

BY JOHN SHEPARD An American Tale

From storefront to the legislative floor and back again

With its solid industrial base and exploding population, today's Covington, Tenn., is a far cry from the town that greeted twelve-year-old Oney Naifeh—father of Tennessee Speaker of the House Jimmy Naifeh—upon his arrival from Beirut in 1920. At the time, Covington and surrounding Tipton County constituted little more than a sleepy outpost on the Mississippi River with slender economic clout and nothing in the way of higher education. But in the decades that followed, both the Naifehs and their home county in Southwest Tennessee have blossomed in parallel arcs, one the story of a small town's success, the other a genuine tale of the American Dream.

The story of the Naifehs begins in the humblest of circumstances in Lebanon, where the family lived in abject poverty. Later, Oney would tell tales of walking miles for a cup of grain and eating the meat of killed snakes to survive, according to family friend Houston Gordon. In search of a better life for his family, Naifeh patriarch Joseph immigrated to America around 1900, settling in Covington and making a living peddling vegetables and sundries in the town square. Joseph was forced to leave behind his wife and son, Richard, and only returned to Lebanon once, a visit that made possible the birth of the couple's second son, Oney, and marked the last time Joseph would see his wife, who died there when Oney was only six.

In 1920, facing the looming prospect of a quota system restricting the number of immigrants who would be allowed to enter the United States, Joseph managed to save enough money to bring his two sons to America. Oney and Richard, accompanied by Richard's wife, made the long trip by boat to Ellis Island. The passage from New York to Tennessee proved to be equally perilous for young Oney, who, unable to speak English, was mistakenly sent to Covington, Ky., as the result of a railroad mishap. After several weeks stuck hundreds of miles to the north, Oney was finally reunited with

his father and soon went to work at the family grocery store, which Joseph had opened on the square.

Nine years later, Joseph died, and management of the family store fell to Oney, who solidified the business in the Covington landscape with a combination of progressive thinking and a simple slogan: "Everything Good to Eat." Oney brought innovation to the grocery business, selling the first bottles of milk and first loaves of bread in Covington and proudly rolling out the first shopping carts the town had ever seen.

For the next 70 years, Oney steadily grew the operation and raised, with his wife Adele, sons Joe, Jimmy and Johnny in Covington, leaving only to serve in the army during World War II. Oney died in 2000, and Joe and grandson Judson continue to operate two locations of Naifeh's Food Markets in Tipton County.

Speaker Jimmy Naifeh, who attended the University of Tennessee, says one of the things his father valued most was education, a value that he passed on to his children. "We got all of our values from my dad," says Speaker Naifeh. "He made sure that all his grandchildren were educated, and all six of them went to the UT-Knoxville." After ascending

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to the position of Speaker of the House in the Tennessee General Assembly, Naifeh set about spreading the values he inherited from his father to his constituents in Tipton County. After meeting with a group of local citizens, Naifeh collaborated with County Executive Jeff Huffman and Superintendent of Schools Tim Fite to open a branch campus of Dyersburg State Community College in Covington, a facility now known as the Jimmy Naifeh Center.

“I believe everyone should have a job and everyone should have enough to eat.”

—ONEY NAIFEH

“Speaker Naifeh’s influence made that happen. We could not have gotten it done without his help,” Huffman says.

The Covington campus, which now boasts an enrollment surpassing that of the primary Dyersburg location, is currently in its fourth expansion, with plans underway to add a much needed nursing program.

“I’ve always tried to maintain a strong relationship with local government,” Naifeh says. “That’s how you get things done.”

Getting things done is right.

While the establishment of a college in Tipton County is probably Naifeh’s proudest accomplishment for his home district, the record of other developments he’s helped bring to the area reads like a veritable what’s what of economic and community development windfalls. Mueller Industries, H.T. Hackney Co., Delfield Refrigeration, Bowater, Quebecor World USA, Charms Co.—the latter makers of Blow Pops candies, which Speaker Naifeh keeps stocked in his office for reporters—and several other large companies all have sizeable presences in Tipton County, providing thousands of jobs. In addition, the Speaker was instrumental in several downtown revitalization projects, transportation improvement grants and the construction of Glen Springs Lake.

Today, Speaker Naifeh is a powerful force in the Tennessee legislature, and Tipton County is a thriving community. Though never the politician his son became, Oney Naifeh once shared his view of politics with friend Houston Gordon. “I believe everyone should have a job and everyone should have enough to eat,” Gordon recalls Oney saying.

Thanks to Naifeh’s Food Markets and the legislative influence of the Speaker, in one corner of the world at least, that philosophy rings true. **tn**

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