

Sam Abraham, the Syrian River Peddler

Gerald Nadeau, Transcript

“Sam Abraham was one of the [Ottawa] River peddlers who came every spring after the log drive was finished and he knew there’d be still some money, hopefully, to buy what he had to sell. It was a time of year when anyone getting married would buy wedding rings, gifts for girls they hoped would they would one day marry, maybe. And he would come carrying two cases of merchandise, one in each hand, and a pack on his back as well. And sometimes the weight of all of all three together would equal his body weight. His method of selling was, if he met someone on the road, even walking between farms, and he thought they’d be interested in anything, he’d stop and open all his packs and show what he thought he might sell. He’d carry in it some medicine, clothing, or goods that could be made into clothing like needles, thread. Jack knives, rings, broaches, watches, and medicines of some sort. Oil of citronella would be one of the basic things he would bring because that was used in making homemade fly repellent. Because you couldn’t buy it, then. And big items like boots and shoes, he didn’t carry much of that. Possibly if someone had ordered from a time before he might possibly bring it, but because of the weight and size he didn’t carry much of that.

And he stayed over when nightfall came. There was places he had picked out that he would stay, from experiences before when he had stayed there. And his pay for his keep for the night was some small item in his cases. He wouldn’t use money. He traded some merchandise. And at night he slept on the floor with his head on the case that had the most valuable of what he carried. He carried no firearms, but a scary looking knife which I don’t think he ever had to use, hopefully. And he was never robbed as far as was known. The worst thing that would happen would be when he’d open these cases, the children of the household would all come around to see the things he’d have. It was like opening a store. And they came crowding closer and closer, until they became within reach of some of the items he might have. And if they got too bold, or came too close, he’d take his fierce looking knife out of the case and start sharpening it, looking at the child who was too close to what he had to sell [laughter]. And that was enough to back him up because he had fierce eyes when he wanted to use them [laughter].”