

Couple learn by teaching in Iran

By CAROLINE PRICE

In August, 1975, Ernest and Flo Nolan stepped off a plane in Ahvaz, Iran, into the scorching, 130-degree heat of the desert summer.

Things got even hotter in Iran before they left.

Ernest and wife Flo, a substitute teacher in the Garden City school district, went to Iran because Nolan was to teach at the Jundi Shapur University college of literature and humanities.

The Nolans, who now live in Canton with their two-year old son, spent a year of their lives in Iran during the days when the Shah held undisputed power. Already, however, the first student riots against the 2,500-year Pahlavi reign had begun.

On their first day in the country, the couple was taken on a four-hour walking tour of Ahvaz, stopping for dinner at one of the few places they'd been told was safe to eat in.

"THE CREDIBILITY of people who would think of a four-hour walking tour (130 degree heat is, however, questionable. Nolan was hospitalized for food poisoning the next day. "I think at that point both of us really wanted to go back home," said Mrs. Nolan.

"But Ernie had just finished graduate school at Notre Dame and we didn't have any money. The government paid

our way there, but we still had to come up with money to pay for luggage and other expenses. Our tickets home wouldn't be paid until we were there two years."

A couple arriving with the Nolans took a look at student riots, 130-degree temperatures and food poisoning. They left. The Nolans decided to stay on at least a year.

Only Nolan had been hired to teach, but eventually his wife found a position in the college of economics teaching English as a foreign language.

She had plenty of practice with foreign tongues — when the Nolans arrived, they spoke no Farsi, the largest language group in the country.

"I think we developed a working Iranian vocabulary after a while," said Nolan.

THE COMMUNICATION GAP lessened, and the Nolans got to know Iranian students and teachers — they also started to understand the rumblings of discontent with the Shah.

"The secret police (SAVAK) were very strong. We always felt its presence," said Nolan.

"Our letters were censored. Once, we sent my mother a letter. Someone read it and crumpled it up in the envelope. My mother got the letter, which was also dirty, and wrote an angry letter to the Iranian consulate in Chicago. The consulate wrote the postmaster in

Ahvaz, who called us in and asked us why we told my mother our letters were censored," he said.

"Because I taught literature, we would often run across the theme of freedom, and the students would get into discussions of liberty. They would ask me what it's like in America."

"The Shah controlled everything," recalled Mrs. Nolan. "The year before we arrived, there was a lot of student unrest. We weren't threatened while we were there, but there were riots."

The Nolans were understandably circumspect in what they said and did, but their life was luxurious compared to most of the country's people.

Except for their rugs. The Nolans — and the dissident students — found it difficult to absorb the contrast between the prosperity of foreigners and the poverty around them.

While the Nolans visited other parts of Iran, some employees of the oil and utility companies never left their compounds. They didn't find it necessary.

At the British Oil Co. compound, where the Nolans visited, was a swimming pool, bowling alley and a well-equipped store. Many of the foreign company employees could take free trips to Europe every few months and were allowed to return to their own countries often.

But about those rugs — "It was not uncommon to see rugs worth \$5,000

even in very poor homes," said Nolan. "The rugs are kind of like a savings account to people. Sometimes there would be rugs piled on upon another in homes."

Throughout their year in Iran, the Nolans saw discontent and unrest mount at the university. In their talks with Iranian students and teachers however, they only heard the name Khomeini once.

Khomeini recently returned to Iran from a long exile in France. He intends to establish an Islamic republic ruled by religious law.

"I personally think many groups such as the Marxists, rallied about Khomeini just to get rid of the Shah," Mrs. Nolan said.

Shortly after the Nolans' return to the U.S. in 1976, they became the parents of Ernest, Jr. Nolan is now chairman of the communications arts department at Madonna College.

Their lives are different, as well as their jobs.

There are cultural events to attend, books to read that don't have to be pulled from their storage trunk and electricity that works every time a switch is flipped.

And they watch developments in Iran with avid interest. They believe they've learned something from their experience.

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