churches were for the accommodation of the many Haradney. They claimed there were more Haradney in Wilkes Barre than there were in Hardeen. This left in Hardeen, the aging, the sickly, and the children. I do not know if draught and pestilence was added to their woes, but I do know famine set in.

What remained in Hardeen of the Issah family was my grandfather, Butrus, my grandmother, Zina, and their children, Antonius, Yusef, and Anouah. We think the world flu epidemic of that period (1918) put the Coup de Gras on the Issah family. Being in dire straits, my grandfather sold a piece of property to Saleem Leywoon, who by the way is from the Biadyeh clan. (The property is in the heart of the village next to the church, and is one of the original land grants of Issah. Issah gave the land on which the church is built. On the Southern slope of Hardeen, there is a piece of forested property that still remains registered at the county seat, in the name of Butrus Issah.) However, in spite of their efforts to survive, there was nothing that could help them. Within a week they had all died. My grandmother and Anouah died within minutes of each other.

One day, when I was seven or eight years old (in New Castle Penn around 1933 or 1934), I walked into my fathers barber shop to find him reading aloud from a book to one of his friends. He said to his friend "Wallah, Millah fussil", By God what a tale. Being an inquisitive little boy, I asked my father what he was reading. He said he was reading about my mother's family. My curiosity being satisfied, and my concentration span being normal for a 7 year old boy, I said "Oh" and went back out the door, never asking him to read it to me.

As the years went by and I was introduced to more and more friends and relatives of my mother, I would be told "Issah ouell insan saken Hardeen", Issah was the first person to settle Hardeen. Or "Beit Issah ouell ailett Hardeen", the Issah family was the first family in Hardeen.

During the 1950's a man came to Richmond, VA, where we resided at that time, from Pittsburgh. His name was Tony Zater. I remember seeing him at Haflees and Maherjans in Pennsylvania. He bought a small cafe' called the Casa Loma. I would drop in on him occasionally. He made a good club sandwich and a good submarine. For the price of a sandwich and a cup of coffee, I could gather a lot of information about Hardeen. Sometimes I could get him to come to our house for supper. The lure I used was Kibbee Nayeh. Kibbee Nayeh is the hook that will snag any Hardeeny. They can't resist it. He told me, many times, that he had a book that contained the history of Hardeen and beit Issah. I asked him, continuously and persistently, to let me see it. Finally, in the early 1970's, he brought me the book.

The book was a paperback and approximately 5 x 8 in size. There was an athographed picture of the author, Georjius Bey Karam. The copyright was 1903. I saw the title "Tareekh diaah Lebanon", History of the cities (or villages) of Lebanon. The book contained the history of the ancient cities Byblos (Jibiel), Beirut, Sidon, Tripoli, Baalbeck and others, but when I saw the

title Hardeen, I stopped. I had found what I had been looking for. There would be no more heresay. The truth was here in this history book. Since we are now in the year 1988, that was fifteen years ago. However, I remember that the first sentence was stated in such a way that Issah and Hardeen seemed to be one and the same.

I should explain that I speak Arabic, rather fluently, but I read Arabic on approximately a second grade level. The history of Hardeen was written in basic uncomplicated Arabic which I could understand. I may not have the words exactly in the same order, but basically it sounded like this. "El ouell fee Hardeen can Issah" (The first to be in Hardeen was Issah). "Aawad Nader, Khoury weh Dagheer"(later Nader, Priest, and Decker). The book stated Issah's arrival was in 280 AD, amazing! Since my mother thought Issah was her great great grandfather, she would say, "Issah can bey jid jiddey. Since she could not read, she had no idea the history went back that far.

The original name of the village was Harrat el Deen (courtyard of religion), and it was the seat of the patriarch of the maronites. Hardeen remained the seat of the patriarch until it was moved in 1640 A.D. Shikree Shinch and Tony Zater told me that Issah gave land to Nader, Khoury, Dagheer, and the Church, which included a monastery, convent, school, and seminary.

Hardeen must have been a safe place to live. To this day there is still only one narrow road to reach it. The seat of the patriarch, being Hardeen, must have made this village a bustling place. So the seventeen churches, they claimed to be, probably included churches, monasteries, seminaries, chapels, and shrines. I think most of these buildings are now in ruins. My mother told me there were ruins of a Kasser (Castle). I've often wondered if it was the ruins of a monastery or crusader castle, but I have since found out that it is a temple of Jupiter built by the Romans at approximately the same period as the one in Baalbeck. I have been told by some elders that hardeen had as many as one-thousand homes in the period before WWI.

Also, since I have explained that I read on a second grade level, I would welcome any one who could locate a copy of this book ("Tareekh diaah Lebnan") to verify or correct anything I have written.

A day or two after he gave it to me, and before I had a chance to read it thoroughly, Tony Zater asked me to return the book. It seems he had promised it to a friend of his in Pittsburgh, (John Khoury). I never saw that book again. I have inquired about a copy of it, ever since, from anyone and everyone whom I suspected might have old books. Until this time, (1988), I have had no luck.

I explained earlier that Issah was the originator of our family, known as "Beit Issah". As the family extended and the relatives became more numerous, these families came under the umbrella of "Beit el Biadyeh". In English terms, it would be the Biadyeh Clan. This means that everyone in Hardeen, or whom had left Hardeen, belongs to either Beit el Biadyeh, Beit Nader, Beit el Khoury or Beit Dagheer. So no matter what your name might be, if your bloodline comes from Hardeen, you are related to one of these families directly or through marriage.

Hardeen lies in the Northern Lebanon Mountains. There are more mountain villages in Northern Lebanon that are also not easily accessible. These formidable mountains in Shmaelley Lebanon (Northern Lebanon), are called Lebnan el Zagheerey, (Little Lebanon).

The inaccessibility of these rugged mountains proved to be a safe haven for the villagers, from the marauding armies throughout the ages. It has also isolated them from the rest of the world. They received very little correspondence, or none at all. This caused them to be behind the times and a little backward, if you will. They had no machinery so they accomplished their work the same as it was done a thousand years previously. Everything was done by hand and their life was planned to coincide with the seasons.

The spring of the year was the time for “falleha”, (plowing and tilling). Then came the time for “Zaraah” (planting). Harvest time was the “Hasseeday”. During this time to make sure the crops would be gathered in time, the village operated much like a co-op. They had fruit trees, and the most important of these were the olive and the grape. They would cure some olives for the winter and pressed the remainder into oil. They used the oil for cooking and as fuel for their lamps. The grape was pressed for wine. The remainder was made into raisin or molasses called dibbiss. The grape mash was cooked and distilled into arac. Due to shortage of pastureland they kept only one cow for fresh milk and naturally “Leban” (Yogurt). Goats and sheep were more natural for mountain pastures, and goat milk made good cheese. The sheep were for meat products. One thing they made was oahrma a sausage type product made by rendering and combining some suet with some chopped lamb. This was cooked and prepared with seasonings and stored in clay crocks for the winter. There was also one room set aside for raising silk worms during the winter. The silk worms were fed mulberry leaves that fell from the trees in early fall. One room was set aside for a storeroom called a “mekhzaney”. My mother described this room as having cabinets, drawers and bins along all the walls. She called it Khazaney.

This tells us these people were very industrious and, for the most part, self contained but isolated. They were not expansionists, but isolationists. This was the key to their survival. The marauding armies below the mountains recognized that and left them to their own wiles. Besides, all the food supplies were in the Bekaah Valley and in the seaports. So for the most part, they lived as they always did. They elected their own Mayor (Shikk el dieaa), sherrif (shikk el Sulehh), and the church guided their spiritual life. Education in Hardeen was limited and mainly for boys. They lived this way, to a certain degree, from before Roman times and through the Ottoman conquest.

About the year 1860 someone started spreading the news that “the streets in America were paved in gold”, and “money flowed like water”. The joke is, that message was sent in a letter from Cortez to the King of Spain in 1520 A.D. The news arrived three hundred years too late in Hardeen! The exodus to America began with this news.

Now the families began scraping together enough money to send someone to America

who would in turn make them all rich. In order to buy passage aboard ship, you had to pay a bribe, barteel, for the privilege of purchasing a ticket. It seems they had hawkers in those days also. Hammocks were strung in the hold of the ship for steerage passengers. Toilet facilities were practically nil and a small area of the deck was roped off for their use. Mamma brought bread olives and cheese to eat on her journey. After a week they stopped in Istanbul where they were allowed to disembark and replenish their supplies. At this time they also bought fresh meat to eat. Here she enjoyed one of the public baths. Every time she spoke of her journey to America, she would always mention this bathhouse in Istanbul. It must have been most refreshing to her. The ship stopped in Naples, Rome and Marseilles. It took the better part of a month to reach Ellis Island.

Ellis Island was very crowded. Inside aisles had been roped off for the immigrants to follow. They couldn't speak English, so they were pushed and prodded along by attendants. Also doctors examined their eyes, poked their ribs, probed their ears and so on. Their hair was dusted with DDT and their collars and bosoms. These ladies that wore ankle length skirts to cover their purity were having their skirts raised by strangers who at the same time dusted their bottom, front and back. There was much shouting and screaming in tongues, for they did not understand each other. My mother saw a few who did not pass the physical test, sitting dejectedly, waiting to be returned. Their dream was shattered. Some of the rejected tried South America instead.

There were a few people who came to America earlier who could speak a little English. They made arrangements for the accommodation of the new arrivals. They acted, in part, like an agent. They would locate the building and room of the relatives or people from your village. There you would share this room until arrangements were made for your final destination. There were no beds. You slept on your blanket or pallet. My mother said there were eight to ten people sleeping on the floor. Most of the people were gone during the day tending to their arrangements. She said an egg cost one cent.

When the proper arrangements were made, my mother went by train to Pittsburgh Penn., where she stayed with her sister Warrid and her husband Antonius (Tony) Michael (Romanos)

My mother is ninety-seven in this year of 1988. She is being given much of the same medicine she prescribed for us in our lifetime - Plenty of T.L.C. (Tender Loving Care).

Anthony Joseph Issah Esper