

Historic Date Palm Links UA to Abu Ghraib, Iraq

By Elizabeth Davison



1955 palm planting ceremony in front of Old Main.

The trees in the University of Arizona Campus Arboretum link the world to Tucson. One fascinating tale of the tree collection is the linkage between Iraq and the UA campus.

In 1952, many UA students came from the dry lands of the world to study agriculture, geology, mining and other related subjects at the U.S. land-grant institutions that excelled in these disciplines. At that time the UA was collaborating with the U.S. Department of State and the USDA to assist in the development of the Agricultural College of Iraq at Abu Ghraib, near Baghdad. This was one of the first such collaborations between a U.S. university and a foreign government.

The UA field team “taught courses, improved curricula, prepared classroom demonstration materials and texts, assisted in training Iraqi faculty, initiated research and demonstration plots, organized field days and other extension activities, assisted in planning for facilities development and established a maintenance program and shop,” according to a report in *The University of Arizona College of Agriculture: A Century of Discovery*, published for the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) centennial in 1985.

UA faculty served on the project in both Arizona and Iraq. Graduate degree programs in the United States were provided for two Iraqi faculty members and other Iraqi students completed courses the UA.

Phillip Eckert was dean of the College of Agriculture in 1952. He had responsibility for coordinating the project. To honor and thank him in 1955, Iraqi students planted a date palm from Iraq on campus. The tree still stands by Old Main, facing the UA Mall. From a small sprout with just a few leaves, it has grown to a robust multi-trunked tree nearly 20 feet tall. Dates regularly form on some of the older trunks.

Recently his daughters, Susan Eckert and Karen Sanzone, visited campus with Patricia and Hussam Urfali, wife and son of of Hufdhi Urfali, one of the original Iraqi students. They provided the above photo of the original installation in 1955.

The 50-year-old tree has an interpretive sign to honor Eckert and his efforts in establishing the Agricultural College of Iraq. 📍

A Fruitful Collaboration 1952-1959



Susan McGinley

Initiated in 1952, a cooperative project between the Agricultural College of Iraq and the University of Arizona’s College of Agriculture assisted in developing the Iraqi college into an efficient and effective instrument for improving agricultural methods and practices in Iraq. The Iraq Project was funded by the International Cooperation Administration, now the U.S. Agency for International Development. Taking inspiration from the American land-grant college agricultural curriculum, teaching, research and extension activities were included in a program that focused on soils, field crops, animal husbandry and farm machinery.

The program ended during the 1959-60 session when the original intent of establishing a four-year college of agriculture at Abu Ghraib was achieved. After seven years, the school had attained full college status, granting a Bachelor of Science degree, and enrollment had grown from 95 to nearly 300.

—Susan McGinley