

"R. E. Olds . . . Benefactor
to the Holy Lands "

by

Rajee Tobia

President

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Address delivered at the Reo Club House
during Michigan Week to the Historical
Society of Greater Lansing, May 19, 1965.

June 15, 1966

R: Dec. 3-2014

Scanned by
Timothy Bowman
NOV. 27, 2015

Copyright, 1965

Good Evening!

Our subject tonight is "R.E. Olds, Benefactor to the Holy Lands". Both have a unique significance in the Automotive history of Lansing and of the human race.

The Holy Land is the birth place of three world religions. It is a land of Conquests - Victories - Defeats - Towers - Castles - Temples - Cathedrals - Mosques . . . and ruins.

THE COMING OF THE AMERICAN MISSIONARIES

American Missionaries went to this land in 1818 led by Levi Parson - Pliny Fisk and Jonas King. They went to build schools - churches - hospitals and orphanages.

After 1865 came the founding of the American University of Beirut . . . later Robert College of Constantinople . . . also Gerard Institute at Sidon, and two others . . . at Tripoli and Souk-Al Gharb. Later came the American College at Aleppo - and the American Colony, the Childrens Home and the YMCA - all of Jerusalem.

Also during this period the Bible was first translated into Arabic by the very able scholar, Cornelius Van Dyke, assisted by a group of outstanding native scholars among them prominent Naseef Yazigy and Butrus Bustani.

INVITATION TO IMMIGRATION

About 1885 invitations were extended by missionaries to people of the Holy Land to immigrate to the United States. These people readily answered the call. Simplicity and determination explored America.

After their arrival there were adventures - disappointments - tears and defeats - abundance beyond reach - a "promised land" but not for them. Most of them had to return home because of the cold and the language difficulties. The change was too difficult for most.

A STAR FROM THE WEST

. . . the Century turns and immigration also turns with it. A star from the West shines upon that part of the world called "Holy" . . . and a voice from beyond the seven seas calls . . . COME! . . . follow the star of genius.

"AR-REO" . . . THE AUTOMOBILE

In 1905 the magic word in the Holy Land was AR-REO! . . . the Automobile . . . Lansing, Michigan . . . AR-REO!

"Have you heard of him? . . . the genius of the age - who invented the HANTOUR that runs on hidden fire with snakes wrapped around its wheels to roll forward - backward - sideways - up hill - down hill . . . and they say that in the future it may even fly! "

Such good miraculous tidings the "Shining Star from the West" spread over the Holy Land . . . the story of the AUTOMOBILE !

Immigrants came by the hundreds to Lansing to help build the "wonder buggy". This was a new type of immigration - it was security. They found themselves useful and took pride in their work. Unlike their earlier brothers and neighbors they did not have to go around peddling door to door to sell trinkets and souvenirs from the Holy Land that were made in New York. They had strong arms - and they used them! They had good old natural intelligence . . . put to work through training given them by management on orders from the "head man" - their Benefactor - now known as Mr. Olds to some and still "AR-REO" to new-comers.

Impressive stories were sent back to the Holy Land by letter. Some immigrants returned to improve their native homes . . . and to again return to Lansing. They told how this kind, faithful and great man had loved them . . . how he visited with them at lunchtime and at social affairs of the "Reo Family". These social affairs were held in this very Club House.

Proudly they repeated the questions he asked about Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth. One immigrant who was quite a traveler and knew all these Holy Cities . . . and who had learned fairly good English . . . was given the honorable title "REO JOE". His picture - along with a story of his life and the family he had left behind - appeared in the Company magazine, "Reo Spirit", February 1916. That proud man was my father.

There were other names at Reo Motors that became familiar in the Holy Land besides the kind Prophet R.E. Olds . . . such as Scott - Teel - Rath - Wilson - White - Griffith and Thomas. People spoke of these men as next door neighbors.

The Golden Era of 1905 to 1915 brought prosperity, self respect and the promotion of education to families back in the Holy Land. Education, in my humble opinion, was the most useful of all.

The beginning of World War One saw well over 200 Holy Landers on the Reo Pay Roll . . . originating from towns that spread from Jerusalem suburbs on the South to the city of Aleppo on the distant north, and from Damascus past the Plateau of Auranitis on the east over through Libanus down Berytus and the stretched limits of the great waters on the west. To these towns mail carriers delivered - every week - hundreds of regular and registered letters. The registered letters, of course, contained money - or in the Holy Land called "Boulisa".

To increase aid further to their families, many letters were written on Reo letterheads and sent in Reo envelopes - given to them by Mr. Olds. Families in the Holy Land marveled at the picture of the Reo factory in the upper left corner of the stationery . . . with smoke coming out of the chimneys. "See" they said, "everything in America runs on fire"!

In the Holy Land there was peeling of bells, burning of Frank's incense and chanting of Hymns. Prayers were offered to the Almighty asking that HE lend a helping hand to their Benefactor, Mr. Olds, and to all those associated with him. Prayers were offered for success and good health . . . and a happy reunion with loved ones under the skies of the Free Land - the land of miraculous wonders and strange surprises. A land where the mosquito turns into an elephant and the buffalo vanishes like a butterfly. To the land of NEW Prophets and NEW messengers. To the NEW Holy Land!

6

ERUPTION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

1910 - 1914

Efforts toward family reunion actually came into being with the help of Mr. Olds and Reo Management. Before results became fully fruitful the First World War erupted in Europe . . . touching most of the world.

This dimmed all hope of reunion and brought communications between the men at Reo and their families in the Holy Land to an end.

In October, 1915 a cousin of my father, Reverend Joseph Tobia - a priest of his villiage in the Holy Land - wrote a letter to him saying . . .

"Our exalted Government joined the War on the side of the Central Powers - "Victory to the Sultan" - abbreviation is necessary while we are busy with the war effort." (This meant Censorship, of course) "We shall continue our daily prayers for you - for Mr. Reo - his family - his factory - and all those associated with him industrially or commercially."

No other letters followed this one. The heavy curtain of the war fell - and darkness covered the earth for over four years. During this time people of the Holy Land experienced deep suffering and the worst of oppression . . while in America their young ones joined the colors and the older labored on the home front under the guidance of their Benefactor and his able men.

A NEW DAWN

After the war mass family reunions took place. I can best describe the feelings that prevailed at those happy occasions by quoting from the memoirs of Mrs. A.N. Coury of Lansing.

Her father, Alex Solomon, was then a Reo employee. Her husband is now with Fisher Body.

Mrs. Coury wrote:

"I was a shy little girl approaching ten when my mother and I arrived from the Holy Land in September of 1920. We were met at the train station in Jackson, Michigan by two strange men, who came to drive us to our destination . . . Lansing. As they came in an Oldsmobile coupe, I had to sit on one stranger's lap . . . my first introduction to my father". Here in Lansing began a permanent settlement . . . orientation and progressive growth.

8

R.E. OLDS VISITS THE HOLY LAND

In 1922 Mr. and Mrs. R.E. Olds visited the Holy Land. This visit - with pictures - is recorded in his life story "Auto Pioneering" . . . copies of which are available if you care to buy one from our Society this evening.

Their special visit to Constantinople . . . and their humane acts toward refugees, is very well presented . . . as well as documents of appreciation received from that city. These documents are on display here tonight for the first time through the courtesy of Mrs. Gladys Olds Anderson, daughter of R.E. Olds.

The appointment of Mr. Olds to the Sacred Office of a "Knight of the Holy Sepulcher" is an outstanding and an ever-lasting testimony to the Benevolence of this "Shining Star from the West" who brought a new spark of faith, hope and charity from the new young sacred land to the ancient Holy one. Her people, for generations to come, will remember what is recorded in their modern history of Mr. "REO" of Lansing, Michigan . . . United States of America.

A VISIT TO WHITE MOTOR CO. (REO)

Last December 28th, I took my first tour of White Motors (formerly Reo). With me was my kind friend, Mr. Ford Ceasar . . . Chairman of tonight's Michigan Week Program. Our tour guide of the entire plant was able and courteous Mr. Barry Christie of the Public Relations Department.

No attempt of mine can fully describe my feeling. All I can say is . . . on that day I had a glimpse of eternity! Mr. Christie was kind enough to loan me six volumes of "Reo Spirit" . . . 1916 through 1922 plus the premier number, December 1915. Until last week I lived with the touching contents of these volumes that speak vividly of the past. Incidentally, these volumes were once the personal property of Cy Rath, who was mentioned earlier . . . now living at Stanton, Michigan with his daughter. Perhaps through some heavenly power . . . Cy Rath can know of my gratitude.

On this historical evening I wish to convey my thanks to him and to add that over fifty of the hundred or more men from the Holy Land that he listed in the Reo Citizenship class in the June 1917 number of "Reo Spirit" became - with their wives - naturalized American citizens and twenty to twenty-five years later . . . through a special citizenship class offered by the Peoples University and later by the Board of Education . . . taught voluntarily by the son of "Reo Joe".

When I toured the Oldsmobile Main Plant during the Christmas Holiday Week with Ford Ceasar and his family . . . and with my daughter Rajia - this visit had a taste of the old and the new. This tour was arranged through the courtesy of George Egbert, Editor of the Oldsmobile "TEAM" magazine and Doyle Fitzpatrick, Supervisor of the Art Department.

Perhaps the author of "Alice in Wonderland" could best describe the industrial wonders and the mechanical achievements of this age. As for me, I have a wish that was born in me during our impressive tours . . . that the area of Reo Motors on the east side of Grand River becomes - some day - an industrial shrine and may Oldsmobile continue "Rocketing toward the Stars"! . . . and may the legacy of Ransom E. Olds at all times be preserved and held in sacred trust by the citizens of this City and State.

This would be a glorious heritage for Lansing . . . one to be proud of for posterity in the eyes of the whole world . . . and for which we gratefully praise God now and forever.

Thank You