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CITIZEN KHAN

Behind a Muslim community in northern Wyoming lies one enterprising man—and countless tamales.



By Kathryn Schulz



The first person in Sheridan, Wyoming, to learn that Hot Tamale Louie had been knifed to death was William Henry Harrison, Jr. The news

Zarif Khan, a.k.a. Hot Tamale Louie, arrived in small-town Wyoming in 1909 and eventually became a local legend.

came by telegram, the day after the murder. Harrison was the son of a member of Congress, the great-grandson of one President, the great-great-great-grandson of another President, and the great-great-great-great-grandson of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Hot Tamale Louie was the son of nobody knows who, the grandson of nobody knows who, and the great-great-grandson of nobody knows who. He had been selling tamales in Sheridan since Buffalo Bill rode in the town parade, sold them when President Taft came to visit, was still selling them when the Russians sent Sputnik into space and the British sent the Beatles to America.

By then, Louie was a local legend, and his murder shocked everyone. It was front-page, above-the-fold news in Sheridan, and made headlines throughout Wyoming, Colorado, and South Dakota. It travelled by word of mouth across the state to Yellowstone, and by post to California, where former Sheridan residents opened their mailboxes to find letters from home-town friends mourning Louie's death.

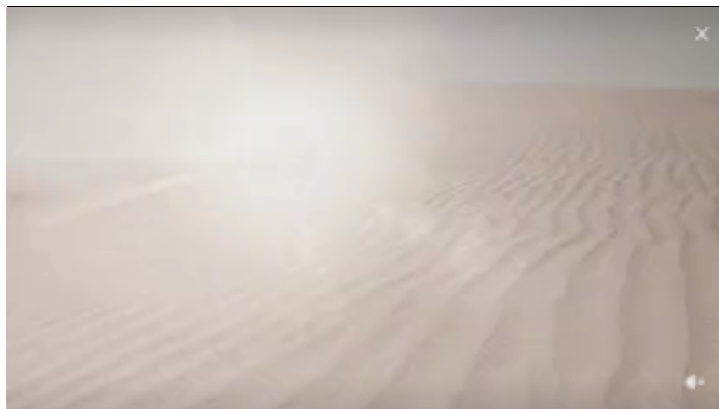
That was in 1964. Two years later, the killer was tried, found guilty, hanged, removed from the gallows, then hanged again. Within a few years after that, Louie, his tamales, his murder, and everything else about him had faded from the headlines. A half century passed. Then, late last year, he wound up back in the news.

The events that propelled him there took place in the town of Gillette, ninety minutes southeast of Sheridan. Situated in the stark center of Wyoming's energy-rich but otherwise empty Powder River Basin, Gillette grew up around wildcat wells and coal mines—dry as a bone except in its saloons, prone to spontaneous combustion from the underground fires burning perpetually beneath it. Because its economy is tied to the energy industry, it is subject to an endless cycle of boom and bust, and to a ballooning population during the good years. The pattern of social problems that attend that kind of rapid population growth—increased crime, higher divorce rates, lower

school attendance, more mental-health issues—has been known, since the nineteen-seventies, as Gillette Syndrome. Today, the town consists of three interstate exits' worth of tract housing and fast food, surrounded by open-pit mines and pinned to the map by oil rigs. Signs on the highway warn about the fifty-mile-per-hour winds.

A couple of hundred Muslims live in northeastern Wyoming, and last fall some of them pooled their money to buy a one-story house at the end of Gillette's Country Club Road, just outside a development called Country Club Estates, in one of the nicer neighborhoods in town. They placed a sign at the end of the driveway, laid prayer rugs on top of the wall-to-wall carpeting, and began meeting there for Friday worship—making it, in function if not in form, the third mosque in the state.

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Most locals reacted to this development with indifference or neighborly interest, if they reacted at all. But a small number formed a group called Stop Islam in Gillette to protest the mosque; to them, the Muslims it served were unwelcome newcomers to Wyoming, at best a menace to the state's cultural traditions and at worst incipient jihadis. When those protests darkened into threats, the local police got involved, as did the F.B.I.

Whatever their politics, many outsiders, on hearing about Stop Islam in Gillette, shared at least one of its sentiments: a measure of surprise that a Muslim community existed in such a remote corner of the country. Wyoming is geographically huge—you could fit all of New England inside it, then throw in Hawaii and Maryland for good measure—but it is the least populous state in the Union; under six hundred thousand people live there, fewer than in Louisville, Kentucky. Its Muslim population is correspondingly tiny—perhaps seven or eight hundred people.

Contrary to the claims of Stop Islam in Gillette, however, the Muslims who established the mosque are not new to the region. Together with some twenty per cent of all Muslims in Wyoming, they trace their presence back more than a hundred years, to 1909, when a young man named Zarif Khan immigrated to the American frontier. Born around 1887, Khan came from a little village called Bara, not far from the Khyber Pass, in the borderlands between Afghanistan and Pakistan. His parents were poor, and the region was politically unstable. Khan's childhood would have been marked by privation and conflict—if he had any childhood to speak of. Family legend has it that he was just twelve when he left.

What he did next nobody knows, but by September 3, 1907, he had got himself a thousand miles south, to Bombay, where he boarded a ship called the Peno. Eight weeks later, on October 28th, he arrived in Seattle.

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Go sky high



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INTERNATIONAL CONCEPT

From there, he struck out for the interior, apparently living for a while in Deadwood, South Dakota, and the nearby towns of Lead and Spearfish before crossing the border into Wyoming. Once there, he settled in Sheridan, which is where he made a name for himself, literally: as Hot Tamale Louie—beloved Mexican-food vender, Afghan immigrant, and patriarch of Wyoming’s now besieged Muslim population.

“I trust him—he has a science background.”

When Khan arrived in Sheridan, he and Wyoming were roughly the same age—the man in his early twenties, the state nineteen. At the time, the idea that anyone at all would move to the region was a novelty. Although Native Americans had lived there for millennia, Europeans didn’t visit until at least 1743, and they didn’t linger. As late as 1870, scarcely nine thousand people lived in the entire territory. The coming of the railroad, which was supposed to solve that population problem, temporarily exacerbated it instead. “Hundreds of thousands of people had seen Wyoming from train windows,” the historian T. A. Larson wrote, “and were spreading the word that the territory looked like a barren wasteland.”

That was particularly true in northeastern Wyoming. The rest of the state could be daunting, with its successive mountain chains rising like crests on a flash-frozen ocean. But at least it had grandeur, and verdure. In the east, by contrast, you could travel five hundred miles and not see a tree. Precipitation was similarly scarce. The Homestead Act offered Western settlers a hundred and sixty acres—not enough, in that landscape, to keep five cows alive. In winter, the mercury could plunge to fifty degrees below zero. People froze to death in blizzards in May. Frontier Texas, the saying goes, was paradise for men and dogs, hell on women and horses. Frontier Wyoming was hell on everyone.

Perhaps because it so desperately needed people, Wyoming was, from the outset, unusually egalitarian. Beginning in 1869, women in the territory could vote, serve on juries, and, in some instances, enjoy a guarantee of equal pay for equal work—making it, Susan B. Anthony said, “the first place on God’s green earth which could consistently claim to be the land of the free.” Despite resistance from the U.S. Congress, Wyoming insisted on retaining those rights when petitioning for statehood; in 1890, when it became the forty-fourth state in the Union, it also became the first where women could vote. On the spot, it acquired its nickname: the Equality State.

At statehood, Sheridan was a tiny settlement, just across the line from Montana, just east of the Big Horns, and otherwise very far from much of anything. But two years later, following rumors of coal (true) and gold (overblown), the population began to boom. By 1909, when Khan arrived, around eight thousand people lived there and, on the evidence of the local business pages, the town had developed a kind of frontier-cosmopolitan chic. It had seventeen Blacksmiths, one Bicycle Dealer, and five purveyors of Buggies and Wagons. It had a Clairvoyant—one Mrs. Ellen Johnston—and a great many Coal Miners. Residents could go Bowling, or to the Opera House, or visit a Health Resort. They could get a Manicure from a Mrs. Rosella Wood, who was also available for Massages. They could read two different newspapers—one Republican, one Democratic. They could buy Grain and Guns and Horses, Books and Stationery and Coffee, Camping Outfits, Driving Gloves, Musical Instruments, and Talking Machines.

But perhaps the most striking entry in the Sheridan business directory was the one tucked in between “Tallow and Grease” and “Taxidermists”: “Tamales.” When Zarif Khan first began selling them, he shouldered a yoke with a bucket swinging from each end and

walked to wherever he could find customers: outside the bank at lunch, outside the bars at closing time, down at the railroad depot when the trains came in. Business was good enough that he soon bought a pushcart. By 1914, the Sheridan *Enterprise* was referring to him, inaccurately but affectionately, as “the well-known Turkish tamale

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vendor.” (In fairness, nearly all references to Khan’s nationality were inaccurate, including his own. Although he identified as Afghan and official documents pertaining to his life reflect that, his natal village was ceded to British India before his birth, and today belongs to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.)

In 1915, or maybe the year after, Khan opened a restaurant—a hole-in-the-wall on Grinnell Avenue, around the corner from Main Street. The hand-painted lettering on the façade said “Louie’s,” and, forever afterward, that is what both Khan and his restaurant were called. It had a service window that opened onto the street for customers who wanted their food to go, and a counter lined with stools for those who preferred to eat inside. In addition to the tamales, Khan served hamburgers, chili, pie, and ice cream—any flavor except chocolate, which he avoided because it sullied the cuffs of the white button-down shirts he liked to wear to work.

For nomenclatural purposes, however, none of these other menu items mattered. To the town of Sheridan, Khan would always be Hot Tamale Louie, or Tamale Louie, or, because it sounded best, Louie Tamale. He could have served steak tartare and the name would have stuck. Purists insist that it was apt, because nothing Khan or anyone else ever served was as delicious as his tamales. He made them at home, from chickens he kept in the back yard and killed in halal fashion. Everett McGlothlin, who last tasted one of Louie’s tamales when he worked there as a high-school kid, in the nineteen-fifties, said, “I love tamales, and I still haven’t found anything that comes close.”

For another faction, however, it was Louie’s hamburgers that dazzled. Sixty years on, locals who hear someone talking about Khan will cross the room and interrupt the conversation to say that he made the greatest burgers in the history of burgerdom. Five generations of Sheridan residents ate them, and those who are still around go into a kind of blissed-out cholesterol-bomb reverie when attempting to describe them. Some claim that he used only bull meat, and rendered his own tallow to fry it in. Others say he cooked the burgers in chicken fat, or sizzled bay leaf into the grease, or mixed in hearts and tongues.

“As exercise, it’s torture, but as torture it’s not so bad.”

Whatever his secret, Khan was particular about how he served his hamburgers. Cheese was unheard of, and woe betide those who requested ketchup. A burger from Louie’s came plain, or, if you chose, with mustard, pickles, and onions. (Several former repeat customers, now in their seventies and eighties, pointed an imaginary knife at me and said, “You wan’ onions, keed?”) He sliced the pickles the long way, with a rapidity that mesmerized his customers. On a good day, he went through a hundred and fifty buns. On a really good day—when the rodeo came to town, say—he would fire up a second grill and bring on an extra high-school kid, and tour buses would pull up and order a hundred burgers at a time. By 1919, the restaurant was doing so well that Khan opened a Ladies Annex, “fitted with tables for the convenience of women,” as the *Sheridan Post* reported. The place was still a hole-in-the-wall—those tables numbered precisely three—but it was the most popular hole-in-the-wall in town.

It helped that it was always open. Seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, Khan began prepping at ten, opened the window at eleven, and served food until midnight or one or whenever the last of the bar crowd went home. It also helped that he would serve anyone. Sheridan in 1919 was still the kind of place where businesses posted signs saying “No Dogs or Indians Allowed,” but Native Americans were welcome at Louie’s. Some of them, in consequence, became strikingly loyal customers. Joe Medicine Crow, the scholar and Second World War hero, who died this past April, at a hundred and two, loved Khan’s burgers so much that, on his way home to Montana after the war, he hopped off the train during a thirty-minute stop in Sheridan and was still down at Louie’s eating when it pulled out again—much to the

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dismay of his mother, who had organized a town-wide celebration at his home station.

Kids were welcome at Louie's, too, as were the women who worked at the nearby brothels and people who were too broke to buy a meal. Khan would hand out a tamale anyway, although the next time he saw you he might say, "Hi, Mr. Ten Cents," and if by then you had a dime you'd pay him back. The only people he refused to serve were the drunk, the foulmouthed, and the brawling, whom he personally threw out on their ears. He was five feet six and weighed a hundred and twenty pounds, but nothing and no one intimidated him. For one thing, he had got himself all the way to Sheridan from the Khyber Pass. For another, he was the one holding the foot-long knife. Also, he had good aim with an onion.

Khan's egalitarian attitude raised eyebrows among Sheridan's snootier citizens. In the end, though, no one could stay away from the food, and so Louie's gradually became its own little Equality State—an American kind of place, diverse and democratic, where the staff of the newspaper wolfed down post-deadline burgers elbow to elbow with society ladies, and schoolkids counted out their nickels next to stockbrokers ordering large. Meanwhile, Louie himself had gradually become American as well, and in 1925, after nearly twenty years in the United States, he decided to make it official. The town fathers, all of them Louie regulars, were happy to help; when Khan filed his naturalization petition, it was witnessed for him by the general counsel for the city of Sheridan and one of its former mayors.

The citizenship hearing was held on November 6, 1925. Because naturalization examiners showed up in Sheridan only once a year, the event was crowded with would-be Americans from around the county: seventeen from Poland, six from Austria, four from Czechoslovakia, two each from Greece, Scotland, Hungary, and Montenegro, one from Russia, one from Sweden, and one—Hot Tamale Louie, né Zarif Khan—from Afghanistan. On February 2, 1926, the paperwork came through, and Louie became a citizen. Five months after that, he received a subpoena from the U.S. Attorney for the district of Wyoming, ordering him to appear in court in the matter of the United States of America v. Zarif Khan.

The first naturalization law in the United States was passed in 1790, one year into George Washington's first term as President. It established that only "free white persons" were eligible to become citizens, a constraint designed to exclude Native Americans and slaves. After the Civil War, that law was changed to extend eligibility to people of African descent. As a result, beginning in 1870, those petitioning for American citizenship had to be either black or white.

That left immigrants from Asian nations in the lurch—deliberately, as Congress soon made clear. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act prevented anyone born in China from becoming American. The Immigration Act of 1917 established an "Asiatic Barred Zone": a region, encompassing dozens of countries, from the Middle East to Melanesia, whose native citizens could not be naturalized. In theory, such laws were plenty clear. In practice, however, Asians petitioning for citizenship simply contended that they were white. Whether that was true was a matter of heated dispute among ethnologists, anthropologists, political scientists, policymakers, and government officials around the nation.

The courts, brought in to clarify the issue, made a mess of it instead. In "White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race," the Berkeley law professor Ian Haney López provides a tragicomic list of court rulings on racial identity, together with their legal rationales. Among those rulings: that Hawaiians are not white (based on scientific evidence); that Mexicans are not white (based on legal precedent); that Burmese are not white (based on common knowledge); that Japanese are not white (based on legal precedent); that people who are one-quarter Japanese are not white (based on legal precedent); that Syrians are white (based on scientific evidence); that Syrians are not white (based on common knowledge); that Arabs are white (based on common knowledge); that Arabs are not white (based on common knowledge); that Native Americans are not white (based on nothing).

"Time passes more slowly in that dimension, so take these sudokus."

That is the kind of wild inconsistency that eventually compels the Supreme Court to weigh in, and in 1922 it agreed to do so. Instead of resolving the muddle, however, the Court issued two rulings in under a year that made matters worse. In the first, *Ozawa v. United States*, a Japanese man brought up and educated in Berkeley argued that, for naturalization purposes, he was white. The Court acknowledged that Ozawa's character was irreproachable, and also that he had a paler complexion than many people whose whiteness went uncontested. But it denied him citizenship, ruling that "the words 'white person' were meant to indicate only a person of what is popularly known as the Caucasian race." A year later, the Court took up the case of Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian man who was, as the Justices reluctantly conceded, technically Caucasian. This time, however, the judges ruled that "white persons" was "synonymous with the word 'Caucasian' only as that word is popularly understood."

Like Zarif Khan, Thind had already been naturalized; upon ruling against him, the Supreme Court stripped him of his citizenship. For most of U.S. history, that process, called denaturalization, was used to revoke citizenship that had been fraudulently obtained, or to remove from the ranks of Americans felons, traitors, and war criminals. The former Auschwitz guard Jakob Frank Denzinger was denaturalized, as was the anarchist Emma Goldman and the alleged Communist spy Solomon Adler. But, beginning in the early twentieth century, the Naturalization Bureau (later the Immigration and Naturalization Service) sought to denaturalize Asians who had been granted citizenship by courts that were either ignorant of current immigration law or deliberately defying it. According to the legal scholar Patrick Weil, this process was so far from systematic as to be scattershot. In effect, it came down to chance: an Asian citizen who'd had the good luck to find a lenient representative of the Naturalization Bureau then had the bad luck to be found by a strict one.

No one knows exactly how such a person found Zarif Khan. Perhaps he tried to obtain a passport, or perhaps he was summoned for jury duty, or perhaps someone read about his citizenship ceremony in the local papers and decided to tip off the authorities. Whatever happened, on August 12, 1926, U.S. Attorney Albert D. Walton—best known for helping to represent the federal government during the Teapot Dome scandal—filed a suit alleging that Khan's naturalization was "illegally procured."

Khan's case arrived at a curious moment in immigration history. The year before, an Indian man from San Francisco named Vaishno Das Bagai had been stripped of his citizenship, as had his wife and children—a particularly dire development for a California resident, because, by state law, those ineligible for citizenship could not own property. Sometime later, Das Bagai told his family that he was going on a business trip, booked a hotel room in San Jose, and killed himself. In the note he left behind, he described his suicide as a political protest. "I came to America thinking, dreaming, and hoping to make this land my home," he wrote. "But now they come to me and say, I am no longer an American Citizen. . . . Now what am I? What have I made of myself and my children?" Das Bagai addressed the note to the San Francisco *Examiner*, which published it.

Das Bagai's death marked the beginning of a gradual shift in both public opinion and official policy on denaturalization. In 1927, the Supreme Court refused to hear a case against a naturalized Indian man, thereby sending a message to the lower courts to stop revoking citizenship on the basis of race. By then, it was clear that, as a practical matter, no good would come of judicial wrangling over whiteness, and also that attempting to maintain a white population through naturalization policy was a losing battle. Moreover, immigration laws were rapidly becoming ideologically untenable as well. At the start of the Second World War, the United States was the only developed nation other than Germany to explicitly restrict citizenship on the basis of race—a common ground that became increasingly uncomfortable as Nazi atrocities came to light. Midway through the war, Congress repealed the Chinese exclusion laws. Immediately afterward, it lifted all race-based citizenship requirements.

But all that came too late for Zarif Khan. His citizenship was challenged at a time when the courts had consistently held that whiteness was a requisite quality in a new American, and one that Afghans lacked. At some point, his cause must have seemed hopeless; when his case came to court, Khan did not contest it. On December 30, 1926, a judge declared him “forever restrained and enjoined from setting up or claiming any right, privilege, benefit, or advantage whatsoever” of U.S. citizenship. All told, Khan had enjoyed those rights for under a year. Then his naturalization was cancelled, and the form on file with the court was emended to read “member of the yellow race.” He was ordered to pay the cost of the lawsuit, plus tax.

If Khan was bitter about his loss of citizenship, he didn’t show it. He may never even have mentioned it; no one I talked to, including his children, knew that it had happened. Instead, he set his sights on that most American of goals: making money.

It began in the nineteen-twenties, with the wealthy men who settled into the stools at Louie’s and studied their newspapers. What’s so interesting in there? Khan wanted to know. They laughed at him, but they told him. He began buying the paper every day and asking whichever kid was working for him to take a break from peeling onions to read the business pages aloud. Khan couldn’t read or write English. He had no formal education to speak of. But he was frugal, focussed, patient, and, as it turned out, exceptionally good at picking stocks. The rumor around town was that he’d already made a million dollars by 1929.

“C’mon—we are not staying home on a Saturday night.”

Whatever his earnings were, they were wiped out in the Great Depression. But he still had the restaurant, and

now he had experience. He began buying up stocks made cheap by the crash—General Motors, for instance, which was then trading at eight dollars a share and had hit ninety by 1960. Also General Electric, Standard Oil, Union Carbide, Northern Pacific Railway, B. F. Goodrich, International Telephone and Telegraph, and Texaco. He favored utilities, the energy industry, and mining companies. He bought thousands of shares in Lucky Friday, a silver and zinc mine in Idaho, for thirty cents each, and sat on them as they rose to thirty dollars.

In 1944, he hired a woman named Helen Ellis as a combination bookkeeper and all-purpose assistant. She worked for him for twenty years, doing everything from handling his correspondence to tying the strings on the ends of his tamales. When his finances got more complex, he hired an accountant—Bill Harrison, of the Presidential lineage—and Ellis began working exclusively in the restaurant. Khan himself kept working there, too. Very few people knew that he had any other source of income, and his day-to-day life betrayed no signs of improved financial circumstances. He still rented the same house on North Scott Street that he’d moved into in 1909. He still rented the same tiny restaurant space on Grinnell Avenue. He still walked everywhere, and he still worked eighty hours a week.

The only way Khan ever displayed his wealth was through his generosity, which had always been remarkable and eventually became legendary. In the nineteen-twenties, for instance, a country kid named Archie Nash began boarding in Sheridan so that he could attend high school there. In the long gaps between visits from his parents, when his money and his tolerance for loneliness ran out, Nash would go to Louie’s to soak up the company and gratefully accept free food. After graduation, he took a job at the *Sheridan Press*, and began buying a whole lot of meals at Louie’s. Eventually, he and a local woman fell in love; too poor to afford a wedding, they decided to elope. Nash told no one except Louie, who had only one question. As Nash’s daughter later told it: “You got ring for dat girl?” Nash did not. Louie opened his register, took out some cash, and told him to go buy one. That girl wore it for nearly forty years.

Stories like that abound. Khan knew everyone’s name, never failed to ask after sick children or aging parents, never forgot anyone on a birthday or Christmas. The hungry could count on him for meals, kids could count on him for jobs, overseas service members for money and gifts. Yet, as open as he was toward others, Khan was

reserved about his own life, almost to the point of shyness. He was professionally close to Bill Harrison, Helen Ellis, and his lawyer, Henry Burgess. Beyond that, he had no known friends.

Perhaps for that reason, no one ever seems to have asked Khan many questions about himself. Any information that circulated about him was largely rumor and often wrong. He was from Greece; he was from Turkey; he was from Mongolia. He was Buddhist; he was Hindu. He had spent some time in Texas; he once owned a grapefruit farm in Arizona. But, of all the questions that went unasked, the most glaring omission was the obvious one: Why was an Afghan man named Zarif Khan making a small fortune plus a whole lot of Mexican food under the name Louie Tamale?

People floated theories, of course. Some thought that Khan, before arriving in the United States, had worked as a cook in Mexico, then gradually made his way north to Wyoming. Others claimed that he first arrived in San Francisco, where a Latino immigrant taught him to make tamales. In reality, Khan never went to Mexico and was not taught his trade by anyone from Latin America. Instead, in becoming Louie Tamale, Zarif Khan also became part of a curious piece of culinary, labor, and immigration history: an entire network of Afghan tamale venders who, from roughly 1900 to 1920, sold their wares on the streets of nearly every city in the West, from small-town Wyoming all the way up to Alaska.

Tamales are old, as food goes; they preceded Columbus, and possibly Christ. They originated in Mesoamerica, likely courtesy of the Maya, and were the carry-out food of their day, much prized by soldiers, hunters, and other hungry people on the go. By the time Europeans got to the New World, tamales could be found, at a minimum, in much of Central America and throughout Mexico. As late as 1884, however, they were sufficiently unfamiliar in the United States that the Associated Press felt compelled to refer to them thus: “A queer article of food, locally known as ‘tamales.’”

Ten years later, tamales were the nation’s hottest new food trend, the cronuts of fin-de-siècle America. According to Gustavo Arellano, the author of “Taco USA,” the craze began in 1892, when a San Francisco man named Robert H. Putnam started the California Chicken Tamale Company. Putnam took his culinary cue from the city’s popular Mexican tamale peddlers and his fashion cue from, apparently, pharmacists: the venders he hired wore white from head to toe, with the company’s brand emblazoned on their hats and their buckets—mobile chafing dishes, basically, with fire below, boiling water in the middle, and steamed tamales above. Putnam then took his tamales to Chicago, where they became the hit of the 1893 World’s Fair.

Like other forms of peddling, the tamale business required relatively little up-front money, which made it attractive to immigrants and the poor. In New York City, tamales were sold chiefly by Irish and Italians, while in the South and the Midwest most venders were African-American. But in the Rocky Mountain West the tamale trade was dominated by men from Afghanistan.

“I’m not a guru. I’m just hanging out here till my renovation is done.”

AUGUST 13, 2007

Specifically, it was dominated by men from Afghanistan with the surname Khan. (The men were generally unrelated; the name is extremely common.) In the first two decades of the twentieth century, tamale-selling Afghan Khans could be found in Deadwood and Fargo and Reno; in Seattle and Spokane and Wenatchee, Washington; in Butte, Montana, which boasted eighteen such tamale men by 1913, and all over the rest of the state as well—in Flathead, Fort Benton, Silver Bow, Anaconda, Havre, Great Falls, Red Lodge, Miles City, Chinook, Billings. Starting in 1908, you could buy tamales in Alaska from a Buhadin Khan, a Habib Khan, an M. Khan, and a guy called Tamale Joe, whose real name was likely also Khan.

Not every tamale vender in the West was from Afghanistan, of course, and not every Afghan vender sold tamales.

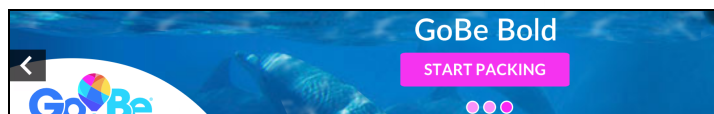
A smaller but still significant group, for instance, sold chili, as Zarif Khan later did in his restaurant. (One such vender, Dollha Jaffa Khan, got his start with a pushcart in Seattle, in 1916, before opening a successful chili parlor there. Later, Jaffa Khan changed his name to Joseph Joffrey; his son Robert went on to found the Joffrey Ballet.) But it was the Afghan tamale venders who were so common as to become a stereotype—akin to Turkish coffee-shop owners, Syrian rug dealers, and Jewish pawnbrokers.

With that stereotype went another: that tamale sellers were constantly at one another's throat. There was some truth to that, but the problem was not limited to Afghans. Throughout the country, for the duration of the culinary craze, headlines about "tamale wars" were comically abundant. "The hot tamale war which has been raging in this city for the past few weeks reached a climax last evening," the Colorado Springs *Weekly Gazette* reported in 1895: gunfire had broken out between rival venders and a boy named Harry Risner was shot in the arm. In Montana, in 1901, a man named Joseph Marino was killed by Salvagora (Bull Dog) Demicilli over "a rivalry in the tamale business." Among the Afghan venders, the worst of the tamale wars took place in Seattle, where the trade was dominated by a Khan with a mafioso reputation: mean, mendacious, scary as hell. Eventually, he was shot in the back, presumably by one of his fellow-peddlers, but, if the murder was meant to ease tensions in the tamale scene, it failed. Nearly a decade later, the Seattle *Star* was still reporting on "the vendetta of the hot tamale men."

All of this sheds some light on why Zarif Khan ended up in Sheridan. No one there seemed to know about the Afghan tamale trade, but some people recalled hearing that Khan had been treated poorly by other South Asians when he first came to America, and headed for the

hinterlands in search of a place with fewer immigrants—a report that comports with the climate in Seattle when Khan arrived. If you were him—new to the country, new to the tamale trade, by all accounts private and peaceable—you, too, might have gravitated toward small-town Wyoming.

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Contrary to family legend, however, Khan did not show up in Sheridan alone with his yoke and pails and introduce the town to tamales. He had a predecessor: one Azed Khan, born in 1871 in the Afghan village of Behbudi. Azed was the town's first tamale vender; when Zarif first appears in the Sheridan business directory, it is as his assistant. Over the next ten years, three more tamale salesmen and one chili peddler set up shop in Sheridan. All were named Khan, all lived in the same modest house on North Scott Street, and by 1923 all but Zarif were gone. By that time, tamales themselves were also on the way out. Between 1900 and 1916, sales fell from four million per year to just forty thousand, and the once omnipresent tamale vender began vanishing from city streets.

Among those who left the trade during this decline was a German-born Wyoming man named Louis Menge. In 1910, Menge placed an ad in the Sheridan *Daily Enterprise*: "Wanted: some one to learn hot tamale business." After finding a successor, he moved with his wife and child to Montana to try his hand at farming. Two years later, a return visit to Wyoming found him in dismal straits: the work was brutal, good help was scarce, and drought was destroying his crops. The Sheridan *Post*, which reported the visit, reminded readers that they had known the struggling farmer in better days: "Mr. Menge is more familiarly known to Sheridan people as Hot Tamale Louie."

These days, Mr. Menge is known to almost no one. His farm failed, his wife and child predeceased him, and he died alone at the Yellowstone County Poor Farm. Hot Tamale Louie, however, lived on. In time, the first man to hold that title was forgotten, along with all the other Khans who had come through Sheridan and the entire nationwide tamale craze. Soon enough, only Zarif Khan was remembered, because only Zarif Khan remained. As

many immigrants can tell you, sometimes a story about leaving turns into a story about staying.

By the time Zarif Khan applied to become a United States citizen for the second time, he had been living in Wyoming for nearly half a century. He was in his late sixties. On the naturalization petition, his official hair color had turned from brown to gray. His skin color remained unchanged but no longer constituted a barrier to citizenship. On May 4, 1954, the federal government conferred upon Khan the privileges and duties it had once forever enjoined him from claiming.

Meanwhile, Khan's life had changed in another momentous way. The year before, he had travelled to Pakistan and returned home a married man. The marriage was an arranged one; the bride, Bibi Fatima Khan (no relation), was fifteen years old. People in town talked, of course, but the tone was less judgmental than jokey—along the lines of “I wouldn't have thought he had it in him.”

“I just don't think attack ads have a place in selling baby clothes.”

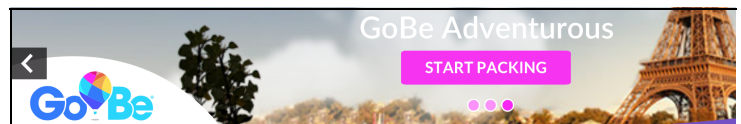
OCTOBER 13, 2008

He did, apparently; in the course of the next eleven years, the couple had six children. Khan, a doting father, could be seen around Sheridan hoisting his firstborn,

Roenna, on his hip, while pushing his infant son Zarif in a carriage. When they got older, they recalled for me, he took them to the restaurant, set them at the counter, emptied the till, and used the money to teach them how to count. Meanwhile, more children kept coming: Fatima, named for her mother, then Zarina, then a second boy, Nazir, and, finally, Merriam. After each birth, Khan flew the whole family back to Pakistan to introduce his relatives there to the new arrival.

In 1963, not long after Merriam was born, the family once again returned to Bara. This time, though, in addition to showing off his baby, Khan had business to conduct. Like many immigrants, he had spent much of his working life funnelling money back home: paying to build wells and mosques in areas where travellers would otherwise have no water to drink and nowhere to pray, buying land for his relatives to farm and houses for them to live in. Now he began giving all of that away, distributing deeds to those who were living in his properties and money to nearly everyone.

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In the course of doing so, his children told me, he got into a dispute with a ne'er-do-well grandnephew by the name of Sultan Khan. When Sultan was a kid, just sixteen or so, he had been involved in a violent crime; rich Uncle Zarif in America had helped bail him out and got him into private school, but the kid had not shown signs of reforming. Now Sultan was thirty years old, and rich Uncle Zarif was no longer inclined to be generous. Sultan screamed and threatened; Khan held his ground.

The next day, Khan and a different grandnephew left Bara early in the morning to run an errand in a neighboring town. In keeping with Khan's lifelong habit, they went by foot. Partway along the route, Sultan was waiting with a knife. It was June 23, 1964. Khan was roughly eighty—one of the few eighty-year-olds of whom it could be said that he still had most of his life ahead of him. In a picture taken earlier that year, he is holding the toddler Nazir on his lap, surrounded by his wife and other children. The oldest is barely ten, the next one eight, the next one seven. The others are too young to have begun salting away memories of their father, and they would never get to make new ones. Sultan Khan killed his cousin, then stabbed his uncle seven times. Zarif Khan died in the dirt in a place as important to his life as any other: the road out of town.

The shock of Khan's death was followed by the surprise of his will. Other than his accountant and his lawyer, no one, not even his wife, had known that he was rich. When the will was probated, his estate was worth

around half a million dollars—almost four million in today’s money. Supposedly, he had an equivalent amount back in Pakistan. Apparently worried that someone would marry his wife for her money, he had placed most of the estate in separate trusts for the children, leaving Bibi Fatima just ten thousand dollars plus a monthly allowance. Under Wyoming law, she was entitled to more, and, with the guidance of a lawyer, she sued for it. Eventually, she was awarded half the estate.

Thus began the afterlife of the Wyoming Khans. At the time of Louie’s death, Fatima was twenty-six years old, responsible for six children under the age of ten, uneducated, illiterate, unaccustomed to so much as leaving the house on her own. She brought a brother and a nephew over from Pakistan to help, and then, in an act of self-creation that rivalled Khan’s, set about figuring out how to thrive in Sheridan under radically changed circumstances. She hired an English tutor, learned to read and write, and joined the PTA. She got her driver’s license the same day as her oldest daughter. In 1970, she became an American citizen. Two years later, she bought the J.E. Motel and Café in Sheridan. Ever since then, the Khan family has been in the hospitality business—which, in a sense, Zarif was, too.

In time, the relatives whom Fatima brought over to help with her children married and had children of their own. Some of them brought over other relatives, who also married and had kids. Many of those kids now have children as well. As the family multiplied, it also dispersed.

In 2003, the brother Fatima brought to Sheridan moved to Gillette to open a hotel; these days, his branch of the Khans owns eleven hotels in the area, and his grown children have young kids of their own. In total, there are now some hundred and fifty or two hundred Khans, mostly in Wyoming, though also in South Dakota, Colorado, and beyond. As with most families, there have been fallings out, about the kinds of things families fall out over: who got more money, who got more affection, who slighted so-and-so at such-and-such a time. Still, most of them get along, and they try to get together—at Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, at births and weddings and funerals.

Many of the Khans contributed money to fund the mosque in Gillette, and the threats against it came as a shock to them all; none had ever personally experienced such vitriol in Wyoming. Zarif Khan’s children, in particular, seem to have been shielded from whatever racism and xenophobia they might have otherwise encountered in nearly all-white Sheridan by their father’s standing. “Growing up here, it was great,” Zarina, who now owns Sheridan’s Holiday Lodge, said. “We had friends. No one asked about our skin. No one asked about our religion. No one would say, ‘Where are you from?’” Instead, the community recognized the Khans as its own; immediately after 9/11, Zarif told me, his Jewish pediatrician showed up to make sure the family was all right. Even in those tense times, Zarina said, “we had no troubles, no friction, no fight.”

“The legitimate-businessman’s lunch?”

MAY 12, 2008

after high school, and spent the next decade in the Marines. Later, he worked in private security, in crab fishing, and in the oil and methane fields of the West. But these days oil is down, Gillette’s economy is suffering, and employment is hard to find. “You can’t even get a fast-food job in this town,” Colvin said; to get by, he’d been doing some computer and cell-phone repair.

That left him with a lot of time to stare at the Internet, which is how he learned about the mosque. Colvin was the one who organized the protests against it, and, according to the Khans, threatened to train a scope on it as well. He also menaced the town’s Muslims more generally; when he heard about a public lecture on Islam being

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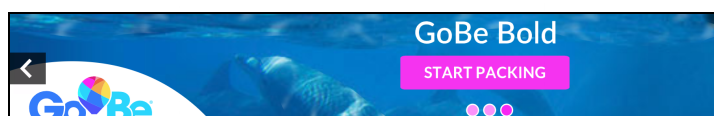
Fuchsia finds
its place in
the sun

held in Gillette, he used a podcast he produces to announce his plans to attend and “fuck some shit up,” and urged his listeners to come help him “run the ragheads out of town.” At some point, the threats grew sufficiently serious that the F.B.I. got involved.

Like the Khans, Colvin’s family has been in the West for a long time, though it represents a very different strain of the American character. “There’s been Colvins in Wyoming since the wagon-train days,” he told me. “My great-grandfather used to shoot Indians for the cavalry for five dollars a head.” That conduct—the effort by a group of newcomers to subdue or eradicate their predecessors through violence—is precisely what Colvin fears from Muslims. He believes that they are planning a violent invasion of America, and considers himself personally responsible for trying to stop it. That is why, he told me, he went to investigate the mosque after it opened. “I’m one of those people that just does stuff, O.K.?” he said. “I went down there and beat on the door and asked them who the hell they were and where they came from and what they were doing. They said, ‘We’re the Khan family.’ I said, ‘Well, that doesn’t mean anything to me.’”

Who the Khans are and where they came from and what they’re doing here is a long story, and a quintessentially American one. The history of immigrants is, to a huge extent, the history of this nation, though so is the pernicious practice of determining that some among us do not deserve full humanity, and full citizenship. Zarif Khan was deemed insufficiently American on the basis of skin color; ninety years later, when the presence of Muslims among us had come to seem like a crisis, his descendants were deemed insufficiently American on the basis of faith.

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Over and over, we forget what being American means. The radical premise of our nation is that one people can be made from many, yet in each new generation we find reasons to limit who those “many” can be—to wall off access to America, literally or figuratively. That impulse usually finds its roots in claims about who we used to be, but nativist nostalgia is a fantasy. We have always been a pluralist nation, with a past far richer and stranger than we choose to recall. Back when the streets of Sheridan were still dirt and Zarif Khan was still young, the Muslim who made his living selling Mexican food in the Wild West would put up a tamale for stakes and race local cowboys barefoot down Main Street. History does not record who won. ♦

Kathryn Schulz joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2015. In 2016, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing and a National Magazine Award for “[The Really Big One](#),” her story on the seismic risk in the Pacific Northwest. She is the author of “[Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error](#).”

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