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= Breakfast With Bedouins: Film Documents Americans In Arabia



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HOUSTON (Dow Jones)--A typical suburb separated by a thin strip of highway from endless sand. Blonde children sharing coffee with dagger-wielding bedouins. A visit to one of the last functioning royal courts on earth. All scenes from an ordinary childhood, as told in "Home - The Aramco Brats Story."

The documentary, directed by Todd Nims and Matthew Miller, chronicles the lives and attitudes of dozens of Americans who grew up in the Saudi Arabian oil fields over a period of more than 50 years. Whether they were talking about the 1940s or the 1990s, kids who were dragged to Saudi Arabia from comfortable lives in Minnesota or Georgia now describe themselves in the film as citizens of the world, at ease in an Arabian market or a Texan barbecue.

"We ourselves at times have to wonder who the hell we are," said one former Aramco brat. The term refers to the children of Western employees of the state-owned Saudi Arabian Oil Company, or before 1988, the Arabian American Oil Company.

The premiere in Houston drew at least 200, with limos lining the street outside an independent movie theater. Women in cocktail dresses mingled near teens waiting in line to see The Darjeeling Limited. When Nims asked the audience in the packed theater to raise their hands if they were an Aramco brat, nearly everyone did. That should hardly have come as a surprise - Houston has a bigger population of residents who once lived in Saudi Arabia than any other U.S. city, according to the Bilateral U.S.-Arab Chamber of Commerce, one of the film's sponsors.

Getting Along

Oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1938, and for more than 30 years a partnership between the Saud monarchy and American oil companies ruled the desert. Saudi Arabia took complete control of the venture in 1980, but relies on support from U.S. geologists and contractors, who still bring their families to live in four towns that grew up around the ex-pats.

Nims, one of the documentary's directors, said the movie could serve as case study for the energy industry on how people from different cultures are able to work and live together.

"Oil companies can learn how important is for workers to have a community in a foreign country," Nims said. "If oil companies learn from the relationship between Saudi Aramco and Americans, the industry will be able to see more successful partnerships around the world."

The documentary included a host of odd encounters - Shr-Lyn Cruse-Sweat described being surprise when King Saud sent her three horses in response to an offhand remark she had made about losing her own. A mother told how her young son and a friend won an audience with the king by dressing up like John Wayne and "holding up" the royal guard.

The relationship began to strain in the 1970s, however, when Saudi Arabia began to more aggressively wield its power as the world's largest oil producer to influence prices, and more recently over the kingdom's support for fundamentalist Islam. A December 2006 CNN poll found that 58% of Americans believe Saudi Arabia to be friendly to U.S. interests, but only 18% consider the nation an ally.

Nims said the business relationship remains strong, however, and that modern Aramco brats still feel the bond previous generations

shared with their hosts.

"We have a huge history together," he said. "The relationship is a little strange now, but we are still friends."

Nims, who was born in Saudi Arabia in 1985 and lived there with his parents until 1990, said the key factor for what he sees as a uniquely successful experience of Americans living in a foreign country was their ability to create a strong community that includes close ties with the local inhabitants.

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