

From “Rag-and-Tatter Town” to Booming-and-Bustling City: Remembering Mildred White and Ramallah

Mildred White with commentary
by Donn Hutchison



Figure 1. Mildred E. White served as teacher at Friends Girls School between 1922–1927, she worked for a short period at Friends Boys School. Between 1949–1954 she served as the principal of Friends Girls School. *Friendly Flashes*, January 1948.

The shoppers here are the poorest of the poor – those who have brought nothing tangible out of their past and for whom the future seems to promise nothing.

– Mildred White

Donn Hutchison:

Thus opens chapter twenty-six of *Ramallah Teacher: The Life of Mildred White*, written by her niece, Lois Harned Jordan.¹ Mildred White was a legend in the Audi-Mansur family that I married into. She had taught my mother-in-law, Ellen Audi Mansur; had been principal when my wife and her four sisters were students at the Friends School; and she and I became friends over the six months I lived in Richmond, Indiana, where Mildred was living in a Quaker retirement home.

The Ramallah I first came to know seventeen years after the Nakba was much different from the rag-and-tatter town of which Mildred writes in 1948. There were no longer refugees living in tents or shacks

fashioned out of loose stones and hammered-out tin and covered with sacking. The Friends Meeting House no longer housed refugee families, nor were the Friends Girls School grounds dotted with tents or the classrooms shared by families who had fled their homes. There were no longer tent-restaurants in the Old City, though there was still one tiny shop that made sandals and buckets out of used tires, and one could, and can still, buy used clothing and shoes from street vendors in the *hisba* (vegetable market).

Those refugee families, who carried little with them other than the iron keys to their homes, brought with them their ingenuity, their creativity, their belief in the value of education, and their strength to endure. They put down tentative roots that eventually grew into sturdy trees. At first, they lived in one-room dwellings, then apartments, some even eventually built villas and apartment buildings. The Ramallah of 2019 is vastly different from the Ramallah of 1948, as these refugees blended into the town and contributed to its prosperity. The rag-and-tatter town of which Mildred White wrote is only a memory in the minds of those who remember the tales of those days of 1948. The Ramallah of today is a booming-and-bustling city.

When I first came to Ramallah, the tallest building was three stories high and the majority were only one; there were three cinemas where one could go in the evenings to see the latest Western films as well as Egyptian movies featuring such stars as Fatin Hamama and Omar Sharif. (Today, those cinema houses are gone and have been replaced by shopping centers.) Few people had a television or a car; there were no fast food restaurants; shepherds still drove flocks of sheep down the street to graze in empty lots, and Abu ‘Abed delivered kerosene in the winter from a wagon pulled by a mule!

When I first came to Ramallah, Share‘ al-Irsal, known as “Radio Road,” was tree-lined and lovely old stone houses flanked both sides. It was the street where young engaged couples – not holding hands – strolled under the stars. It was Ramallah’s version of a lovers’ lane. Today, only one old stone house with its red tile roof remains. The trees are gone, the houses too. Today, it is a bustling commercial center with high-rises, shopping centers, malls, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Popeye’s. The sidewalks are crowded; the streets are congested with taxis, vans, and private cars. Pedestrians weave among the vehicles and, concentrating on their cell phones, rarely see the people whom they pass.

This booming-and-bustling city is home for the international representative offices of twenty-one countries, numerous banks and their branches, thirty-two hotels and ninety-three restaurants, and shops too numerous to count, selling any item one might want. Merchants concentrate on making their shop windows attractive and inviting. There seems to have been a literal invasion of mannequins dressed in the latest fashions to entice a buyer to stop, to look, to buy. Shop windows are made decorative with the addition of old sewing machines and metal toys used as backdrops for the items on display. There is a conscious attempt to be creative, to appeal to the senses as one markets one’s goods.

The town of Ramallah was and is centered around the *manara* (literally, lighthouse). Six roads, like the spokes of a wheel, radiate out from that hub for a block or two. Today, Ramallah extends for miles beyond that hub. There is the road to al-Tira,

which used to be practically empty except for a few houses and the UNRWA Women's Teachers Training College at the top of the hill. Today, it is a crowded thoroughfare with one restaurant or coffeehouse following another in a seeming endless line. Each one attempts to attract patrons to its outside café, to its beautiful garden, or by its tempting interior. There are lovely residential neighborhoods just beyond the complex of restaurants and coffeehouses: the cluster of individual homes in the Birzeit faculty housing neighborhood, the beautiful apartment buildings that comprise yet another neighborhood – everywhere one looks there are buildings. And silently observing it all is the giant stone statue of Nelson Mandela, a gift from the people of South Africa.

Mildred White, if she were to walk the streets of Ramallah today, would be lost. It is no longer that small town of 1948 Palestine. Perhaps she would recognize the five one-story shops a block up from the manara, as they still wear their Mandate-era red tile roofs. She might also recognize the street that goes to the left of Saleh Khalaf's store down its narrow brick road toward the old city of Ramallah. The nine shops on the right are much as they would have been during Mildred's time. They are only one story high; their flat roofs identify them as pre-Mandate. From some of these roofs, straggly plants grow out of the ancient mortar; two of the shops are without doors, the grill work above the doorways are rusted, and the interiors are gutted.

From Lois Harned Jordan's *Ramallah Teacher*:²

Mildred arrived in Ramallah on a "temporary appointment" to the [Friends] Mission. She was immediately involved in the administration of the Friends Girls School, care of the Ramallah Meeting, and work among the refugees.

The members of the meeting asked Mildred to give Sunday morning messages, in the absence of Willard and Christina Jones who were in America for a short furlough.³ She worked with Na'meh Shahla to oversee Sunday School activities for ninety children.⁴ The teachers were seven girls from Friends families. They had interest and enthusiasm, but little experience, so needed a good bit of guidance.

Teaching, administration, and serving the meeting were familiar tasks to Mildred. But new were the tasks that had come to the Mission as a result of thousands of refugees living in and around Ramallah and nearby al-Bireh. Through letters and news media, Mildred had kept up with events in Palestine during her two years' absence, but nothing had adequately prepared her for the scope of the problem. The Mission staff, besides carrying on the programs of the schools, gave as much time and resources as they could spare to alleviate some of the suffering that surrounded them. New tasks were added to the familiar ones.

When vacation time arrived in December, Mildred retreated to one of her favorite places – sunny Jericho. Besides resting, enjoying the sunshine, and eating oranges, she used some quiet hours to catch up on correspondence. In January 1950, as she sat at the little table that held her portable typewriter, she considered how best to describe the lives



Figure 2. Teachers at Friends Girls School surrounding Mildred White (second row from below, second from left). Circa 1950. Courtesy of Donn Hutchison.

of refugee families to Friends in America. As she began to type, the story of “Rag-and-Tatter Town” unfolded. When Friends opened their January 1950 issue of the *American Friend* they found that story.

Mildred White, “Rag-and-Tatter Town,” *American Friend* (January 1950):

There’s a high road and a low road in Ramallah. On the high road cars speed along and trucks and buses rumble by. The high road runs through the best shopping district of the town. The modern motion picture house fronts the high road. This smooth pavement is flanked with smart shops in whose glass windows displays of merchandise of varied kinds invite the passerby who has money to spend.

And the low road? Well, the low road is a stony, dusty path between two straggling rows of crazy shacks which form the shopping districts for the poor refugee population of our little city. This district may well be called “Rag-and-Tatter Town.”

The "Town" sprawls the length of a bare and dusty field lying below the high road. Wretched as it is, it is all alive with activity. People in faded rags and patches come and go, to buy and sell. Articles which would be shunned anywhere else are put on sale here at the cheapest prices. Here are the culls of fruits and vegetables, and shop-worn articles of merchandise discarded from the better stores along the high road. Here are the cheapest of candies, sticky and fly-blown, for the delight of the children of the poor. Here you can see how men who have lost everything they possessed struggle with their bare hands to defend their families against hunger, nakedness, and the merciless winter sky. Because of what you see here, many families who a year ago had no shelter now pay rent for a room where all may sleep huddled together on the floor, protected from the weather. Some who a year ago had only the Red Cross rations between them and starvation now supplement their diet with vegetables and fruits. Soap has appeared in many a tent and shack and rented room where a year ago it was entirely absent.

So here is Rag-and-Tatter Town, a huddle of shops made out of next-to-nothing and costing no rent. Over here is a string of vegetable shops. Each has four wooden uprights at the corners of its enclosure and a roof of old gunny sacks sewed together with scraps of string. The sacking is weathered and has been whipped by the wind into fantastic rags and tatters, resembling the garments of Rip Van Winkle. The floors of these shops are solid earth swept daily with homemade brooms of wild thorn. The doors and windows are thin air. Displayed in these shops are small heaps of eggplant, string beans, tomatoes, peppers, okra, and garlic. Flies swarm over heaps of grapes not fresh enough to be offered for sale in the better shops. Sacks of beans, lentils, and smutty charcoal slump in the corners. The scales stand on empty goods boxes. The sellers lookup alertly as you pass. "Come in and buy," they plead eagerly. "Good vegetables, cheap, almost given away!"

Over there is a melon shop. The owner has constructed from loose stones a wall around his small enclosure and safeguarded the rear with a tangle of rusty barbed wire salvaged from a junk heap. A few steps down the street is an old-clothes shop. Shabby coats and trousers and soiled dresses, limp and dejected, swing from ropes strung around the tiny enclosure. Worn shoes of odd sizes are set out in rows or piled in heaps waiting for buyers. Here is a tinner, sitting beside a pile of empty food tins, purchased for a song from the Red Cross. His calloused hands are busy shaping from the tin stout dustpans, funnels, candleholders, oil cans, and other clumsy utensils for sale. The finished articles dangle on strings from the roof of the shop.

At the end of the "street" is a heap of clay pots and water jars. The donkey who brought them here from a native pottery has dropped down beside them, saddle and all, to rest. The roof of this "shop" is the open sky. It has no walls at all. The proprietor, being unable to lock up at closing time, is

obliged to spend his nights as well as his days among his jars. He is busy crying his wares and sending out three or four ragged boys to carry the jars, a few at a time, to peddle from door to door. Turn and walk back on the other side of the street.

Bless my soul, what's this? It is actually a restaurant!

In a squat hut made of oil tins pounded flat and nailed edge to edge over a skeleton of scrap lumber, where the close air resembles that of an oven in full blast, a dingy apron whisks about and a voice says cordially, "Come in and dine on good home-cooked food." Three or four small tables, guiltless of tablecloths, stand on one side of the room and several men are eating a meal there. The other side is occupied by the kitchen and the dishwashing operations. Here food can be had at rock-bottom prices. No expensive sign is needed to advertise the place. A glass jar of cheese in brine and another of pickled turnips stand on a shelf behind the tiny front window to give evidence of the stock in trade.

That hammering sound comes from a small open shoe shop. The shoemaker cuts and hammers and stitches. The inner soles of the shoes are pasteboard salvaged from old boxes. A man must save here and there. A couple of grimy little apprentices are cutting out sandals from an old inner tube. Strings of men's heavy shoes, women's heelless house slippers, and children's sandals swing from the roof.

And so we move down the street. The shoppers here are the poorest of the poor – those who have brought nothing tangible out of their past and for whom the future seems to promise nothing – people who, only by the merciful intervention of the Red Cross have from day to day a hold on life. Pallid women are buying wilted vegetables, matches, and remnants of material. Some are carrying small measures of kerosene in bottles salvaged from trash heaps. Here is a mother holding a child by the hand. Both are shabby and ill-fed, but she is smiling at his happy face as he holds up a half-piaster to a shopkeeper and receives a few candies in a cone of soiled newspaper. And here at last, of all things – a coffeehouse of gunny sacking! A dozen coffee stools are ranged in a cheerful circle on the earthen floor. Across the front of the shop is a row of stunted plants growing bravely in tin cans. The bit of green is a reminder of the village coffee houses that stood near the dear lost homes, far away, where the flowering vines shaded the rustic arbors of bamboo, and where the coffee stools in the gardens were flanked by beds of blooming marigolds and bright cockscomb. Here in a corner is a great hospitable water jar offering comfort free for thirsty lips. There is the coffee pot on the glowing charcoal brazier. The wavering light from a hanging lantern falls softly on the circle of men sitting relaxed and genial, enjoying the simple comforts and cheer of the place. Here a man may rest after the toil of the day. Here he is welcome in spite of shabby clothes and a flat purse. Here, for the price of a piaster, he may feel himself

a man among men for a few hours. The cups are handed round. The aroma of hot coffee is on the air. To the Arab it is the very breath of comfort and cheer and sociability. Talk goes round the circle, and tales familiar and well loved. Often the talk turns sadly on the losses they suffered in the war days when the world was suddenly turned upside down, crushing out their old life and familiar daily round forever. There is ease for the heartaches in each other's presence and sympathy.

As the hour grows late, they rise one by one and disappear in the darkness toward their home. Homes? Home to one now means a crowded tent in a vacant lot. To another it means a shack with walls of loose stone and a roof of sacks and brush. To yet another it means a basement room somewhere, or a deserted cow shed. A man coming "home" late stumbles over the sleeping bodies of his wife and children, as they lie crowded together on the floor. Often the families of brothers or cousins must share the same cramped space. He gropes his way to his own place on a pallet or folded Red Cross blanket, and lies down to rest. Another day is over, thank God for that, he says to himself with a gusty sigh. But what of tomorrow, and the next tomorrow, and the next, for these sleeping ones, dependent upon him? Somewhere, somehow, God knows. The weary refugee takes off his shoes and thrusts them under his head for a pillow, and relaxes at last in sleep.

The last light winks out in the coffee-house. Only the stamping feet of the fly-bitten donkeys break the stillness. The long day is over in Rag-and-Tatter Town.

Donn Hutchison is an American-Palestinian who has lived in Ramallah for over fifty years. For forty-four of those years he was a teacher at the Friends Schools. He is the author of several books of historical fiction telling the Palestinian story and two devotionals based on lines from the Qur'an, Sufism, and the poetry of Hafiz and Rumi.

Endnotes

Thanks to Tania Tamari Nasser who first suggested the idea for this remembrance of Mildred White, along with an accompanying recollection of Ramallah by Donn Hutchison, and who also selected the excerpts reprinted here from Lois Harned Jordan, *Ramallah Teacher: The Life of Mildred White*.

- 1 Lois Harned Jordan, *Ramallah Teacher: The Life of Mildred White* (Richmond, IN: Punit, 1995).
- 2 Jordan, *Ramallah Teacher*, chapter 26, 204-08.
- 3 The Reverend A. Willard Jones was head of the Friends Boys School, where his wife Christina Henry Jones taught history and English.
- 4 Na'meh Shahla was a Palestinian involved in teaching and charitable works associated with the Ramallah Mission. See Enaya Hammad Othman, *Negotiating Palestinian Womanhood: Encounters between Palestinian Women and American Missionaries, 1880s-1940s* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 155.