

# Scholar Seeks 'Fragile' Armenian Tale

By CORINNE ABATT

For the past 15 weeks, Mrs. Sue Villa, of the Orchard Ridge English faculty of Oakland Community College, has been on a sabbatical leave.

Mrs. Villa was granted the 15 week leave from teaching at half pay to complete a project which she terms "very fragile."

She has been compiling information through personal interview on the home life of the Armenian people. The project is an outgrowth of her master's thesis at Wayne State University, which was a stylistic study of Armenian folklore.

Later she took more courses in folklore at Indiana University and in 1966 wrote a book, "100 Armenian Tales." It was a co-winner of the first prize in the Inter-

national Folklore contest in 1966.

The present study is "fragile" because Armenia is not a country. There are Turkish Armenia and Russian Armenia which Armenians prefer to reverse and call Armenia in Turkey or Armenia in Russia, but there's no nation of Armenia as such, and there hasn't been for many years.

Fragile, too, are the people who can help Mrs. Villa with her project because they have to be old enough to have been living before World War I and fortunate to have survived the mass slaughter which the Turks carried out against the Armenians.

For political, economic and religious reasons, the Turks wiped out more than a million Armenians.

Each of those in their 70s or 80s whom Mrs. Villa has interviewed is sole survivor of a closely knit family that included 35 to 40 in the immediate household. And sometimes, the interview on family life becomes extremely painful as the tragic memories come flooding back.

It was the collection of the folklore for the book which triggered the family life project. That, too, was done by actual interview. When she began to transcribe her shorthand notes for the book

(she uses a tape recorder now), she found some of the stories running as long as 40 pages.

She would frequently hear the same long story more than once, sometimes with variations, but always easily recognizable. Frequently the story tellers would act out the various characters, dance when the story called for dancing and sing when it called for singing.

What in the home life nurtured the ability to recount such long stories? What were the values that were passed on through them? What meaning did the stories have in the cultural life of the Armenian? These were some questions which Mrs. Villa asked herself and which led to her research of the life of her people.

She was born of Armenian parents. Her full name is Susie Hoggassian Villa.

Her parents met in the United States. Her father came before World War I and her mother in 1920. They settled in the Delray section of Detroit.

Mrs. Villa received both her bachelor of science degree and master's in folklore from Wayne State, taught in the Detroit school system for nine years and at Wayne part-time for about two years.

She has been with the Orchard Ridge English faculty teaching composition for four years. Mrs. Villa and her husband, John, a shoe-repairs manager with General Electric's Carbide & Systems business department, live in Beverly Hills. They have three children, John, 25, Nancy, 17, and Jimmy, 10.

Through her family background, Mrs. Villa was always acutely aware of the tragic Armenian history. As a child she listened to the folk tales. She can speak, read and write the language.

As she progressed into her studies of the folklore and life of the people, she came to realize how scarce was the material on the life of the people.

Her study may be the only one of its kind ever done be-



ARMENIAN home life is the subject of a study which Mrs. Sue Villa, of the Orchard Ridge English faculty, has been doing on her sabbatical leave. (Observer photo by Bob Woodring)

cause the people who can furnish the material are dwindling. The time is now or not at all.

She says, "I am doing it because I want to... This has been a fantastic thing for me, and I am so grateful the college gave me the time to do it."

She continues: "The Armenian people are very interesting. Here they are in Asia Minor, completely surrounded by Muslims, the

only Christian group. They speak an Indo-European language where everyone else is Semitic."

When Jimmy was small, Mrs. Villa was taking special courses in sociology and anthropology. She made a pilot study for her present project, using five informants; got into the theory on how culture affects achievement; and studied child rearing under Dr. Esther Cal-

land, of Wayne - all of which made her more certain that the project should be done completely.

Another who has given help inspiration and encouragement is Dr. Arnold Pilling, of the WSU Anthropology Dept.

In the more than 40 interviews of roughly three hours each which Mrs. Villa has conducted in the past 15 weeks, she sees patterns. She chose her informants so that a wide geographical area is fairly represented - from the Iran border across what is now Turkey to Istanbul.

The families of 30 to 40 members lived together in a kind of compound protected by a barricade. The buildings were a long rectangular one and a wing on each end. One wing was the stable area, the long one was the family quarters, and the other wing the kitchen.

Each person had a bed roll which was stored against the family room wall during the day and rolled out for sleeping.

To get away from the women in the family - and there were many - the men would retreat to the stable for their story telling sessions during the long winter after the crops were in. By the heat of a portable brazier and the warm breath of the animals, the men would begin the tales.

"This was the way they found privacy and entertainment in the long winter months," Mrs. Villa says.

"The women would tell stories to the children in the house."

She describes the ceramic oven built into the floor and how the stories might be told there. There was also a portable stove in many homes.

The women would put a structure on top of that when the coals burned down and a quilt over it, tuck their feet under the quilt and begin the stories.

"The Armenian himself is a very masterful story teller. One of the favorites is called 'The World Below.' There must be five or six versions of it - each telling is different."

"It was through the stories of the Armenian mothers and grandmothers were able to translate family values to the children."

The Armenian family was grounded on respect for age. You did nothing that would destroy the honor of the family. One of the most important beliefs was the honoring of the soul - the honoring of the dead."

From her own personal experience, Mrs. Villa mentions the abiding Armenian belief that everything that happens is God's will - destiny. "Jagadekar" is the Armenian word.

The study has been a moving and rewarding experience for Mrs. Villa. She is not sure what it will bring - another book, more research or articles.

**Seniors Plan Mystery Trip**

PONTIAC The Oakland Senior Citizens and Retirees Travel Club will hold a one-day mystery trip on May 18.

The bus will leave at 10 a.m. from the Senior Citizens and Retirees Drop-in Center at 195 Oakland Ave., Pontiac, and return at about 4 p.m. the same day.

The \$8.25 per person cost covers bus fare and lunch.

But she is sure of one thing, if she had not had the opportunity at this particular time, the material, like so much of that about the people and culture, might never have been put down.

"The Armenians were the Christian martyrs of World War I, and so few people know," she remarks sadly.

She does not intend to do that story: it is too agonizing in its terror and tragedy. But she will continue her study of the culture and literature, both oral and written, as long as she can.



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