

# 103

## Year-Old

### RETIREE RECALLS

# OLD PLACES

# AND FACES

*By Arthur Clark*



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*he shook hands with Sa'ud ibn Abdulaziz when he was crown prince and again when he was king, watched pearl divers pull treasures from the Gulf and has a "favorite memory" of walking through al-Khobar's sandy streets on Fridays off from work in Dhahran.*

Now 103-year-old retiree Johnnie Merritt is aiming to remake company connections at the Annuitants Reunion in Austin, Texas, in September—and perhaps at the Expatriates Reunion in Saudi Arabia next year.

Merritt, who worked in Dhahran from 1948-70, read about the reunions in the last issue of *Al-Ayyam Al-Jamilah*. “Her first comment was, ‘Do you think there might be any way to attend?’” said Judy Herman, a friend who put her in touch with the magazine.

A filmed interview followed at Merritt’s retirement facility in San Antonio.

That redoubled her interest in reconnecting with people from the place she had landed seven decades ago.

Merritt and her husband, Jim, a retired Aramco pilot, met Judy and her spouse, Bill, at a campground in California on New Year’s Eve 1997. Despite the generation-wide gap in their ages, they kept in touch over the years—especially after the Merritts moved to San Antonio,

*Top: At her interview in San Antonio, Texas, in January, Johnnie Merritt wore a brooch made with a pearl she purchased while working in Government Relations. Right: She joined Aramco in 1948.*



TOP: ARTHUR CLARK



Hailing from Oklahoma City, Merritt “always wanted to see the world,” a dream she made come true as an Aramco employee.

“Men wanted for Saudi Arabia,” she recalled. “I said to myself, ‘Hmm, I always wanted to see the world.’ It said ‘Men,’ but I thought, ‘Surely they’re going to be taking in women.’”

So she hopped in her car and drove to Tulsa for an interview. When she finally

found the Aramco recruiters, they hired her. “Within a short period, something over a month, I had to report to New York and then to Saudi Arabia on a charter flight,” she said.

Her family was taken aback by her decision. “They couldn’t believe I was going,” she said. “They never expressed their opinion, but I could tell they were scared.”

Merritt said she’d “always been a dreamer of travel and read a lot of books instead of doing other things when I was young. I always wanted to see the world to know what it’s like on the other side... and it’s been a wonderful trip.”

Even her first flight to the kingdom was exceptional: She was the only woman on a plane with around 60 construction workers. “I was treated very nicely!” she said.

When she finally landed in Dhahran, no one was there to welcome a new female employee. “Since my name was Johnnie, Personnel in Dhahran wouldn’t believe that a woman was coming in on that flight, which arrived at midnight,” she said.

Fortunately, another Oklahoma City girl who was already working in Dhahran was able to help her. Merritt spent the first night in her new friend’s quarters before moving into a five-woman residence, later graduating to an efficiency apartment.

“There was always quite a turnover in the occupants of company quarters,” she

found. “Women were either going home or out to the districts to be employed.” Merritt spent her entire career in Dhahran, however, something she does not regret.

“We could make our own meals in our accommodations,” she said, adding that she usually “went to the Dining Hall, with only an occasional special meal when we were inviting someone into our dorms or apartments. I did too much overtime to stay in the kitchen.

“The Dining Hall food was delicious” and in the early days free, making the “long walk” there after work worthwhile.

Early in her career, employees only got Friday off. When Merritt had the chance, she enjoyed “shooing” with fellow employees in the desert.

“We’d find some friends who, luckily, could get a little old car and we’d go prowling in the desert to find pottery shards. I loved the freedom of all those open spaces. You kept your eyes on the ground to see what interesting things you could find—the remnants of other people who lived there.”

Photos of Dhahran, past and present, stirred many memories during Merritt’s interview with *Al-Ayyam Al-Jamilah*.



a four-and-a-half-hour drive north of the Hermans’ home in McAllen.

Jim Merritt, who flew for the company from 1955-70, died in 2015, and the Hermans and Johnnie Merritt have become even closer friends since then.

“Johnnie mentioned that she recognized individuals in the photo that accompanied the article about the Expatriates Reunion,” said Judy. One was Ali Baluchi, who joined Aramco in 1949 and retired as general manager of Community Services in 1990.

“He was a little office boy, carrying papers and things around and running errands [when I knew him],” said Merritt, who worked first in the steno pool, then moved to Engineering, Personnel and Government Relations.

She also remembered Ali Al-Naimi, who was an office boy around the same time as Baluchi, rose to the positions of president and CEO, and became minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources.

“I had less contact with him because he had his nose to the grindstone all the time when you went by his desk, it seemed,” she said. “I didn’t talk to him much.”

Merritt was 33-year-old widow with experience as a teacher and in the newspaper business when she joined Aramco as Johnnie Rusher.

“I was reading the paper one Sunday in Oklahoma City and just by chance I looked at the want ads and one said,



The camels have it: Merritt (right) and her colleague, Lillian Robertson, visited the Pyramids by camel in 1958; and this 1960 Dhahran Airfield "officer's mess" card, with a camel logo, brings back fond memories.



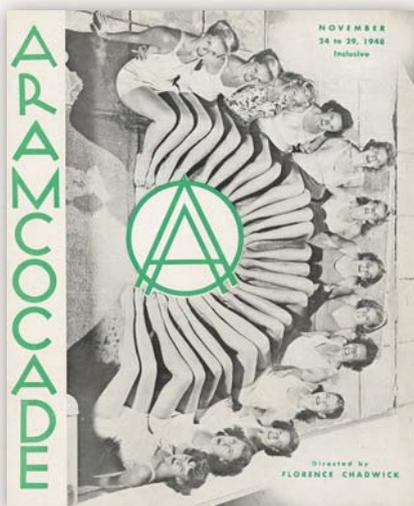
She also participated in the women's synchronized swimming team coached by fellow employee Florence Chadwick, who became the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions—from England to France in 1950 and from France to England in 1951.

Chadwick was "all business" in the pool, said Merritt, but the results—exhibited to the public at the Aramcocode—were worth the hard work.

Merritt first served as secretary to the head of the Engineering Dept. When she moved to Personnel, she worked for Walter Reese. In Government Relations, her boss was John R. Jones.

One of her assignments in Personnel was to greet new employees at the airport. That was a company "first," she said.

Merritt joined the synchronized swimming team in Dhahran. She is fourth from left, top, on the 1948 Aramcocode cover.



Only men had done that job before.

She helped new arrivals clear Customs and introduced them to their departments. "Meeting the people and getting out of the compound into the community" were the best parts of the job, she said. "You felt like you were part of the community when you went down there. [It gave me] a closer love of the country."

Part of that love was kindled when she met Crown Prince Sa'ud in the Dhahran Theater in the late 1940s. She met him on another occasion in the Dining Hall when he hosted women who had earlier invited him for tea. "That was the time he took me by the hand with both of his hands, held mine and shook hands," she remembered with a smile. "It was a very warm greeting."

"When he came to the compound it was always very interesting to observe the routines...and to look at the falcons sitting on the lawn at the guest house with their trainers," she said.

After Sa'ud became king, Merritt went with a group of executives' wives accompanying their husbands to Riyadh in "one of the first groups of women ever invited to the palace," she said. "We all put on our long sleeves and longest dresses we had."

She particularly enjoyed taking a company bus to al-Khobar and riding the train from the station near Dhahran's old main gate "all the way to the end" of the tracks in Dammam in the early 1950s to fish from the Dammam Pier.

"Al-Khobar was our favorite place," she said. "It was the only place to shop, but I did more walking around and look-

ing and investigating things than I did buying things."

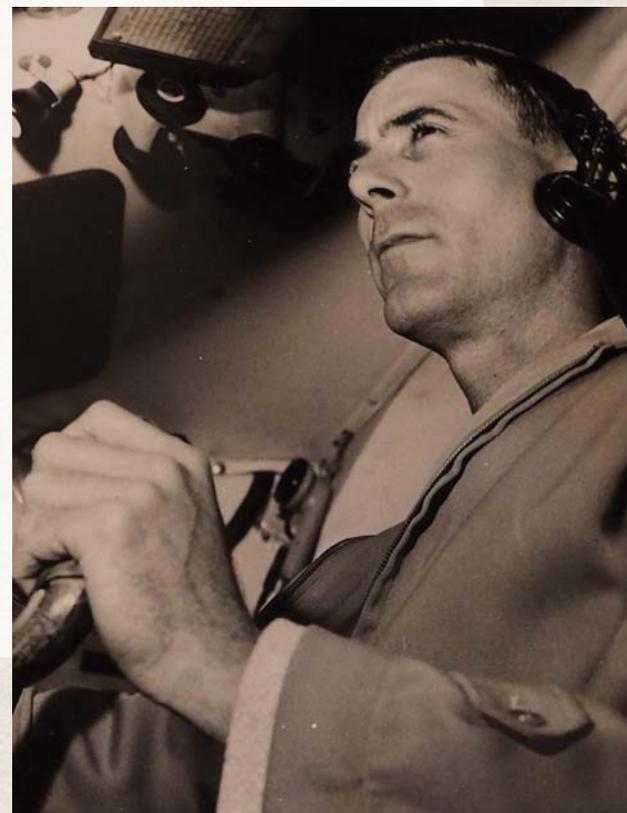
Among her favorite memories of al-Khobar are "walking through the sand streets...having to pull my feet out of the sand to make the next step. I can still see the little merchant sitting in his little kiosk with a shutter that pulled down to close his shop when he went home at night.

"I also loved being able to walk along the al-Khobar beach and the lovely Gulf waterfront, to walk in the sand and dip my finger in the water. We'd take a sandwich and have lunch sometimes out there.

"We would also go in groups down to Aziziyah Beach and to Half Moon Bay for recreation—walking through the dunes, getting in the water with the boats and trying out the Gulf."

Sometimes the Gulf came to Merritt.

Jim Merritt flew Beaver, DC-3 and F-27 aircraft during his 15-year Aramco career. Opposite: The Merritts delighted in meeting old friends at the Annuitants Reunion in Coronado, Calif., in 1972.



When she spoke to *Al-Ayyam Al-Jamilah* in January, she wore the fruit of such a rendezvous on her lapel: a pearl she had purchased in Dhahran from a merchant named Khalifa. A jeweler in Amsterdam later mounted it as the “blossom” nestled in white-gold leaves sparkling with tiny diamonds.

“Pearl merchants came through our offices in Government Relations, sat by my desk, watched me type and asked me a question once in a while,” she said. “They made themselves comfortable because they loved my boss and therefore were always nice to me.

“After a bit, they would pull out a pack of pearls and just lay them out. I liked the shape of this one.”

Arab “storytellers” also spent time in the offices. They came from different parts of Saudi Arabia, “verbally giving directions, names and helping to identify places in areas of the country” to assist in mapmaking, she said. “They always fascinated me.”

Merritt’s connection to the kingdom went deeper than meeting pearl merchants or storytellers. She recalled a trip aboard a dhow where she and her companions sat on the deck “watching divers holding onto a rope go down to the bottom of the Gulf and pick up shells in a bucket and bring them in. Then we would look at them separate the pearls from the shells.”

Merritt’s jewelry told other tales, too. On her left hand she wore a large, beautifully cut Qaisumah diamond she’d found on a trip to the town north of Dhahran at the head of the Trans-Arabian Pipeline.

There, on a little hill covered with pieces of quartz crystals, “you’d just see sparkles, sparkles, like diamonds,” she recalled.

On her right hand she wore a smaller ring inscribed with “Johnnie” in Arabic, acquired on her first trip outside the kingdom in 1949. That’s when she took a ferry to Basra, at the head of the Gulf, and met a little boy who put her name on the ring.

“He was sitting by himself when the ferry landed and he didn’t know a word of English,” she said. They still managed to communicate, but she almost missed the return trip when, just as the lad was finishing his work, the ferry captain started furiously tooting his horn to depart.

She also has a deep affection for Egypt. She traveled there with a secretary named Lillian Robertson in 1958, as captured in a picture of the pair on camels in front of the Pyramids.

When they arrived around midnight at the Mena House, next to the Pyramids, “I said, ‘Before we go to bed we’d better pull these drapes and see what’s there.’ We opened them and there was the Sphinx!”

Cairo is especially close to Merritt’s heart, perhaps because an Aramco employee there escorted her and Robertson on that trip. “He traveled with us and showed us all the different things, even a nightclub, which we thoroughly enjoyed,” she remembers.

Going to the Dhahran Airport one day in April 1955 to meet a planeload of new arrivals turned into something close to her heart, too. One new employee was Jim Merritt, fresh out of the Marine Corps. He had been in the last flight of U.S. fighter-bombers to cross the demilitarized zone between the two Koreas just before the armistice in 1953.

Though she won’t be drawn on the question of whether it was “love at first sight,” it’s obvious that the pilot impressed her. After he’d finished his orientation they stayed in touch and became good friends through social channels at Aramco.

“We made our own activities in the company,” Merritt said. “We had lots of get-togethers in our little apartments, inviting in newcomers.” She and the pilot shared a love of the desert and outings there gave them some “personal time.”

Upon their retirement in June 1970, they traveled to Bahrain and got married. Then, as luck would have it, a plane “came along and the pilot had kicked his



Johnnie Merritt celebrated her 103rd birthday—her first birthday party ever—with 135 guests in San Antonio on Aug. 22, 2017.

help out of the jump seat, [so he] put us into his plane and flew us to Shiraz, the City of Roses” she said.

That was a very pretty part of a travel trajectory that took her around the world eight times and to 64 countries, she reckoned.

Merritt never got to the Sahara Desert, as she’d planned, so did not have the chance to see the sands that would have reminded her of Saudi Arabia. But she and her husband did attend the 1972 Annuitants Reunion in Coronado, Calif., hosted by Warren and Myrle Hodges, which brought back pleasant memories.

“We had a chance to see people we’d known and reminisce,” she said.

If it is not possible to do that again in Dhahran next March, when she will be 104, then she has already penciled in a couple of days at the Annuitants Reunion in Austin this September.

That will likely spark memories of the “marvelous experience” she had in the kingdom and reinforce “a beautiful feeling about the whole number of years I spent there,” she said.

“I often think about the whole story [of my time at Aramco] and it feels like a dream...about people getting along,” she added, pointing to the deep Saudi-American connections forged in the kingdom. “I wish that would continue because together we have done a wonderful thing for the whole world by producing this bonanza of oil that Saudi Arabia has. I hope we can always be friends.”

TOP: JUDY HERMAN

