



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL  
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (PT) Patricia A. Thomas

Accession Numbers:

PT-01-2 -FN

PT-01-2 -C

PT-01-2 -CN

- - -M

Fieldnotes

Audio recordings

Photographic documentation

Additional materials

Initial Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Date: 3/11/2001

Related Accession Numbers: PT-01-2 . - - . - -

Individual/Group/Event: Anthony H. Thomas

Address: [REDACTED]

City: New Bedford

Zip: 02740

County: Bristol

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED]

Evening: same

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

Website: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact person: Anthony H. Thomas

Title: Singer / The Arabian Nights

Location of Interview: The Thomas home

Street Address: [REDACTED]

City: New Bedford

Zip: 02740

County: Bristol

Special Needs (including translation):

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community):

Traditions noted for follow-up: Arabic Musical and Poetic structures and forms

Other Possible Contacts:

Summary Description: Interview about early music education and performance career

FIELDNOTES from Patricia A. Thomas  
MCC Field Work Accession# : PT-01-2. PT-01-3  
( PT-01-2-C, PT-01-2-CN; PT-01-3-C, PT-01-3-CN )  
March 11 & 22, 2001

**Subject: Anthony H. Thomas and The Arabian Nights, Lebanese Band**

Anthony H. Thomas is a 75 year-old retired grocer, who was a popular entertainer within the Lebanese communities of Massachusetts. Tommy, as his friends and acquaintances call him, was born and raised in New Bedford by Lebanese- born parents who immigrated to the U. S. from Lebanon near the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - around 1910). Arabic was spoken at home. In fact, in the 70 years that Raheel, Tommy's mother, lived in New Bedford, she did not learn English. There was no need, living amidst the Lebanese community as she did. Tommy and his siblings were born at home and delivered by the midwife who serviced the Lebanese community at the time. Of course, she, too, was Lebanese.

As a young boy, Tommy helped his father, Hanna, tend their vegetable garden in back of the three-family - tenement- house that they and many other family members lived in. Hanna sang songs in Arabic while tending the garden and it was there (and at his mother's knee) that Tommy first heard the folk songs of Lebanon. Hi father sang to pass the time and to think again of the country he had left behind. In teaching the songs to Tommy, who loved to sing and to imitate his mother and father, Hanna was able to instill a love and devotion in Tommy to a country he had never seen. The songs themselves spoke of nature, traditional life, and the physical beauty of the country of Lebanon. Ehmej, the small village in Northern Lebanon where most of New Bedford's Lebanese population originated, is known for its music makers and poets, two traditions which Hanna passed on to his children by singing in his vegetable garden.

Tommy continued to develop his interest in Lebanese music and singing. Raised Maronite Catholic, he had ample opportunity to sing on Sundays at Mass - there is much music in the Maronite Liturgy, sung by a choir, cantor and other soloists, but Tommy preferred the vitality of the popular songs and folk songs. He listened to recordings of Lebanese popular singing artists, including Wadih il Safeeh, Watta il Atrash, Hannan and later, Fairuz. He also listened to the great Egyptian singer, 'Oum Koulthoum. Accompanied by his cousins, Tommy began recreating the music he was listening to. He would sing and play the "daff" or tambourine, his cousin - Tommy G. Thomas, accompanied on the 'oud, and Eddie Coury played "derebake", or hand drum. As teenagers of 14, 15 and 16, they were often asked to play songs for dancing at Lebanese parties and social gatherings. Their skills and repertoire, along with their reputation as

performers grew. After travelling to Old Orchard Beach Maine to play for a 3-day wedding celebration, the teen-agers decided to formalize their "hobby". They named their band The Arabian Nights.

At 18 years of age, Tommy's singing career was interrupted by WWII, and he and many other New Bedford young men walked to the train station, not to return for years or forever.

Four years later, The Arabian Nights reunited and played again and in earnest. They were quite busy with "gigs". All of the members - the group had grown to include violin played by Teddy Razouk; another 'oud, played by Charlie Hallal; and sometimes featured a female vocalist, as well - had day jobs. Tommy, worked in a factory, but soon opened his own business, Thomas' Market, a grocery store located in the heart of New Bedford, which sold meats, groceries, as well as Shyrrian - Lebanese import food items and prepared Lebanese foods. Tommy, the 'oud player was an accountant for a New Bedford corporation and Eddie Coury was beginning life in New Bedford politics. (He went on to a career in state politics, as Massachusetts state Representative of New Bedford.) The different day jobs aside, the three Arabian Nights band members were musicians and entertainers when they assembled to play. They were busy playing weddings, church functions, parties and bookings at local and regional restaurants, night clubs. For many years during the '60's, they played at the Wonder Bowl on Wednesday nights, a New Bedford landmark bowling alley that is still in operation today.

Though Tommy Thomas had never traveled to Lebanon, he was a loyal Lebanese, carrying on the language and music tradition, and providing food for the Lebanese community through his grocery store. Tommy learned, in addition to the popular songs of Lebanese recording artists, other Arabic vocal styles, including 'Attaba, the improvisational setting of poetry to intoned singing, accompanied by the 'oud. This style of song is usually presented in classical Arabid. He excelled at other improvisational techniques of setting poetry to music, sometimes working with another vocalist, each trying to outdo the other in the beauty of the imagery (poetry) and the rhyme.

Though officially retired, the surviving Arabian nights, Eddie Coury (who as of this writing has just undergone quadruple bypass heart surgery), Anthony (Tommy) H. Thomas, and Matthew Thomas, son of Anthony G. Thomas, the Arabian Nights' original 'oud player, still perform informally on occasion. Though there may be hired musicians, someone eventually calls for Tommy and the Arabian Nights to sing and play their all-time hits, songs that talk of Lebanon, the country their parents left behind and always intended to return to to live, and of better days. Tommy H. still throws the tambourine - in its velvet travelling bag embroidered by his wife Margaret- along with his notebook of lyrics in the phonetic transliterations, into the back of the car. Eddie still packs his

derebake, and Matthew always carries along his 'oud, just in case someone requests a song from the Arabian Nights.