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“We were never weak in the old days”:
*Gender and Pearling in the Southern Gulf Emirates, 1870-1950*

Dr. Victoria Penziner Hightower
North Georgia College and State University, USA

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Mr. Julian Walker
Ex Political Agent and Counselor in the British Embassy, Dubai

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**My Discovery of the Gulf in 1964**

Mr. Alain St. Hilaire
Producer and Photographer
The pearl industry in the southern Gulf emirates typically focuses on men and the practices of pearling. It reduces all discussions of social life to the trials and tribulations of men at sea. While pearling was difficult, pearl workers cooperated in a homosocial environment that offered some avenues for support and advancement. However, men’s participation in pearling would never have been possible without women’s work. Women rarely participated in the pearl trade directly, but were responsible for the family’s survival during the months the pearl workers were at sea. Women’s production in the oases, their oversight over the date harvest and the maintenance of social relationships with distant relatives afforded men the opportunity to go to sea for 3-4 months during the summer. Accessing this information, however, is very difficult because British documents rarely discussed social relations directly, particularly not in the southern Gulf. This article relies on published interviews and provides a first step to understanding the ways that the practice of pearling was gendered and how these practices changed in the 20th century.

Gendered expectations permeated the pearl industry both for those at sea, participating directly in the extraction of pearls, as well as for those on land, who ensured the nutritional survival of the family throughout the year. Yet, many sources rely on simple, idealized gendered stereotypes to explain this relationship. For men, lives are reduced to the details of their trips, the trials of diving, and the dangers they encountered. The camaraderie on the pearl boat and pearling’s importance as a rite of passage is mentioned but rarely examined. At the same time women are constructed out of the narrative entirely, except as they bade farewell to or welcomed home the men. The pearl industry relied upon the work women did in the oases during the summer, harvesting dates and maintaining social relations, as much as it did among men’s produce at sea. The pearl industry was based on a gendered division of labor that emphasized men’s productive capacity as the primary extractors of pearls and producers of wealth. Though this has been discussed with regard to emirates in the northern Gulf, in Qatar, Bahrain, or Kuwait, it is largely unexplored in the context of the southern Gulf emirates. By recognizing these otherwise ignored aspects, the pearl industry provides an opportunity to discuss the complementary and interdependent
nature of gendered relations along the southern Arabian Gulf, while also illustrating the changes that swept through the emirates during the middle of the 20th century.

Pearling did not arise out of a static society or one that was unflinchingly rigid in its social roles, yet many books either ignore the gendered aspects of pearling altogether or fail to give analysis of the social impacts of pearling. Since the 1950s, books and articles written about pearling in the southern Gulf emirates simply narrate the history cobbled together British reports on the economic history of the pearl trade with vague explanations of pearling practices, but few move the field beyond this vagueness or analyze the social roles produced on a pearl boat. The older books provide context for the industry’s changes during the years of decline at mid-century but rarely extend their analysis beyond 1940, in spite of the continuation of pearling until the 1960s for those in the southern Gulf emirates. A second source of information is published interviews in Arabic with former divers or merchants. Unfortunately, books published in Arabic rarely offer any analysis and present their information as timeless truth, when, in fact, the narrative they tell reflects only the last great pearl boom, 1875-1930, and only the stories of men they have known or interviewed. Many focus on the mechanics of the trade and liberally draw upon British documents to historically situate their explanations, without offering much in the way of local knowledge, or they simply detail a single trip and declare it to be the norm.

The difficulty of investigating the gendered impact of pearling in the southern Gulf emirates is that there are few ruzmeh, or navigation guides, and few famous nukhada, boat captains, have published their memoirs publicly as Saif Marzooq al-Shamlan has in Kuwait. The British reports and documents on pearling focus on Bahrain and Kuwait, where the British had a greater presence and a closer relationship with the ruling families, and where the captain, diver, merchant families are willing to have published memoirs or granted researchers access to their materials. Though the methods of pearling varied little between Kuwait or Bahrain or Abu Dhabi, the social contexts in which men dove and traded pearls were more diverse. Life in Bahrain was fundamentally different from life in Abu Dhabi, Dubai, or Sharjah, and the southern Gulf ports contended with more geographic variety-the ability for women to migrate to the interior oases, at the very least.

In the southern Gulf emirates, gender roles in the past are imagined as unchanging-men hunted, fished, and pearled, while women cared for the home and hearth. The rigidity of this characterization makes any meaningful discussion of social relations between the genders difficult. These roles are often perceived as fixed until oil wealth, when the pace of change accelerated; in reality, these alterations began in the 1930s following the decline of pearling and accelerated at mid-century. By the 1950s, pearling ceased to be the primary source of wealth for those living along the coast, replaced by new opportunities in trade, smuggling, and migrant labor. Rupert Hay, a former British official in the southern Gulf noted that by 1959 “most of the diving class prefer steady employment with the oil companies to the hardships and risks
of their old profession and not more than a few hundred boats go out every year, and these mostly from the Trucial Coast where no oil company has yet gone into production.” For those who continued to dive, they did so out of tradition, out of a hope for wealth, or as a supplement to their existing income.7 Boats ceased to leave for the pearl banks in fleets and in at least one case, girls were permitted to accompany their immediate family pearling.10 Though the practices changed, the ruler of Abu Dhabi continued to collect the taraz tax from pearl boats until the 1960s, indicating that enough people still went pearling to warrant the collection of taxes from them.11

Men and Pearling

Pearl reports from the late 19th century provide a catalogue of jobs, the funding scheme for pearl boats, the techniques for extracting the resource, and the terrible conditions of pearl workers.12 These sources rarely discuss men’s lives on board the pearl boat except to emphasize their suffering and the dangers they encountered. This feeling of isolation, of the diver alone, or the boat alone at sea, reinforces the notion that the pearling season was a period of agony and anguish for men, who were forced to suffer alone, without companionship. In reality, pearling was a communal activity until the 1940s in the southern Gulf emirates and men on the pearl boats recreated communities, through the inclusion of family members on the boats, the moments of levity and socialization, and by remaining in contact with each other while on the banks. This paper offers a perspective on pearling that expands it from a static, two dimensional report of tools and practices.

Before the collapse of pearling in 1930, working on a pearl crew provided men with a pathway to manhood. This path is reinforced not only by the hierarchy and the idea that a person could work their way up to being a diver, with all of its accompanying opportunities, but also by the ways that boat captains are talked about.

Pearling was a hierarchical profession and the boat was multi-generational. It required young men to join boats as young as age seven and to work until they could no longer dive, see, or open shells. Further, the path to becoming a diver was laid out—young boys (radafa) apprenticed themselves to haulers (seeb), who worked with divers to haul them up from the sea floor. The presence of this hierarchy suggests that pearling helped move boys from their childhood to adulthood. Khamis Rashid Za’al al Rumaithi explains that it was easier for divers to be married because of their status and their higher earning potential.13 Mauzah al-Hamur even suggests that the hierarchy on the pearl boat translated onto land and that, in at least one instance, provided a space in which a daughter defied her father, arguing that she should be allowed to marry a pearl diver. She reasoned that while the diver’s career was difficult and dangerous, it was nobler, in her opinion, than being a Bedouin in the desert.14 Divers received the largest shares of the profits, after the boat owner and captain were paid. This helps explain why men would compete to become divers.15 Though this
story may be apocryphal, it suggests that divers were respected within society and thus a status for young men to aspire.

In addition to the workers on board the boat, those who dove, helped the divers, or opened the shells, there were other positions on a pearl boat that help to reinforce the sense of community on a pearl boat. The *tab bab* was a young boy, included on the boat to become socialized into the life of a pearl boat. *Tab bab* were generally seven years old and could remain classified as a *tab bab* until age 12. The young boy brought water or *Gadu*, water pipes, to the divers, but generally just played on board the boats. These young boys reminded the older men their reasons for diving, while also bringing levity to an otherwise difficult occupation.

Similarly, the role of the *nahham*, or singer is also double—the singer was the task-master, using song to maintain the pace while the men rowed or dove, but also provided entertainment in the evening with poems and songs to help the men forget about the cramped conditions and their aches and pains. Men pined to return to shore and often framed this desire in terms of wanting to be reunited with their wives and female family members. The desire to dive and to remain with their families was intertwined. The songs and poems of the *nahham* often revolved around life at sea and provided men with respite from their work. The songs are meant to help the men overcome their exhaustion, the long hours of work, the harshness of the sun and the heaviness of their hearts. In a poem by Khalfan al-Muhairi, the diver pleads with Um Anbar, a *jinn* (spirit) to protect him at sea, his beloved on shore, and to reunite them at the end of the season. These poems, while they revolve around suffering, function as a coping mechanism for the men on board the pearl boats with the realization that every man is experiencing this homesickness. These poems illustrate the centrality of absence to the development of manhood on the pearl boats.

Pearling provided a space for men to learn how to be men or how to support each other within a homosocial environment. Men cooperated to buy special foods, like tahini, rice, tea or sugar and shared these while on board. Boats often had between 10 and 30 men on them and boats were rarely big enough for the crew. Muhammad bin Khalifa bin Thani al Muhaire and Saif bin Ghanim al-Suweidi both recall sleeping on top of the shells they brought up earlier in the day for lack of room to sleep and store the shells. These sleeping arrangements forced men to negotiate and cooperate in ways that might not be necessary on land. However, it is not just workers that exhibit ideal masculinity, even discussions about the *nukhada*, boat captains, provide a glimpse into the social contract that pearling operated under. Boat captains (*nukhada*) are often described as despotic or good depending on how they treated their workers. These descriptions provide glimpses into the moral realm of masculinity. Good captains were compassionate and inspired men's loyalty and faith; they were not despots who drive their men mercilessly without breaks. A bad captain was a torturous person who beat men to keep them diving in spite of hunger, dehydration, sickness and disease.
Pearling reinforced the idea that all men should strive to be loyal and work hard in order to earn respect and these apply more broadly and illustrate what it means to become a man. Men should be fair and provide for their dependents. They should be willing to work to acquire the knowledge necessary to do their job well.\textsuperscript{28} However, pearling was not about learning how to cope independently with long absences from home, it was about learning how to do it communally.

Beyond the community on board the boats, boats rarely went out alone to the banks. Fleets of ships departed from the ports and were generally led by a \textit{Sirdal al-Ghaus}, leader of the dive. There could be many Sirdals on the banks and these men were recognized as the most knowledgeable navigators and capable captains in the area.\textsuperscript{29} Travelling in fleets meant that men could come together at night to socialize or to congratulate one another if someone found an especially valuable pearl.\textsuperscript{30} This helped limit the feelings of isolation.

Maintaining contact on the beds helped men feel less isolated on the pearl banks, but it also provided a measure of protection from pirates, who wanted to steal pearls rather than dive for them, and from debt collectors who used the cover of the pearl trade to recover outstanding debts.\textsuperscript{31} The latter practice suggests that it was possible to find a single man in a single boat on the pearl beds. Though the most lucrative beds were clustered together, between Qatar and Abu Dhabi Island, this was still a feat and it indicates that there was some communication between boats and that the practice of maintaining contact on the beds was successful. By the 1950s, however, the pearl industry changed. Pearls ceased to be a lucrative commodity; therefore there was little need of communal protection on the banks. By 1949, Dubai ceased to send a fleet.\textsuperscript{32}

This change occurred following the 1929 global economic collapse and although people continued to pearl in the southern Gulf into the 1960s, the profits were never the same. Saif Ahmed al Ghurair recalled that in the 1930s, he paid 7,000 rupees for a pearl that two generations earlier would have sold for 100,000 rupees.\textsuperscript{33} Indeed, the profit margin on pearls declined continuously and by 1931 the prices that Bahraini merchants were buying pearls at was 65\% below what they purchased them for just three years earlier.\textsuperscript{34} This precipitous decline forced many into abject poverty, as many divers relied upon loans and advances to sustain them throughout the year.

Bilal Khamis explained the changes after the 1930s from his own experience. From Jumeirah, Khamis worked as a diver in his youth and young adulthood during the 1940s-50s. In his experience, earnings rarely covered costs. Crewmen were advanced 15-20 rupees to provision their families for the summer diving season. The hope was that men would earn enough from the season’s profits to cover these debts and sustain their families for the remainder of the year. In Khamis’ experience, however, men rarely earned more than 30-40 Rupees in a good year and 50-60 Rupees indicated an extraordinary season.\textsuperscript{35} Khamis’ recollections represent a common theme in the discussions of pearling debt, loans were required to sustain families for the time
that men were at sea for the summer diving season. Though his recollections reflect the period of pearling’s decline in the Gulf, they also reveal a fundamental truth of pearling— it was unequal and those that worked hardest often did not reap the biggest rewards. Boat owners, merchants, and rulers were paid prior to pearl crews, who were often forced to settle for shares of what was left after the merchant, boat owner, captain, and rulers were paid.

These changes accelerated trends already in practice along the coast. The pearling fleet phenomenon was abandoned because men were needed elsewhere for more lucrative activities, such as long distance trade, which filled the economic space left behind by the decline of pearling. Saif Ahmed al Ghurair recalled that one of the enticements to abandoning pearling was that while in pearling, merchants had to share their profits with the crew, in trade, the profits went to the boat owner or captain with the crew receiving a fixed wage.\(^\text{36}\) Not only was trading more profitable for the boat owner and captain, but long distance trade was much more secure. It freed the boat captain from his reliance upon the global market for a single commodity, and enabled him to make smaller, but more sustainable profits by moving different types of goods within the Indian Ocean system. Saif al Suweidi recalled how he worked as a diver for at least seven years, but eventually went into business with his brothers. They amassed enough wealth to purchase a boat and grew their fortune from 700-800 dirhams which he grew into 100,000 dirhams through trade.\(^\text{37}\)

In spite of declining profits, some families continued to dive and trade in pearls. Abdullah Rumaithi recalled the beginning of his life as a pearl merchant. He was 66 years old when he was interviewed in 2006. His life as a pearl trader began when he was 10 years old, in approximately 1950. He worked with Ali bin Fardan, a famous merchant, and together they started a business.\(^\text{38}\) Perhaps the most important measure of the changing nature of the pearl trade comes from a young woman. Um Abdullah, or Shamsa bint Sultan al Mura’i started diving in the late 1940s with her father and brother and dove until she was about 20 years old.\(^\text{39}\) Her mother died when she was young and her father brought her with him on pearling trips. She worked as a hauler for her brother until one day he was tired, so she decided to dive.\(^\text{40}\) On her first dive, she found a \textit{dana}, a perfect pearl, which she sold to Ahmad bin Khalaf al-Otaiba, a famous Abu Dhabi pearl merchant. She recognized the extraordinary nature of her story and suggests that most women only collected shells near the beach. It was practically impossible for a woman or girl to participate in pearling, and when a man visited her father’s boat, he questioned her father about the young boy dressed as a girl, asking why “he” was diving in girl’s clothing. Her father explained that the boy had recently lost his mother and was consoling himself in his mother’s clothing. It was inconceivable to the visitor that the person diving could be a girl, and clearly her father decided it prudent to maintain the farce, rather than admit the truth.\(^\text{41}\)

This story indicates that pearling was rigidly considered a man’s job, except in time of absolute necessity, such as the poverty during the middle of the 20th century. As one
man explained, pearling was a man’s job because the pearl boats lacked private spaces for women to dress, sleep, or live in. Shamsa’s father undoubtedly experienced a high level of poverty and did not feel comfortable migrating to the northern Gulf to work in the oil fields or in service jobs, perhaps because of familial obligations. Shamsa’s father should have been able to call on his relatives or those who lived in his freej, neighborhood, to help him care for his daughter, but he did not. He chose to take her with him and in so doing, trained her to be a fisherwoman as well as pearl diver. His decision to bring her along on the trip indicates that the social order that existed before pearling collapsed was breaking down.

Women’s direct role in pearling was not limited to their random participation. Women helped prepare for men’s embarkation and for their return. Pearling was grueling work and in some cities, the entire male population went to the beds. It is impossible to believe that such a mobilization occurred without the help of women. In Abu Dhabi women helped stock the pearl boats with water. According to Um Saif, women helped men prepare the ships for sailing. She was part of a women’s water hauling cooperative in Abu Dhabi that was inter-tribal and inter-family. It supplied water to the pearl boats before the official embarkation of the fleet earning 1 rupee for every four boats’ completed. The women coordinated their operation by digging wells or looking for new well locations outside of the towns to access the sweet water while others hauled up the water and carried it to the empty water casks waiting in the pearl boats. Digging was a dangerous job and on one occasion, Um Saif recalled that a well collapsed and trapped a woman. To give a scope and scale to this operation, she recalled that sometimes there would be 400 boats lining the shores of the town near al Buteen and al Qita’aiyya and that some boats would have between 300 and 500 water casks of varying sizes that needed to be filled.

In most recollections, water along with the other supplies were procured by the nukhada, the boat’s captain, or by its crew. Um Saif’s recollection provides readers with an inkling of the total mobilization for the pearl trade that would overtake Abu Dhabi and yet, in spite of this mobilization, women are never mentioned in the literature. The only exceptions to this are Abdullah Abd al-Rahman’s article in Turath, that asserts women had a role in the pearl trade, but goes on to ignore their role for the remainder of the article, and Hassan Qayid’s work from 1980 that acknowledges women carried water to the boats, but does not expand beyond that point.

Though women did not always participate directly in pearling, they played an important role in inspiring the men to work, as well as in securing their family’s basic nutritional needs for the coming year. As noted above, the pining for women is a key feature of men’s lives aboard a boat. Women became idealized metaphors for home and happiness. In these poems, however, women are idle, sitting and pining for men’s return in ways that just are not supported by their daily reality.

Women present their own lives in the past in ways similar to men-life was hard and
work was hard, but we persevered and survived. Women portray themselves as strong characters, capable of raising children, herding animals, and maintaining the house without question or comment. In interviews, women often style themselves as super-women, capable of shouldering their domestic and social requirements in a difficult environment. In the words of one woman, “we [women] were never weak in the old days.”

The tension between the idle woman and the super-woman results from the tension between Islam and culture, according to Linda Usra Soffan, a pioneer of women’s history in the UAE, but in reality, it has more to do with the pragmatism that is required for survival.

During the summer, when men went pearling, women, children, the elderly, and infirm watched the men sail away and then began the trip to the interior—to the oases or mountains. For those in the oases, women helped coordinate the date harvest along with bedu relatives who migrated near the oases during the summers. Very little is documented about women’s habits during the summers, because the British officials did not have direct influence or interest in the area until the early 20th century, and few women discuss their lives in such specifics. Generally, women’s pre-oil existence is reduced to the drudgery of domestic duties.

In an interview, Um Salem explains that before oil money changed women’s lives, they worked very hard. She is one of the super-women. She explains that her duty as a woman included waking the household for morning prayers, preparing breakfast, tending livestock, feeding the livestock, tending the family’s garden, ensuring there was enough fodder for the animals, drawing water from the well, collecting firewood, cooking all meals, tending to the children and their education, if need be, and being a good partner to her husband. These were her roles when her husband was present and his absence did not diminish them. Like Um Salem, Hamda bin Humaid al Hamli, or Um Saif, a woman from Abu Dhabi, explains that for most women, herself included, the day began just before the fajr prayer, and her day consisted of hauling water, cooking and cleaning until she fell exhausted into bed.

In the summer, however, with most men away, women in the oases had the job of transforming the fresh dates (ratab) into preserved dates (tamr) or into syrup (dibs). In discussions with Jane Bristol-Rhys, Mama Khalood explained women’s self-sufficiency, “the men were gone from us for pearling when the dates became ripe and so we took care of the date harvest every year…We used to give a portion of the crop to our bedu relatives who helped. They got to eat lots of fresh dates as we harvested and all of the women worked together to sort, dry and boil the rest.” In this recollection, Mama Khalood is asserting not only that women worked, but that they did so cooperatively while also helping poorer relatives. She is also affirming that women’s work was not just about helping one’s own immediate family, but about helping the community and distant family.

Once the harvest ended, the women waited for the appearance of the star Subail to
begin to prepare for the journey back to the coast to greet the men. They cooked food for the men's return along the way. These trips could be long, almost double the time of the original journey, because of the day’s heat as well as the need to cook. This stress could affect pregnant women, and there are stories of women giving birth on the return trip. In this case, others would stop with her, help her through labor, then put her back on her camel and re-join the group. This hardiness contributes to the idealized version of womanhood that many women advance in interviews.

**Conclusion**

The exigencies of the pearl trade, including men's long absences, hard work, and the requirements of agricultural production on land, meant that gender roles did not follow the simple division of labor during the summer pearling season. With the men away, women sometimes expanded their domestic agenda. Women’s contributions to the pearl industry included more than simply pining away for their menfolk, though undoubtedly during a 3-4 month separation loneliness and longing were never truly eliminated. Women's role in the pearl trade was to maintain the household and secure the nutritional resources to help the family survive the coming year. This household was defined broadly and depending on the status of the woman involved and the period in which we are speaking could be simply overseeing workers in the date harvest, farming and livestock rearing or doing each of those activities herself. This was in addition to keeping the children and the elderly alive and happy. Women’s role in pre-ittihad emirati society was broad to begin with and upon the absence of men undoubtedly became broader.

The pearl industry was the basis of the economy in the southern Gulf 1850-1930 with the bulk of pearls being harvested during the summer. Men's long absences would have been simply unsustainable without women’s help on land. Women’s roles in the emirates are more flexible than has been explored previously and in times of economic transition, the fluctuations were even greater. To understand gender roles in the pearl trade one must think more broadly about the industry and see it more holistically, making the connections between sea and oasis that are so natural to most Emiratis and so difficult for scholars.

Discussions about the pearl industry need to begin to move beyond the patterned recollection of the past and men’s role in it. This paper is a critical first step towards demonstrating the utility of published interviews to begin the discussion of social relations in the southern Gulf emirates. It is not definitive and there is much more that must be done to begin to understand the realities of pearling life and the interconnections between sea and land during the summer months. Scholars need to begin recording both men's and women's recollections and asking questions that move beyond the assertions of their lives as difficult. Far too much attention is paid to men's functional roles as divers or merchants, and far too little to their social life. Each individual experienced the past differently and through the coordination of
these recollections it will be possible to offer a more satisfying narrative to the current generation, which they can then use in the present to ward off the ever-present fear of the loss of national identity. Much more must be done to record the memories of older Emiratis, even their stories are apocryphal, they still have value and can help bring the past to life for the younger generations who increasingly see the past as static and foreign. Further, the families of merchants, divers, and boat captains must share their family’s past, even if it shows that their power, wealth, and status is a result of federation and the opportunities given to Emiratis by the state. Women must also be willing to discuss their lives in the past and explain publicly and privately their important status and role in securing the family’s welfare. This will ultimately strengthen the knowledge of the past and ensure that all Emiratis are represented in this version of the past.

Endnotes


9. For instance, recalling mid-century, Shaikh Khalid b. Muhammad al Qasimi recalled bringing his school books with him on trading trips, while Shaikh Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. Yusuf al-Shaiba spent seven years in Qatar studying, but asserted that he was prepared for this by the long trading trips that he took with his family. ‘Abd Allah ‘Abd al-Rahman, *al-Imarat fi Dhakirat ‘Abnai’ha* (Dubai: Nadwat al-Thaiqafa wa al-Alum, 1998), 107, 112.


19. Abu Shihab recalls that the Dubai Sirdal Khamis bin Khalaf Khadiyya and in Abu Dhabi was Hamid al Buti; 14 in Sharjah Abdullah al-Najjar; in Ajman Saif bin ’Obeid bin Badr; in RAK Abdullah bin Khalfan al Qasir and Muhammad bin Saeed al Mahmud. These men were the leaders of the dive and the first line of arbitration for disputes arising from the pearl trade. Jum’a bin Thalith al-Humairi also lists the names of important Sirdal and boat captains in his work. ’Abu Shihab “2-5,”14-15; al-Humairi.
24. Pelly, 8-10.
31. For instance see: Hennell to Malet 6 Jan 1851 IOR/R/15/1/125, 7-10; Hennell to Malet 29 Jan. 1850, IOR/R/15/1/120 5-6; Hennell to Malet 5 Nov. 1850 IOR/R/15/1/120 90-91 and case of Khulaf b. Gureer in Hennell to Malet 30 Jan. 1850, BL, IOR/R/15/1/120,8-10; Porter to Hennell 26 July 1850, ADM 127/54, 40; Government of India, Foreign Department, to Secretary of State for India, 9 November 1876, reporting incidents of piracy on a pearling buggarah, and enclosing a letter from Captain W.F. Prideaux Political Resident, 2, 31 August 1876, with a detailed report from Sharjah listing property stolen; same, 16 Sept 4 Nov. 1877 [FO 78/3069] in Records of the Persian Gulf Pearl Fisheries 1857-1962 Volume 1: 1857-1914 Anita L.P. Burdett ed., Archive Editions, 1995, 99.
33. Wheeler and Thuysbaert, 41.
36. Ibid., 53.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
43. Nasr Shamsa
46. Ibid., 405-406.
47. Ibid., 408.
48. Ibid., 06.
51. Bristol-Rhys, 60.
52. Ibid., 61.
54. Bristol-Rhys, 69.
58. Bristol-Rhys, 69.
60. Ibid., 420.

“We were never weak in the old days.”
I was pleasantly surprised when I heard that one of my long-forgotten manuscripts about the Emirates was accidentally discovered in the midst of a pile of photographs recently donated to the National Center for Documentation & Research by Lady Hawley, wife of Sir Donald Hawley, Political Agent at Dubai from 1958 to 1961. I am thankful to Lady Hawley for carefully preserving the write-up for nearly two decades and handing it over to NCDR - the archival repository of the UAE.

As far as I can recall, I must have written it for Donald in the 1990s when I was still doing frontier work for the Emirates Ministry of the Interior. This work was initiated by late Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan when he asked me back to the UAE to work on the frontiers. This late frontier work of mine concluded in 1996 when I spent a long time working with Col. (later Brigadier) Salem al Mazroui of the Special Security Forces on the Ras Al Khaimah-Fujairah frontier. I gave a copy of the paper to Donald to help clarify for him my knowledge of the background of the oral history of the Emirates.

When I was approached by the Center’s staff for permission to publish the manuscript, I readily conceded primarily because it offers some insight into the nature of the job that I was responsible for conducting in the Emirates on behalf of the British Government in the 1950s. But more importantly, it puts in perspective how in the process of handling the intricacies of contemporary inter-Emirates relations, I acquired a close knowledge of the area and an intimate understanding of the Rulers, tribal chiefs and the people with whom we share a long and special relationship.

When I arrived in the Emirates at the end of 1953, there were no existing written archives of the history of the area before the beginning of the 18th century. For the earliest period there were no records of the old settlements at Umm an Nar and Jabal

[Editor’s Note: This valuable manuscript authored by Mr. Julian Walker is part of the massive collection of pictures and video clips generously donated to the NCDR in December 2012 by Lady Hawley, wife of Sir Donald Hawley. Because of the historical importance of this article for researchers, we sought and received the kind permission of Mr. Walker to have it published in Liwa].
Hafit, neither of which had been discovered. In the North, there was a tradition that Ras al Khaimah had been part of Julfar, based on the ruins of the settlement on the hills above Shimal, and the signs of a long straight canal from there to Ras al Khaimah creek. Julfar was supposed to have stretched southwards to the copper mines in the Wadi Jizzi. But nothing was known about whether the ruins at Nad Zibba near Khatt, or those at Nad Ash Shamis, inland from Hamriyah, belonged to that period or later. Likewise the graves on the coast north of Jazirat Zaab, and traces of Chinese celadon pottery, further north on the coast at the base of the Ras Al Khaimah peninsular where Shaikh Khalid Bin Saqr Al Qasimi’s palace then stood), were believed to be from a later period, but nothing was certain.

But it was rooted in local tradition that Dibba had been the greatest city in the area at the time of the Jahiliyya, and that when the Muslims first arrived there, they had fought a huge battle against the unbelievers, and had won. Evidence of this was said to be the massive grave yard at Amir al Jaish (south of Gharabiyya). And there were still signs of the great wall (Sour) encircling the ancient city (together with names like Sour Shamis and Sour Duhamish) in the 1950s. Later history was similarly a matter of unwritten legend. The name Ras al Khaimah was said to have originated from the golden tent top of the Persian commander who had landed there at the start of his invasion of Oman and defeat of the Ya’aribah. The Tunbs, which had been used in his crossing, were likened to the tent pegs of the same tent.

It was only with the arrival of the British, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, that written, English, archives began. But for many years these archives existed only in Bombay, and later in the India Office in London. There were Residency Agents in Sharjah representing the British and attempting to ensure peace at sea, but if they had kept their own records, none of them survived on the Coast. To us, at the beginning of the 1950’s, Khan Sahib Hussain Ahmad, who had been Residency Agent in 1935-6, had authority and a fine memory which helped us immensely. His successor, Khan Bahadur Sayyid Abdul Razzaq Razuqi (1936-1945), had returned to Kuwait and was not available. British Political Officers had stayed on the Coast during the winter months, from the time of the signing of the Sharjah Air Agreement in 1937 until 1947, but any records they may have left behind in Sharjah were nonexistent or exiguous in the extreme, and copies of them were kept, when they were kept, in Bushire or Bombay.

But we did have one great boon in the way of records, Lorimer’s Gazetteer of the Gulf. Thanks to it, we had a fairly detailed written record of the history of the Emirates during the nineteenth century, and a gazetteer giving us descriptions of the areas making up the Emirates, painstakingly collected by the Residency Agent, Khan Bahadur Abdul Latif, in 1901 and 1902. This gave me, when I started frontier work in the Western Hajar Mountains in 1955, the names and details of villages which I came across, but which we in the Agency had not known existed at all. However, from the time a little before the publication of Lorimer in 1907, until
the arrival of Pat Stobart, as the first resident British Political Agent in Sharjah in 1948, we had virtually no British written archives of events on the Coast. Inland, no British representative visited the Buraimi Oasis (Al Ain) between Sir Percy Cox at the beginning of the century, and Captain J. Howes, the Political Officer who accompanied an oil company party there in the winter of 1936/37.

So, from the time of the struggle in 1906 between the patriarch Shaikh Zayed bin Khalifa, Ruler of Abu Dhabi, and the young strong-willed Shaikh Rashid Bin Ahmad of Umm Al Qaiwain (when the former detained the latter and only granted him an unconditional release after prolonged negotiations with the British Political Resident), until the Abu Dhabi-Dubai war in 1947, there were virtually no British official written documents available on the Coast. For the records of events like the British naval bombardment of Shaikh Buti’s Dubai (after the crew of a naval cutter searching for arms in Shindagha had been attacked) in 1911, the disastrous decline of the pearling trade at the end of the 1920’s, the struggles of Hamriyah, Hairah and Rams for independence from Sharjah or Ras Al Khaimah, the rise of Fujairah, the ‘reform’ movement under Shaikh Mana’ in Dubai in 1937, and the subsequent Dubai-Sharjah war of 1940, we had to rely largely on local memory. Ibrahim al Midfa, ‘the Prime Minister of Sharjah’, was writing a local history of the Emirates, but had not got very far.

As a result of what we had been told by the local people, we were aware of the bitter poverty which had struck the Emirates with the collapse of the pearling trade, and the near starvation that had afflicted the area during the Second World War, more from local sages, than from any records we had available. In the meantime, we could only be grateful that the establishment of the Al Maktoum hospital, the rations provided to the starving population of the Coast by the Government of India during the war years, the generally amicable relations struck by British forces in Sharjah with the local population during those same years, and even the less authoritarian attitude struck by Foreign Office representatives in the Emirates, as compared with those from the Government of India, had eroded much of the suspicion with which the British had been regarded by the local population in the inter-war years. When the newly formed Trucial Oman Levies stopped bedu raiders from attacking the coastal settlements after 1951, we began to be seen as friends, rather than interfering interlopers.

Soon afterwards, there was a further spur for the production of written documents in English dealing with the history and geography of the Emirates. In August 1952, Turki Bin Ataishan, the Saudi Emir, arrived in the village of Hamasa in the Buraimi Oasis at the invitation of its Shaikh, Rashid Bin Hamad Al Shamsi. The Saudis claimed the whole of the area between the Oasis and the Sabhkat Al Matti, including the Liwa and stretching as far north as Jabal Dhanna and Tarif, as part of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Shortly after that, when the Levies, and the Abu Dhabi forces led by Shaikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, had established a blockade around Hamasa, it was agreed that there would be an arbitration over the territory claimed by the Saudis.
This meant that the British, representing Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate of Oman, had to gather evidence to support the claims of Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate. The basic sources for this evidence were the local Shaikhs and their population. So the British Assistant Political Agent in Sharjah, Martin Buckmaster, went touring in the Abu Dhabi sands, to the Liwa and Al Dhafrah, with Shaikhs Hazza and Zayed to collect information to support Abu Dhabi’s case for sovereignty there. Martin, and Edward Henderson from the British oil company (Petroleum Development Trucial Coast), collected further evidence in Abu Dhabi and along the Coast to the Khor Al Odaid, to support the Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Shaikh Shakhbut Bin Sultan’s claims there and in the West. And I, as a raw, new, member of the British team, went with the Arab officer in the Political Agency (which moved to Dubai early in 1953) to collect evidence from the local inhabitants in the Buraimi area to support Abu Dhabi’s (and Muscat’s) claims in the oasis and around it. Shaikh Zayed was wonderfully helpful, and we sat with him and the old men of the local tribes, especially Shaikhs Sultan bin Suroor and Mohammad bin Mana’ of the Dhawahir, and Shaikh Salim bin Hamm of the Awamir, making a rough census of the populations of the Oasis and the surrounding areas. Our work – together with that of Martin Le Quesne in the Foreign Office in London – resulted in the British Buraimi Arbitration Memorial, the most extensive written record of the Abu Dhabi area which had been produced up to that time.

In the meantime the Saudis were also producing their own documentation. George Rentz, of ARAMCO, was sitting in Dhahran taking statements from local tribesmen and Shaikhs, and doing research to produce the Saudi Memorial, which supported the Saudi claim to the disputed area, for submission to the Arbitration Tribunal. He had plenty of money available to finance his work. This had its advantages, and disadvantages. His witnesses would make statements favourable to the Saudi cause, which might well be inaccurate, but were certain to be prolific, in the hopes of getting big rewards. So, as a result of the Buraimi dispute, two major memorials, documenting in English for the first time, the background to much of the southern and western areas of the Emirates were produced and printed. Not only that, but when the memorials were handed over to the opposing parties, we had to start work producing Counter-Memorials with further documentation about large swathes of Abu Dhabi territory. But in September 1955, the Arbitration broke down, and in October 1955, the Saudis were out of the Buraimi Oasis. Thus, the Arbitration, and the work on Memorials, came to an end.

In the meantime I had started, in my own small way, to produce documentation on the Northern Area of the Emirates. The local oil company, the PDTC, wanted to know the extent of the sea bed areas of the Northern Emirates, which meant that we needed to establish the boundary points between them on the Coast. They were also beginning to show some interest in their land concessions with the Northern Emirates. At the same time, we were having difficulties over keeping the peace over disputes in the North, especially in the Masafi area. After the Abu Dhabi-Dubai war,
the British Political Resident in Bahrain, acting on the advice of the British Political Officer in Sharjah, had laid down a frontier between the two Emirates, running from the coast west of Jabal Ali to a point some 30 miles inland. This settlement was not to the satisfaction of Shaikh Shakhbut of Abu Dhabi, but all the other Rulers wanted their frontiers settled, as a preliminary to operations by the oil company to look for oil. They agreed that the best person to carry out such a settlement was the British Political Agent in Dubai, Christopher Pirie Gordon. So Christopher started out in April 1954, to map out the seemingly already agreed frontier between Ras al Khaimah and Umm Al Qaiwain. But when he came to follow that boundary on the ground, he discovered that what he had thought would he a simple task was unpleasantly difficult, and that there was a large area of dispute. He therefore decided that I, as Assistant Political Agent, should be freed for over a month the following winter, to tour as many frontiers between the Northern Emirates as I could, and to settle the disputes in his name.

I had already gathered as much British documentation on frontiers that was available on the Coast as I could. But that was very little. There were other problems. The only detailed maps we had were naval charts, together with a wonderful local map of the pearling banks off the Coast. The maps we had of the land were a map made by Wilfred Thesiger of his travels which was based on his compass traverses, mainly in the Abu Dhabi area, and maps produced by the Oil Company, PDTC. These latter maps just reached the edge of the mountains to the east of the Jiri, Madam, and Gharif gravel plains, and were largely blank. And where there were names on the maps, these could be unreliable. There were, as far as I can remember, two Jabal Ma’arifs plotted, and there was one sand dune, where the local guide had obviously got fed up with the pesterings for a name to which he had been subjected to by the Oil Company surveyor, called Arqub Menteezi.

So when I started out, I took local guides to map the coastal frontier points, and also to do what I could to plot the various areas in the mountains around the Wadi Qaur, and on the East (Shimaliyah) Coast. I purloined the largest paper available on the Coast from the Oil Company accountant, took names from any knowledgeable local tribesman that I met, and with the help of a compass, my Land Rover milometer, and the back of my fountain pen, plotted them on the paper. I also gathered what documentation I could from the local Rulers and Shaikhs. I learnt that the division between the Hinawiya (Bani Yas) tribes of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the Ghafiriya tribes of Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al Qaiwain and Ras Al Khaimah, had originally run down the centre of Dubai creek and inland to Khawanij, but had gradually shifted northwards. Shaikh Sultan Bin Salim, the former Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah gave me a document (dated the 15th of Rajab 1332 - 9 June 1914) dividing the Qawasim fiefdoms of Sharjah and Ras Al Khaimah.

Having started my frontier work in January 1955, I had finished it by the end of February, and in the Political Agency in Dubai, Christopher Pirie Gordon was then
ready to announce the coastal boundary points, the northern section of the Ras Al Khaimah-Umm Al Qaiwain boundary, and a general rough allocation of certain areas in the mountains and inland. However, Sir Bernard Burrows, the Political Resident in Bahrain, realized that some of the evidence I had used to make my decisions, especially that concerning zakat, was very similar to the evidence likely to be used by the Saudis in their claims for Abu Dhabi territory. I therefore had to write a report on the main points of my boundary investigations, which could be sent to the Foreign Office in London for consideration. So I sat in my dining room (there was no room in the office block) producing an 114 page report on the boundaries, listing all the settlements I had discovered, and suggesting who I thought they belonged to. This, together with the hand drawn maps that I had made, was quite an addition to the documentation that we had on the Northern Emirates. The report was roneoed, so that we could have copies, but there was no method by which we could reproduce the maps (photocopying was only developed later), so the originals had to go to London.

The Foreign Office decided that we would have to delay my recommended frontier announcements until the Buraimi Dispute was settled. So it was not until March 1956, that I could be spared to return to the Emirates to make announcements about the coastal boundary points and about the Rulers’ sovereignty over certain areas inland. By the time I had finished, it had become clear that PDTC would have to drill in Sharjah territory by the end of the year, and that I would therefore have to try to define the boundaries of that territory during the summer. So once again I returned to the Emirates in late May to map the Sharjah area in the sands, and to learn, as best I could, from the local tribal leaders and old men of the tribes, where they thought the boundaries should lie. Shaikhs Ali Bin Saif and Ali Bin Obaid of the Khawatir, and Mohammad Bin Ali Al Huwaidin and Said Bin Huwaidin of the Bani Qitab, were especially knowledgeable about the past history. I learnt the differences between Daudi and Bidi wells (and who had dug the latter), heard of tribal clashes and alliances, camel raids and other incidents in the desert. There was a wealth of knowledge to record, and names to put on my hand drawn maps. There were difficulties too. To the bedu mind, most things in the past had happened ‘ams’ (yesterday). But the bedu ‘ams’ stretched way into the past, and one had to work out roughly what age one’s witness was, and had been at the time of the incident he was describing, and what events had happened roughly at the same time as the one he referred to. Sometimes his evidence could be matched with written documents that I had collected.

Finally, at the beginning of July, I was able to record that more boundary decisions had been announced to the Rulers of the Northern Emirates, and my sketch maps were beginning to fill the desert with many names. In the beginning of 1957, I had to return from Bahrain to the Coast to complete my frontier work in the Northern Emirates. When I finished in March 1957, the numbers of my maps, and our documentation of the areas of those Emirates, had greatly increased. We had done
our best to settle the frontiers of the Northern Emirates, but these now consisted of twisting lines, often separating small pockets of territory in a way that made westerners look at the many coloured kaleidoscope with amazement. But all I had done was to try to put what seemed to exist on the ground on paper, onto documents, which still, as a whole, remain valid today. Where they have been incorrect, and there are still areas in the mountains where I was unable to go in the 1950s, they can be amended.

*In the meantime, Edward Henderson, Martin Buckmaster and I had produced a small guide to the tribes of the Trucial Coast. And even though I had originally expected to leave the Gulf to work in the Foreign Office in London once I had finished my work on the Northern, inter-Trucial States frontiers, in April 1957, I had already learnt that, after all, I would have to return to the Gulf the following spring to do more frontier work. We had been having difficulties with the frontiers between the Emirates and the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, especially on the Shimailiya or Eastern Coast, where the Wadi Madha was a jagged bone of contention between Sharjah and the Sultanate. In order to show the Sultan, His Highness Sayyid Said Bin Taimur, that we knew something of the difficulties of plotting frontiers, I had been sent down to Muscat in March 1957 to explain to the Sultan the problems we had had with internal Emirates frontiers, and how careful I had been, when trying to settle those frontiers, not to encroach on territory where we believed the Sultanate had claims. As a result of the conversations that Leslie Chauncy, the British Consul General, and I had had with the Sultan in Muscat, we had swapped maps and information. And the Sultan had suggested that during the following winter I should tour his frontiers with the Emirates accompanied by the official in his Ministry of the Interior, Shaikh Sakhr bin Hamad al Ma’amari, who had been plotting his own frontiers.

So it was that in January 1958, having informed the Rulers of the Emirates, Shaikh Sakhr and I started touring and mapping to the north of Al Ain, with help and advice from Shaikh Zayed and the Dhawahir on the one hand, and Shaikh Abdullah Bin Salim of the Bani Kaab on the other. Shaikh Sakhr and I then managed to plot a line from the oasis north-eastwards to the Shimailiyah Coast at Khatmat Al Milahah and discovered that there was a wide measure of agreement about where the frontier should run. The Sultan gradually gained confidence in our efforts, and by March 1958, had overcome his reluctance that we should map the Abu Dhabi/Oman frontier to the south of Buraimi and Al Ain. But he was also anxious that Shaikh Sakhr should return to his neglected work in the Ministry of the Interior and leave me as soon as we had reached the sands to the West of Jabal Haft. Shaikh Sakhr was also becoming keen to return to his office in Muscat, and his keenness was sharpened when a fasting and confused Al Bu Shamis guide took us deep into the sand- west of Haft during Ramadhan, since he feared that we would get lost in the desert without petrol. Shaikh Sakhr was from a mountain tribe of inner Oman, and had no love of the sands.
By the time I had reached Umm az Zamul in May, Abu Dhabi was pressing me for a frontier settlement with Oman, and the Sultan was prepared for me to discuss negotiated frontier settlements with the Rulers of the Emirates, as long as the tribal shaikhs, of the Duru, Al Bu Shamis, Bani Kaab, and Washahat, on his side of a line from Umm az Zamul to Khatmat aI Malaha, agreed in writing to the line I should suggest.

It took two more winter seasons of touring and mapping before my frontier work between the Emirates and Oman were complete. By that time, I had made 31 1:100,000 sketch maps, covering an area stretching between Musandam in the North, Khor Ghanada in the north west, Qasaiwara in the south west, and Jabal Kaur and Shinas in the east. We had managed to conclude written agreements on the Sultanate’s frontiers with Abu Dhabi from just north of Umm az Zamul to Al Aqaidat, round the south of the Wadi Hatla with Ajman and Dubai, and with Fujairah to the East of Wahala, and in the mountains northwest of Dibba. Only the Qawasim Shaikhdoms of Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah had no agreed frontiers with the Sultanate. On the other hand, not only was the frontier area documented, but with the taking of the Jabal Akhdar in January 1959 when I had been sent to Nizwa to help Sayyid Tariq with captured documents, direct Sultanate rule over the interior of Oman had been consolidated.

I was far from being the only person producing documents at this time. The administration of the Emirates had been developing fast. Dubai creek had been dredged, its customs had been reformed and it had a burgeoning administration. There were primary schools in many of the Emirates, and development, mainly financed by the Kuwaitis and the British, was proceeding apace. Abu Dhabi had had its own police force for several years. All this had produced masses of paperwork.

After 1960 when I was posted to Norway, I only paid two short visits to the Coast. I came back in the autumn of 1961 when I went with a United Nations Mission dealing with the refugees in Al Hasa who had left Buraimi and the Dhahira after the Buraimi Arbitration had broken down in October 1955. I was then representing Abu Dhabi and the Sultanate, and was very junior as compared with my opposite number, Azzam Pasha, who represented Saudi Arabia. My second visit to the Coast took place in 1963, when Shaikh Ahmad of Qatar asked for me to re-examine the situation at Al Mamzer involving his father in law, Shaikh Rashid of Dubai, and Shaikh Saqr of Sharjah.

Thereafter, although the Foreign Office showed a tendency to send me back to the Emirates on postings, I did not return there until 1971. The British Labour government had decided to withdraw from the Gulf, and until mid-1970 I assumed that everything was on course for an orderly British withdrawal. A Union of the nine Gulf Emirates seemed to be well on the way to formation and the Iranian claim to Bahrain had been disposed of. However in the summer of 1970, I went to a talk
by the head of the Foreign Office Department concerned with the Gulf, Anthony Acland, and my pleasant dreams vanished. Qatar and Bahrain were at odds over the Hawar Islands and the adjacent seabed which had its impact on the prospective leadership of any union of Gulf States which might be formed. And the Shah of Iran, having conceded his claim to Bahrain, wanted Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands as compensation. The future of the Emirates was by no means certain, and all my friends, including the Rulers, seemed to be in trouble. So in January 1971, I returned to Dubai as Political Agent to prepare the way for British withdrawal.

The scene was discouraging. The Saudis, the Kuwaitis, and the Special Representative of the British Foreign Secretary, Sir William Luce, were doing what they could to help with the establishment of the possible future Union. But Bahrain and Qatar could, if there was no Union, go it alone in view of their respective differences. Should there be no stability after British withdrawal, the Emirates could well be in trouble because of the existing differences and disputes, and more importantly, because Saudi Arabia had not abandoned the claims it had made to vast areas of Abu Dhabi territory during the Buraimi dispute. Furthermore, it seemed almost certain that once the British withdrew, the Shah would seize the islands.

During the spring and summer of 1971, the Kuwaitis, Saudis and Sir William Luce did what they could to press for the Union of Nine, but made little progress. All I could do was to work for co-operation between the seven Emirates on the Coast, and to try to strengthen their co-ordination under the Council. We had to thrash out the difficulties of immigration. The question of policing was also a very thorny subject. And if that was difficult, what could we do about the future of the Trucial Oman Scouts?

As the summer began to heat up, Shaikh Zayed managed to agree in confidence with Shaikh Rashid that they should unite. I was informed of their agreement and welcomed it, while the Shah was doing what he could to ensure that the Emirates did not unite. But I still had to do what I could to make the Trucial States Council an effective umbrella for the Coast, and the smaller Emirates of the North. When the summer session of the Council opened in Dubai, despite difficulties encountered, Shaikh Zayed spoke to the Rulers and their sons. He told them that he believed that we should not just aim at co-ordination under the Council, but that we work for a Union of the Emirates. Rashid and he were prepared to unite using the Constitution worked out for the Union of Arab Emirates as a basis for a union of seven. Would the Northern Emirates join them? He suggested that each of the Northern Rulers should be consulted to see what the situation was.

It soon became apparent that apart from Shaikh Saqr of Ras al Khaimah, the other Rulers seemed inclined to agree to join, but needed some persuading. However I continued, co-ordinating my work with Mehdi Tajir, Ahmad Suwaidi and Shaikh Khalid of Sharjah and getting telegraphic guidance from Sir William Luce in London.
on the main arguments I could use with the Northern rulers to persuade them to unite with Abu Dhabi and Dubai. In the meantime, Mehdi and Ahmad Suwaidi were seeing what modifications were needed to make the constitution for the Union of nine applicable to a union of seven.

Finally, we all reassembled at Shaikh Rashid’s guest house in the summer heat. Six of the Rulers were prepared to sign the modified constitution of the United Arab Emirates. Shaikh Saqr of Ras al Khaimah came into the meeting with me to show that he wished the Union well and was prepared to co-operate fully with it, even if he would not join for the present. At the same time, we left the door open to Bahrain and Qatar to join in the Union, even though we were almost certain that Bahrain, now free of the Iranian claim to sovereignty over the Island, would go it alone, and that Qatar would follow suit. So, at last we achieved a nascent union of six, with a prospect of it becoming seven. The constitution was deposited in my safe at the Political Agency in Dubai until it could come into effect with British withdrawal at the end of the year. I think that all of us were immensely relieved. There was a prospective of future stability for the Emirates. But I must admit that I was a bit anxious about what reaction might come from London until they sent congratulations.

In the meantime, I begged money from Shaikh Zayed so that the road in the Wadi Ham, started by the Trucial States Council and the Royal Engineers could be completed, and we could have paved roads linking all the capitals of the prospective union. It took some time for the union, so fragmentary to start with, to develop. But thanks to the generosity of Shaikh Zayed, and the co-operation of all the seven Rulers of the Emirates, it has given prosperity and development to an area which, when I arrived, was sunk in poverty and facing challenges which we did our best to meet. And the sparse documentation in the area has burgeoned.

It was only after I left the Emirates in 1972, that I saw for the first time, the records on the Coast that we had available in London. I was granted a year’s Sabbatical leave in Cambridge University, and had decided to write a short history of the Emirates between 1900 and 1950, to fill a gap in our knowledge between the publication of Lorimer’s Gazetteer and the arrival of a resident British Political Agent on the Coast. I was able to explore the archives of the India Office at 197 Blackfriars Road near Waterloo Station in London. As a result of the wealth of documents there, I wrote my history which turned out to be far from short. In fact, the end result of my laborious researches was a 2-volume tome more than 400 pages long titled ‘Trucial Oman 1900-1950’. The Foreign & Commonwealth office did not allow me to publish it then, in case someone objected to it. In any case, the University would have wanted me to polish it up before I published it, but I had no time to spare. Fortunately, Dr. Morsie Abdullah, who became the Director of the Documentation Centre (now the National Center for Documentation & Research) in Abu Dhabi in 1968, was also in England writing a history of the Emirates covering roughly the same period which has subsequently been published.
When I retired from the Diplomatic Service in 1993, I was able to explore further the records dealing with the Emirates up to 1993, and after combing both the India Office records, and those available at the British Public Records Office in Kew, edited eight volumes of documents dealing with the internal boundaries of the UAE, and its boundaries with Oman, giving much of the past history of the Emirates up until 1963, for Archive Editions. The only other semi substantial publication that I have produced on the area, is called ‘Tyro on the Trucial Coast’, a short account of my experiences as a very green young diplomat here between 1953 and 1955, when Abu Dhabi was a small fishing village of some 3,000 inhabitants.
My first visit to the Gulf in 1964 was a real adventure. But it may be interesting to briefly recount my previous travelling experiences prior to my arrival in this part of the world.

In 1961, I went with a friend of mine hitch hiking from France throughout northern Europe as far as Finland. Two years later, three of us decided to organize a well-planned expedition to India. In order to be able to finance the trip, since we were students, we took on as much extra work as we could to amass the necessary funds for the journey.

We were very lucky to have a mutual friend, older than us both, who had an office for industrial designing in the building where we lived in the Paris suburbs. Being the owner of the building, he was responsible for its maintenance. We were thus fortunate to be assigned various odd jobs like gardening, maintenance, painting of the stairwells, and delivery of small equipment to different places in the city, all of which kept us busy during our days off.

* Editor’s Note: Alain St Hilaire was the photographer, film-maker and author who captured photographs of the bygone Arabian Peninsula. As a young man, he resolved to visit Arabia - an exotic and unexplored part of the world with its mystery, distinctive culture and romantic legends.

Alain obtained financial backing from the French TV channel FR3 to travel to the Gulf to film the last pearl divers before the rise of the oil rich states. His first visit took place in 1964 when he travelled to Kuwait, Bahrain, Doha and the UAE in the company of a childhood friend. Alain St. Hilaire returned to the Gulf on many visits after 1964. In 1969, he came back to Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, Umm Al Quwain, met the Rulers of the Emirates and filmed a hunting party with falcons which appeared on channel 4 New York TV in “Strange World” Time-Life series.

In 2011, Alain St. Hilaire was decorated with the ‘Abu Dhabi Award’ by HH Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces.

We are grateful to Mr. Alain St. Hilaire for donating his photograph and film collection to the NCDR.
We saved the modest amount we earned to fund our new project. Extracurricular activities such as going to the cinema or music clubs were banished from our thoughts as we stayed focused on our goal of travelling to India. No other activity or entertainment could sway us from our target and all of our conversations centered on our future expedition.

In 1963 we decided to go from Paris to India by car, following the route of other travellers who had previously made the trip from Europe to India. Upon the recommendation of our friend, we bought an old Citroën car, the well-known 11CV model, and painted the roof white to reflect the heat.

On the 14th of July 1963 coinciding with the French National Day, we bade adieu to our families and numerous friends in the building where we lived in Paris. We could sense the strong emotions in the eyes of our parents and friends as they watched us leave for places, cities and countries unknown. We were three young men, aged 20, 18 and 18, and I was the eldest. Ever since that day, I remained grateful to my parents for not having stopped our expedition then and there, as they surely would have wanted to.

We had lots of adventures and discoveries on the road. We met a group of French students near Istanbul who were going to Rajasthan driving an antique Parisian bus and ultimately made it to their destination. En route, we were rescued by nomads we met in the southern Iranian desert around Lake Niris after running out of gasoline. In India, we were welcomed in Delhi by the generous Ambassador of New Zealand who we happened to meet on a street of the city upon our arrival. With him we attended the Indian National Day celebrations in New Delhi at the Red Fort where we saw the Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at very close range.

Unfortunately, the engine of our car broke down and we had no other choice but to leave it behind. We met a group of young French students who had come with two Citroën 2CV’s, the very popular little French car resembling a turtle. They wanted to take only one back to Europe. We decided to drive the car back to France since we had just enough money to pay for gasoline for the return journey. The youngest member of our group however, decided to go back by boat from Bombay.

On the way back to France, we were exhausted, driving continuously, day and night. As we approached the outskirts of the city of Istanbul, I must have fallen asleep on the wheel and smashed into a big truck. I survived, thanks to the treatment received in Istanbul's Hospital Hayderpaça. With my fractured limbs, I was flown back to Paris at the insistence of the French Consul General in the city. This was not the end of the adventure though.

When I arrived in Paris, I went straight back to the hospital since I also had a dislocated hip which had not been detected by the doctors in Istanbul. At that time, X-rays were of bad quality. Being young and otherwise healthy, I seemingly recovered fully and
rather quickly and never complained. The only problem was that I could not walk. As I had left the hospital in Istanbul too soon and the surgeon was not able to properly investigate and diagnose my injuries due to the haste in which our Consul General made me leave the country, I found myself back in hospital. The French surgeons were skeptical looking at a case they had never seen before - someone with a 6-week old dislocated hip. The prognosis was not good. I was finally prescribed crutches, and after walking a year with them, I was back to normal, thanks to my surgeons in Istanbul and Paris.

In the meantime, I planned our next new expedition. We decided to travel and discover the mysterious Arabian Gulf with its fabulous sheikhdoms. We wanted to unravel the scene of the booming ‘black gold’ exploitation. We named our expedition “Arabia 64”. Having learned a lot from our India expedition, we decided to contact local newspapers and television stations for more information and we started attending the weekly meetings of the French Explorer’s Club in Paris. There we met some of the exploration ‘celebrities’ of that era. The Explorer’s Club President helped us to draft an outline of our project which we later presented to the Paris City Hall’s Commission as an entry in the contest called: “Youth Initiative Prize”. We were fortunate enough to win the regional award, but we lost the National award by one point. However, a modest monetary subsidy was allocated and letters of recommendation from local authorities were given.

Interestingly, the French television station gave us some rolls of black and white film to shoot whatever we could about the youth of the Gulf. All that remained for us to do was to obtain our visas. Only the Emirate of Kuwait was independent at that time, having claimed statehood in 1961. The rest of the Gulf Emirates were protectorates, still under the authority of the UK, and so I had to write to the British Consulate in Paris to apply for visas. I met the Consul who congratulated me and issued us a visa for Bahrain and Qatar. However, he informed me that while we are in the Gulf, we should get permission through the British Political Agent in Doha to go to the Trucial States, particularly Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Our dear friend took two days’ leave from his metal framework designing office to drive us from Paris to Marseille to embark on a Greek Mediterranean liner, the ‘Massalia’. We were surprised to see a TV crew from the local station filming us when we got on board. They could not follow us to our cabins since we were sleeping on the deck of that old rusty boat which already had a smell of adventure. We were at sea for nine days, making stop-overs in Italy (Genoa, Naples), Greece (Le Piree), Cyprus (Limassol), Egypt (Alexandria), then finally Lebanon (Beirut).

In Beirut, on Al Hamra Street, I met a friend from my civil engineering school in Paris who used to sit next to me in class! That made me realize how small our world really is! He wanted us to spend some time enjoying Beirut, but nothing could stop us from going to the Gulf - our goal for the past year.
Two days later, we were on the MEA (Middle East Airlines) flight to Kuwait. At that time, MEA was the only airline flying to all the Emirates of the Gulf. On final approach, before landing, we were invited to go to the cockpit to see the spectacular flares of crude oil in the desert. Our first vision was really impressive. The horizon was lit up by a large yellow-red arch over the sand of the desert.

The plane came to a complete stop in front of what appeared to be a small barrack, but we were informed that this was in fact the airport. When the door opened in the Kuwaiti night, a waft of hot air filled the cabin, and when we reached the aircraft’s door, it was as if we were standing directly behind another jet’s engine or entering a furnace. We seemed to be the only passengers. Inside the airport, air conditioning brought the temperature to a somewhat more acceptable degree. A friend of a friend was waiting for us on arrival. He was of Syrian origin, married to a French lady, and was in the business of importing goods to Kuwait, primarily flour, which was in great demand for bread and other foodstuffs.
The next day, we went to the Ministry of Information and Tourism where we met the Undersecretary, Mr. Saleh Shehab, who was very cordial and requested that we translate into French portions of the annual national publications. He also asked that we each prepare a report about a subject familiar to us in our field of studies. As I was attending a civil engineering school in Paris, my choice obviously went towards the development of the new Kuwait airport which was then under construction. Accordingly, early each morning, a car from the ministry collected me from my residence and took me to the site where I interviewed workers and engineers about the project which was well underway. It was a most interesting experience as my friends did the same in their respective fields of economy and physiotherapy.

On Fridays, we were invited to accompany Mr. Shehab on his conducted tours for foreign tourist groups on Failakah Island to inspect the archeological remains dating back to the time of Alexander the Great. For filming purposes, he made us meet with students at the university. The only topic for which we did not get a straight reply was the subject of falconry. At one point, although we met the owner of a falcon, we had no clue about falconry. We started to believe that people were trying to hide this activity or keep it secret! We were to learn later that the reason was totally different.
After three weeks in Kuwait, time had come for us to fly to Bahrain and we left our new friends not without a feeling of sadness! As soon as we landed on this tiny Island of 500 square kilometers, we took a taxi and the driver asked us where we would like to go. Without the slightest hesitation we answered: “We wish we could meet with His Highness the Ruler of Bahrain!” Nobody can imagine making such a request today, but this was precisely how the incredible became credible!
The driver went first to the souk of Manama, the capital city of Bahrain. He made several stops along the way to make some telephone calls, and after a while, he drove us out of the city. He then came to a stop once more, but this time, in front of a large wooden gate in the middle of a high wall. A guard came to the door and asked us to wait. A few minutes later, a middle aged man dressed in national attire, came over and greeted us and thereafter spoke to the driver and instructed him to take us to the BOAC hotel, the only one on the Island. He also added that we were the guests of the Ruler and that someone would come over to see us the next day. Later on we discovered that the gentleman was Sheikh Ahmed bin Salman Al Khalifa, brother of the Ruler, Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa. We could not believe it! This was more than hospitality - our dream was becoming reality. Coming from places where this kind of hospitality is unknown, we were in a state of utter shock and surprise!

The next day, we were visited by the Director of Public Relations at the Ministry of Information, inquiring about the purpose of our visit. We told him about our plans to produce a film dedicated to the youth of the Gulf. He agreed to assist us. Then we discussed the main occupation for Bahrainis, which at that time was still pearl diving, and with that he obviously did not agree. We understood that this traditional occupation was not an indicator of development and that, maybe, we should not mention it again. It sounded strange to us since Bahrain was known as “The pearl of the Gulf”. We decided not to mention it any more.

The next day, we were taken to Rifā’a Al Gharbi the Ruler’s palace to attend the daily majlis. Approximately 50 people were already seated inside a large hall with sofas and chairs along the walls and a carpet-covered floor. At the gate were several falconers with their falcons on their wrists.

We entered the palace, but did not wait in the big hall. Instead, we went to a smaller room where we were served tea. Thereafter, Sheikh Isa arrived and went straight to the audience room to meet and listen to his people. We learned that every day during the majlis, anybody from Bahrain could come to meet with the Ruler and let him know his problems and requests. This was the time-honoured tradition of desert democracy practised by the Rulers and the tribes. Approximately half an hour to 45 minutes later, Sheikh Isa came to welcome us to Bahrain Island, listened to us and said we were his guests during our stay there. His head was covered with his golden agal and he wore an impressive khanjar, the traditional dagger of the Gulf. His was an exceptional piece with a plain gold cover decorated with real pearls and precious stones and a handle made out of an animal horn. I was fascinated by the beauty of this dagger without knowing at that time that one day, years later, Sheikh Isa would show it to me during a private meeting and I would have the opportunity of holding and admiring it.
Our days in Bahrain went well. We went to the fishing harbour where we saw some pearl diving dhows. Then after a week, we decided to take a chance and we went back to the harbour to meet with the captain of a jalbut, a small dhow very common in the area. The next morning we left our belongings at the Presbyterian Mission in Bahrain and with our photographic equipment went to board the Jamila, our jalbut, for a week for a fee of US$100 for the full week.
It took us several hours to reach the pearl banks where ten or fifteen boats had been standing since the beginning of the warm season in June. Pearl diving only took place during the summer months. We learned that the divers obtained fresh water from the bottom of the sea where some springs of fresh water were bubbling out.

One of us was continuously sea sick and found the only way to get some relief was to swim around the boat. We had a little rescue boat behind Jamila made from a carved wooden beam. It was very unstable and many times we flipped overboard by just stepping into it. However, this was our only means to transport our photographic equipment to the other boats and we decided to use it for transportation of the equipment only. We first put the equipment inside, and then went to the sea before pushing the boat ahead of us to the next boat, an exhausting exercise that we used to do two to three times a day.

The life of the pearl divers was incredible. They were able to stay under water for almost three minutes during each dive and had no protection except a nose claw and rubber covers at the ends for the fingers. Their eyes were in very poor condition due to the high concentration of salt in the Gulf. While the divers went to the bottom of the sea, the rest of the crew busied themselves with opening the oysters. One pearl was found out of 3,000 oysters shells and that work was a most difficult one.

We went back to Manama after a week in the middle of the Gulf. The only outsider we had seen was a tanker going to Kuwait and I just wondered what those people must have thought seeing us through their binoculars.

The last generation of pearl divers in the Gulf before the rise of the oil-rich states

With primitive tools and virtually no protection, pearl diving was an arduous profession
While the divers went to the bottom of the sea, the rest of the crew busied themselves with opening the oysters.

After returning from their trips, divers would be greeted with songs and music to celebrate their achievements.
Two days after our return from the pearl banks, we left for Doha. Our arrival in Doha was very much the same as what we had previously experienced. We told the taxi driver to take us to the Ruler. The result was we were taken to the Ruler’s palace where we met his secretary, a Mr. Dajani. We stayed there for hours drinking tea before we were introduced to the Ruler, HH Sheikh Ahmad Bin Ali Al Thani, at the end of the day. We were invited to stay in the sector of the Amir’s palace in the apartments facing the quarters of the guards.

In Doha, we met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the last “Lawrence of Arabia”, Ronald Cochrane, also known as Mohammed Mahdi, who set up the Qatari Police Force. Thanks to him, we went to the desert up to the border of Saudi Arabia. During our visit throughout Qatar peninsula, we were guided by a British policeman whom we nicknamed “Major Thompson” due to his white mustache. We also came upon some prehistoric sites not far from the capital city while waiting for a visa to Dubai.

After patiently waiting 5 weeks, we decided to go back to Beirut from where we were supposed to return by boat to Marseille. The morning of our departure, we received the long awaited call from the British Political Agent who told us we had the visa to go to Dubai, but, unfortunately, the answer was negative for Abu Dhabi. Sheikh Shakhbut Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, then Ruler of Abu Dhabi, was not able to see us. We immediately cancelled all our reservations and went to Doha airport to fly to Dubai.

The plane landed on the RAF airport in Sharjah, a single runway with no other buildings around. Disembarking, we had to search for our luggage amongst a pile of suitcases dropped in the sand. As soon as we could get everything, a taxi driver came
over to us to take us to our destination. We just gave the usual answer: please take us to HH the Ruler of the Sheikhdom. The driver went to Dubai, made a few telephone calls and took us to the Airlines Hotel, which like the Carlton, was one of the very few hotels in Dubai at that time, not very far from the creek.

Shortly afterwards, we were visited by Mr. Mohammed Al Rezzaq who was adviser to the Ruler HH Sheikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum. He told us we would meet with HH Sheikh Rashid the next morning and could ask whatever we needed - a reply we had become accustomed to by then. For us, we were in the world of “One Thousand and One Nights” - it was all like a dream!

My meeting with Sheikh Rashid Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, then Ruler of Dubai, was a memorable experience

The next day we were in the Ruler’s Office on the creek side. Sheikh Rashid asked us what he could do for us. We had no special request except that we had to be back in Beirut in a few days to board the ship going back to Marseille. We went on to explain that if we could fly back to Paris from Beirut, we could stay ten more days. Sheikh Rashid bent over his desk to address his secretary, and after a few minutes, told us he would be more than happy to have us in Dubai and was also ready to buy us plane tickets to Paris if we would accept it. Our answer was a quick and grateful: “Yes”…

This gave us the opportunity to travel to the rest of the Emirates: Sharjah, Ajman,
Umm Al Quwain, Fujairah and Ras Al Khaimah where we met the then Ruler, Sheikh Saqr bin Muhammad Al Qasimi. At that time, Dubai was the business and commercial center of the whole area and acted as a wholesale warehouse for the other Emirates of the Trucial States. Dubai was also famous for its gold trade. At that time, some well-established merchants were buying/selling gold on the stock market in London or Switzerland. We could sometimes see one ton of gold along the runway in Sharjah airfield and no one was guarding it and no one touched it. Price of gold and customs duties on the Indian market were so high that smuggling became a very lucrative activity.

The creek of Dubai was truly spectacular with its hundreds of dhows packed side by side. Here we could only imagine the adventures those ships and crews experienced, coming from the eastern coast of Africa, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar. The smell of fragrant spices from India, Malaysia and Indonesia filled the air. We were in the fascinating world of Sindbad the Sailor … between dream and reality.
Dubai city in the late 1960s

Dubai creek in the early 1960s

The creek of Dubai was truly spectacular with its hundreds of dhows packed side by side
During our stay at the Airlines Hotel, we heard French songs in the neighbouring room. As soon as we could, we got in touch with its occupant, a Lebanese working for a financial holding firm from the city of London. He had to go to Umm Al Quwain, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah and Fujairah and we joined him on his visit to the Rulers. We also crossed the mountains to reach Dibba, Fujairah and Khor Fakkan where we saw fishermen working on their nets on the beach.

During my visit to Sharjah, I was fortunate to meet then Ruler, Sheikh Khalid Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi.
Khor Fakkan Bay, 1964

Ras Al Khaimah, 1964

Palace Guard in Ras Al Khaimah, 1964
My Discovery of the Gulf in 1964

Aerial view of Fujairah Fort in the 1960s

Close-up views of Fujairah Fort

Woman grinding grains, Fujairah, 1964
I came back to the Gulf in 1969 to make an educational film on the area, and returned every year after that until 1978. In the meantime, I also shot films dedicated to Yemen in 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, and 1976 before going to Iraq in 1979. Then I was back to the area in 1988 to complete a film for TV5.

But I will remember forever our incredible adventures in the Arabian Gulf during that very special summer of 1964!