

Texas Jewish Historical Society

Preserving Jewish Heritage in Texas
Est. 1980



November, 2012 News Magazine

Block(h) Family: Early Settlers of Rio Grande City

by Sally Drayer

Philip Block of Scottsdale, Arizona has graciously donated his family documents to TJHS. Mr. Block grew up in Laredo. The following information is taken from some of the documents.

In August, 1890, three Bloch (in the U.S. it has been changed to k) brothers left their village in Wintzenheim in Alsace and landed in Texas. The three brothers were Leon, Salomon, and Gustave. Leon had been a sergeant in the French army during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. When he returned home to Alsace, it had been taken over by the German government. Many Jews left the region; they



Andree (age 20) and Gaston Block (age 31).

chose not to remain under German rule. Most crossed over the border to France and several immigrated to the United States, many of them settling in Texas. Leon settled in Galveston, while Salomon and Gustave settled along the Rio Grande. Gustave was known as Ephraim in France. In the U.S., he was known as Ephraim, Gustave, Gustavo, or Gus.

Ephraim (Gustave) married Clemence Bernheim on October 19, 1889, in France. According to the 1900 and 1910 census of Rio Grande City, Ephraim had a business there and employed a cousin and a

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Winter Meeting

The Winter Board meeting of the Texas Jewish Historical Society will be held in San Angelo, Texas on January 25-27, 2013 to help celebrate with the community the unveiling of a Texas historical subject marker. The marker will commemorate the "Early Jewish Community of San Angelo and its Synagogue". TJHS helped fund this marker as part of its Grant Program.

Barbara Rosenberg, TJHS Chair of the week-end, is looking for people who have lived in San Angelo or surrounding towns who attended the synagogue, to send their memories with the group. Please contact Barbara at bcr218@aol.com with your memories.

Descendents of some of the early Jewish pioneers will

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Message from the President

by Marc Wormser

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to extend a belated Happy New Year, along with the wishes for good health for everyone.

It is hard to believe it is already October. The year has moved very quickly, and while we still have much to accomplish this year, many programs and projects have been put into motion.

Following our "workshop" board meeting in June, we finalized the database published the bi-annual membership directory, which you should have



received. We made every attempt to correct spellings, addresses, emails, etc. We apologize for any mistakes that may appear. Let us know if any of your information is incorrect so that we can update our database. The task of assembling the directory requires a tremendous amount of time and due diligence. Without the fantastic efforts put forth by our proof readers, Davie Lou Solka, Sally Drayer, Samylu Rubin, Helen Wilk, and Gordon Cizon, as well as the great job that Alexa Kirk performed in putting in the final touches and proofing, the directory could not have been produced. Thanks to all of you.

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In September, Barbara Rosenberg, with great energy and enthusiasm, put together a display and program showing the Jewish contributions to the city at the 175th year celebration of Richmond, Texas. Also there to help and present programs were TJHS members Marvin Rich and Jan Hart. Barbara found a great interest among the attendees in a variety of Jewish topics. Many people took applications and information about TJHS. We might find some members down the road.

Book orders are coming in for Volume 2 of our Burial book. Volume 1, which is only available in spiral is also a hot item and we only have a few copies left. Thanks to Rusty Milstein for handling the orders and shipments.

We are working on a total makeover of our web site. Hopefully in the near future you will see a major change.

We have had many emails requesting information about Jews in Texas, both from a historical perspective as well as genealogical angle. The world is slowly finding the existence of TJHS. In particular, many requests are from people trying to locate burial sites of family members who had lived in Texas. That is the beauty of our Burial Books. Through the efforts

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The Texas Jewish Historical Society November 2012 Quarterly News Magazine

The Texas Jewish Historical Society News Magazine is published four times annually. Stories about Texas Jewish history, oral histories, and requests for assistance with research are welcome, as are photographs and historical documents. Please provide color photocopies or scans at 300 dpi or greater, in .gif, .tif, or .jpg format, and send electronically to Assistant Editor Davie Lou Solka at editor@txjhs.org or by mail to 3808 Woodbrook Circle, Austin, TX 78759, 512-527-3799. Be sure to include your name and contact information.

Publisher-Editor Alexa Kirk
Assistant Editor Davie Lou Solka
Photographers Marvin Rich and Davie Lou Solka

Note: The Texas Jewish Historical Society is unable to guarantee the safe receipt and/or return of documents or photographs. It is strongly recommended that you provide color photocopies of both color and black & white documents. We welcome your comments and suggestions.

Visit us on the web at www.txjhs.org.



The News Magazine of the Texas Jewish Historical Society (USPS) is published four times a year by the Texas Jewish Historical Society, P. O. Box 10193, Austin, Texas 78766-0193, Travis County. Periodical postage paid at Houston, Texas. Postmaster: send address changes to the Texas Jewish Historical Society, P. O. Box 10193, Austin, Texas 78766-0193. www.txjhs.org.

brother-in-law, who also lived with him. Ephraim and Clemence had three children: Gaston, Pierre, and Robert. The census shows that both Ephraim and Salomon owned their homes free of mortgage.

In May, 1996, a resident of Rio Grande City stated in an interview that the business that the brothers owned was still standing at that time and was a restaurant. Before becoming a res-



Ephraim Block

taurant, it was a general merchandise store that sold groceries and farm and ranch supplies and equipment. At one time, the Block family owned land in Starr County on the Osborne Ranch, north of Rio Grande City, and lots in and around the city. Much of the land that they owned was sold when the family later moved to either Laredo or San Antonio.

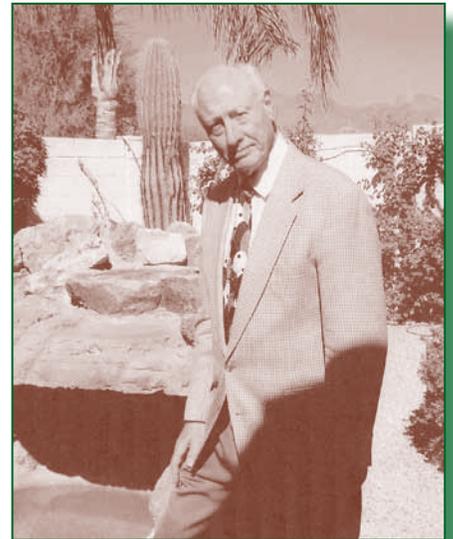
Salomon owned a lumber yard across the street from the mercantile store that was later run by his children, Lucien, Marcel, and Camille. The three children never married, thus leaving no descendants. When Camille passed away in the 1970s, her estate was divided among all of her known family. The lawyers in San Antonio spent several years locating all of these relatives mailing them each a check with their share of the proceeds. Many of these recipients had no idea who Camille Bloch was, but found it exciting to find their name on the list, especially those who had never left France.

Ephraim's son Pierre married and had two sons. His other son Robert remained single and there are no documents describing what happened to him.

Ephraim's son Gaston married Andree Wertheimer, who was also born in France, and they moved to Laredo, where Gaston was one of the owners of P. Block and Co., which was the first freight-forwarding company in Laredo. They had one son, Philip.

Philip Block grew up in Laredo where his mother was active in the Jewish community and taught Sunday School at the Reform Temple for a number of years. She was also a member of many different clubs and was active when she was younger. Mr. Block remembers his home in Laredo on Musser Street and has many fond memories of growing up and of his friends and family. One of the interest-

ing documents related to his mother is the letter that she received from the American Consular Service in May, 1932. It was in accordance with a petition for the issue of an immigration visa, executed in her behalf by her husband. The department issued her a non quota status as an applicant for an immigration visa. Another of her documents is an application for reentry into the United States when she returned from France to visit her



Philip Block, 2004

parents, June 1933.

When Philip's parents grew older they moved to San Antonio. Gaston passed away in July, 1971, and Andree followed in December, 1987. They are buried in San Antonio.

Mr. Block's paternal grandparents and uncle are buried in Brownsville. Gaston passed away in 1919. 

We need Your Stories!

We are currently looking for stories with ties to Texas Jewish history! Any kind of story about your family history or your Temple's history can fill the pages of our quarterly news magazine. Write your story, and if you have questions or need help, call our

assistant editor.

Everyone has a story to tell, long or short. Your history is of interest to members across Texas and the nation! And you will be able to see your family's history in print. It is a wonderful keepsake and a valuable piece of genealogy for fu-

ture generations.

So what are you waiting for? Send your article to our assistant editor, Davie Lou Solka, at editor@txjhs.org, mail it to 3808 Woodbrook Circle, Austin, TX 78759, or call her at 512-527-3799.

TJHS Fall Board Meeting



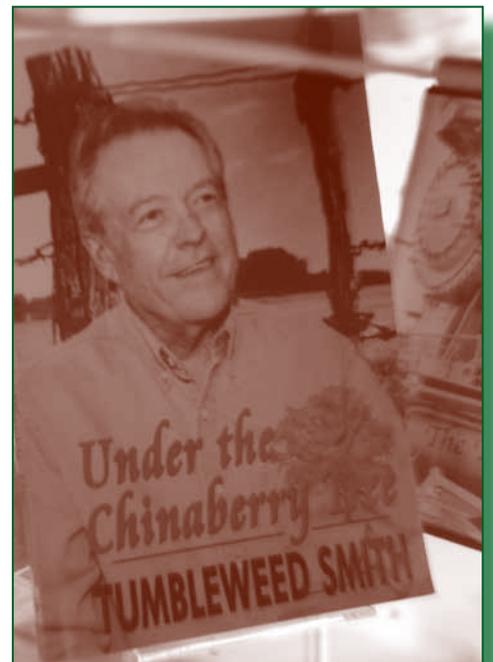
This is the view of the beautiful countryside of Big Spring State Park from the pavillion during Shabbat Eve services.



Shabbat Eve services attendees on top of a mountain at Big Spring State Park.



Marc Wormser, Ben & Barbara Rosenberg, Joyce Wormser, Tumbleweed Smith at dinner.

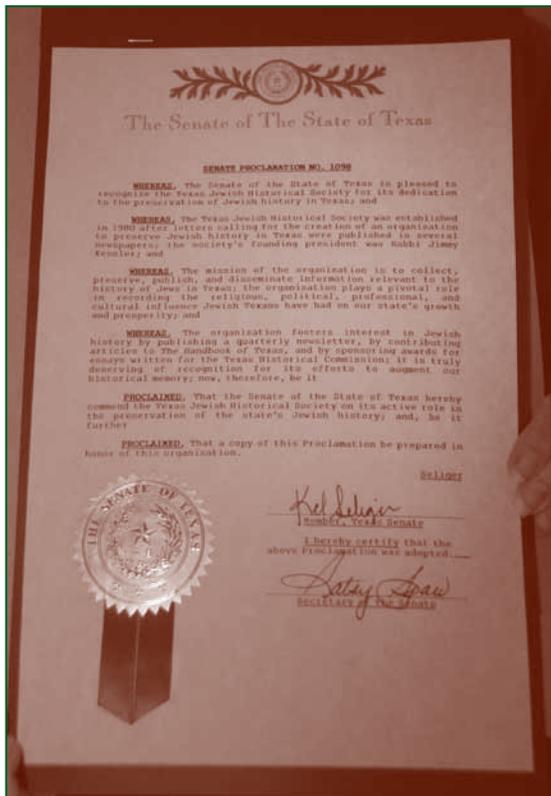


Tumbleweed Smith, aka Bob Lewis, has assembled the largest private collection of oral history in the U.S. This book, Under the Chinaberry Tree, is a collection of fascinating East Texas tales and folkwisdom.



Hollace Weiner stands in front of an exhibit of Texas Longhorns at the Heritage Museum.

— Big Spring, Texas, October 12-14, 2012 —



TJHS members in downtown Big Spring.

A proclamation of the Senate of the State of Texas recognizes the Texas Jewish Historical Society for all of the work that we do.



TJHS members who attended the Fall Meeting.

TJHS Fall Board Meeting



The Heritage Museum in Big Spring welcomed our group.



Big Spring resident and weekend chairperson Susan Lewis gave TJHS members a guided tour of Big Spring.



Joyce Wormser stood among the vast collection of antique dolls at the Heritage Museum.



Rabbi Murray Berger paused at an exhibit at the Heritage Museum.



Susan Lewis showed photos of Big Spring from the 1940s.

TJHS Members Honored by the 25th Dallas Videofest

by Sally Drayer

Cynthia and Allen Mondell of Dallas, Texas were honored Sunday, September 30, 2012, at the Dallas Museum of Art during the 25th Dallas Videofest. They founded Media Projects in Dallas in 1978, a non-profit company dedicated to producing and distributing documentary films that represent social problems and celebrate the diversity of people. The Texas Jewish Historical Society was noted by Allen as sponsors of some of their work and acknowledged the presence of Hollace Weiner and Sally Drayer.

Allen and Cynthia presented their story of how they came to Texas and the beginnings of Media Projects. The audience was shown highlights from the body of their work including film clips of “West of Hester Street,” “The Monster Among Us,” (both of which were financially supported by TJHS), “6th Street Museum,” “A Fair to Remember,” (about the Texas State Fair), “A Reason to Live.” (a documentary about depression and suicide among young adults), and “Sisters of 77” (which concerning the

first federally-funded National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977). Clips were also shown from “Waging Peace: The Peace Corps Experience,” which Allen just completed, and “Sole Sisters,” Cynthia’s current project about women’s identities and life stories told through their shoes. (I shared my own story

about my late mother, Blanche Sheiness, and her lovely SAS shoes, and Hollace Weiner shared her “Lone Stars of David” boots story.) Following each section of film clips, a question and answer period was held. The Mondells gave personal anecdotes about some of the films.

Cynthia and Allen Mondell have made over forty films and have won numerous state and national awards. Mazel tov to you both on them on the wonderful honor and tribute. 🇺🇸



Left to right: Sally Drayer, Allen and Cynthia Mondell, and Hollace Weiner



Cynthia and Allen Mondell were honored at the 25th Dallas Video Festival.

Please Note:

If you are sending a check to the Texas Jewish Historical Society, please indicate the purpose of the check—dues, gift, contribution, etc.

Grant Requests

Sonny Gerber is chair of the Grant Committee. All requests for grants should be directed to Sonny at 5610 Grape, Houston, TX 77096. Sonny can be reached at 713-817-6290.

THE WHOLE DAMN DEAL:

ROBERT STRAUSS AND THE ART OF POLITICS

by Kathryn J. McGarr.

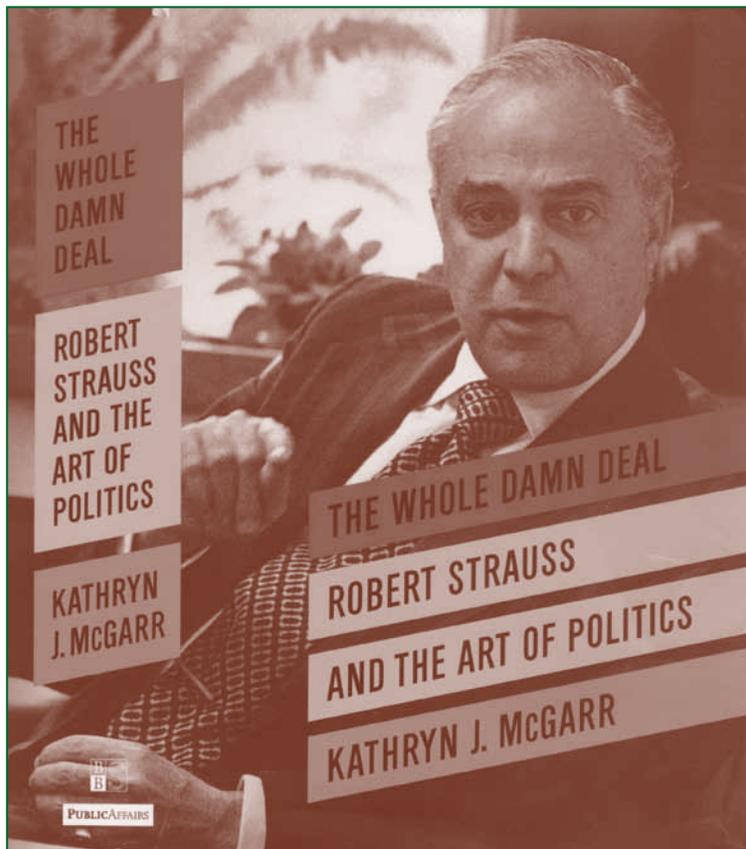
New York: Public Affairs, 2011. 443 pages.

Review by Hollace Weiner. Reprinted from *Southern Jewish History*, 2012

The meeting was at an impasse. The League of Women Voters, which organized presidential debates, was ready to adjourn another unproductive session with representatives of incumbent Jimmy Carter and GOP rival Ronald Reagan. Reagan's liaison, James Baker III, left the room for the men's lavatory. Forty-five seconds later, Carter's henchman, Robert Strauss, excused himself. Fifteen minutes later the pair returned with a twelve-point agreement scribbled on the back of a campaign envelope.

The urinal conference of 1980 was vintage Bob Strauss—a deal brokered out of the limelight, one-on-one, with a wink and a hint of sexism. This was not the first time that personal relationships bridged party, ideological, and procedural differences where Strauss, a Texas power broker, was concerned.

The men's room meeting also illustrates the underlying theme of Strauss's biography, *The Whole Damn Deal: Robert Strauss and the Art of Politics*. Strauss, who in his political heyday from 1960 to 1992, took charge of the Democratic National Committee when it was mired debt, resuscitated trade talks with Japan, and served as George H.W. Bush's ambassador to Moscow, is a folksy negotiator who used charm, wit, and insights into human nature to move the wheels of politics on a national and interna-



tional scale. Personal relationships were his forte—whether facing Mikhail Gorbachev on the back of a flatbed truck or recommending his rabbi for a seat on the University of Texas Board of Regents. Whenever possible, this lawyer evaded sunshine laws. In the decades before red-state/blue-state divisions and Tea Party stridency, Strauss crossed the aisle. He thrived on bringing together disparate people—whether that involved putting George Wallace and Ted Kennedy on the same stage in 1973 or getting Carter and Reagan to a televised debate in 1980.

One caveat for readers of this entertaining biography: The author, Stanford University alumna Kathryn McGarr, is Strauss's grand-niece. She

wrote the book's first draft while a graduate student at the Columbia School of Journalism. Some years earlier, her great-uncle, who will turn 94 in October, had hired a seasoned journalist to assist with his memoirs. He recorded more than 70 interviews before the partnership dissolved. So that political analysts would not lose sight of Strauss's pivotal role, McGarr utilized those interviews along with FBI records, White House files, congressional hearing transcripts, Democratic Party memos, State Department telegrams, additional personal interviews, and research at four presidential libraries

to produce a discerning political biography with forty-nine pages of endnotes.

Organized chronologically, with colloquial chapter titles ("A Dog That'll Hunt," "A Bunch of Goddamn Fools"), the book examines not only Strauss's deftness as Jimmy Carter's "Mr. Fix-It," but also his conflicts of interest involving oil, gas, and savings and loans. Among the eye-opening chapters is "Revolving Door," which details how the Strauss law firm of Akin, Gump became the first on Capitol Hill to develop a lobbying arm, setting a dubious example that is now ubiquitous.

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Strauss's status as a political insider had its downside. He endured some tense months in 1975 while under criminal investigation for accepting rolls of currency for the Democratic National Committee. "[I]n those days you handled a lot of cash," he acknowledged. Rather than record exact amounts, Strauss wrote donors thanking them for "tangible evidence of your support." Unlike his mentor, Texas Governor John Connally, Strauss escaped indictment because an amendment to the 1974 Campaign Spending Act reduced the statute of limitations on such violations from five years to three.

In 1979, Strauss had a disappointing stint as Carter's envoy to the Middle East. Initially, he fretted that Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin would "resent" him because he lacked a "formal" Jewish education. Yet Begin bonded with Strauss, as did Egypt's Prime Minister Anwar Sadat. Ironically, it was Secretary of State Cyrus Vance Sr. and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski with whom Strauss found himself at war. Their diplomacy was more bureaucratic than his personal brand.

Although Bob Strauss, who was born in 1918, is the great-grandson of Texas' first ordained rabbi, he had next to no Jewish education. His German-born father, Karl "Charlie" Strauss, and his uncle Louis Rosenwasser were the only Jewish merchants in Stamford, a West Texas town of 4000. The two families attended High Holy Day services one day a year at the Reform synagogue in Fort Worth, 145 miles away. Strauss's mother, Edith, hired a Hebrew tutor from Wichita Falls, 115 miles distant, to teach the Alef Bet to Bob and his younger brother, Ted. But the teacher quit 30 minutes into the first lesson, saying it was hopeless. The boys did learn from their mother that they were among the Chosen People, an insight

Bob kept to himself lest his Baptist friends become jealous. So popular was the youthful Bob Strauss that the "only door closed" to him in his hometown was presidency of the Baptist Young People's Union, of which he was a social member.

When Strauss enrolled in 1935 at the University of Texas in Austin, another door was blocked. He could pledge only a Jewish fraternity. "That was a very difficult, traumatic experience for me," he recalled. "I . . . wasn't prepared for the segregated society that I found at the University of Texas where basically Jewish people lived with Jewish people." However, once he joined the Jewish fraternity Sigma Alpha Mu, the Greek system provided an avenue to larger campus life. He became secretary-treasurer of the Inter-Fraternity Council and an extraordinary ticket seller for college events, foreshadowing his fundraising in years to come. Fellow students recall him as "the most popular Jewish boy" at UT.

It was on a blind date, but not with each other, that he met the love of his life, Helen Jacobs, daughter of a Dallas paper company executive. He phoned her the next day, and their relationship endured until her death in 2004. The couple wed in 1941, just before his graduation from law school in Austin. Helen was by his side during his four years as an FBI agent and in 1945 when he launched his law firm with former FBI colleague Richard

Gump, a Catholic. She accompanied Bob throughout his career, from the tumultuous party convention in Chicago to Washington, D.C., (where he once directed her to attend LaBelle Lance's Christian Bible study group as a show of support when Budget Director Bert Lance was under investigation). In 1991, Helen moved with Bob to Moscow, where the ambassador's residence "looked like a cross between a pigsty and a West Texas whorehouse." The Strausses ordered dill pickles and deli meats from abroad and raised morale by throwing picnics for the embassy staff.

Again, the personal touch enhanced Strauss's efficacy with bureaucrats and diplomats. The fact that he was a Democrat serving a Republican president enhanced his aura. It was a different time, a bygone, bipartisan era that McGarr effectively reconstructs as she sketches Strauss's political career and lays out the facts so that future historians can integrate and analyze his role on the political stage. 

Contributions

The following donations have been received by the Texas Jewish Historical Society:

A Gift to the Endowment Fund:
In Memory of Don Teter
From his granddaughter, Jamie Linares

Save the Date

January 25-27, 2013

Winter Meeting
in San Angelo, Texas

April, 2013

Annual Gathering

June 7-9, 2013

Summer Meeting
in Corsicana, Texas

**The deadline for
the February 2013
TJHS News Magazine
is Saturday,
January 19.**

Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities

The Texas Jewish Historical Society awarded a grant to the Institute of Southern Jewish Life to research and publish the histories of Jews in Texas towns. These histories are available on the Institute's website and are called "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities." We will print one of these histories in each issue of our News Magazine. Thanks to Dr. Stuart Rockoff, director of the History Department, for permission to reprint these articles. To see other towns, go to the Institute of Southern Jewish Life website and click on "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities."

San Angelo, Texas

Fort Concho, established in 1967 at the forks of its namesake river, served as a United States army outpost to protect isolated settlers and campaigns against Native American tribes in the region. When Bartholomew De Witt purchased 320 acres for development near Concho on a loan on which he later defaulted in 1875, his creditor Marcus Koenigheim ended up owning most of what would become San Angelo. Koenigheim lived in San Antonio, though his luck, which he considered a misfortune, marked the beginning of a Jewish influence in San Angelo. A frontier community graced by saloons, gambling and prostitution, Koenigheim once sought to trade his business blunder for a barrel of whiskey. He was refused and told the whiskey was more valuable. San Angelo's prospects improved by the 1880s, when it became the seat of Tom Green County after a flood decimated nearby town Ben Ficklin. It was aided economically by the construction of the Santa Fe Railroad in 1888. As a burgeoning center for agriculture and ranching in West Central Texas, Jews prospered in San Angelo throughout the next century, influencing the city far beyond their small numbers.

The first Jews who moved into San Angelo worked as merchants, dry goods salesmen, and sutlers. The SAN ANGELO STANDARD newspaper reported on the closing of Jewish businesses for High Holidays as early as 1884. Trader Joseph Loeb is likely

the first Jew to arrive in San Angelo, establishing a partnership with William S. Veck, but they left for another outpost during the 1870s.

Schwartz & Raas, owned by Louis Schwartz and Joseph Raas, was an early Jewish mercantile business and their building is one of the oldest permanent structures in the city. Raas, born in France, worked in San Angelo for a number of years before returning to California to run a wine house after the business closed in 1894. Polish born Samuel and Jacob Lapowski made their way to San Antonio and opened a chain of dry goods stores in West Texas. The San Angelo store was "the biggest general merchandise firm in West Texas" according to the STANDARD.

Though he came from Russian Jewish stock, the Lapowski family quickly assimilated into American society. Samuel married a Swedish Lutheran immigrant, raised his children as Protestants, and changed the family's last name to "Dillon". With S. Lapowski and Bro, making large earning in the growing city, Samuel later sold out and left San Angelo. His son Clarence, worked with the prominent Wall Street banking firm, Dillon, Read & Co. and became one of the richest men in the United States. His son, C. Douglas Dillon, was Ambassador to France and Secretary of Treasury under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, and Chairman of the Rockefeller Foundation and the

Brookings Institution.

Not all the area's Jews made their living in shop keeping. Although he married a Gentile and took up her religion, Sol Mayer distinguished himself as one of Texas's Jewish cowboys. Working in his father's San Angelo store and learning to be a ranch hand as a teenager, he helped found F. Mayer & Sons and bought the T-Half Circle Ranch in Schleicher and Sutton counties. Sol was instrumental in the creation of the San Angelo National Bank and served as its President, built a telephone line from San Angelo to Sonora, and donated a portion of his ranch in McKavett for a Boy Scout Camp that still bears his name. The Angelo State University Administration Building is also named for Mayer.

By 1910, San Angelo's population stood at 10,000. According to the American Jewish Yearbook, there were twenty Jews residing in the city in 1912. A congregation, Beth Israel, was formally chartered in 1913 with services held in local public buildings and hotels. Yeshiva educated David Goldman, a local real estate agent known as "Rabbi Dave" served as lay leader during the time, conducting services every Friday night and for High Holidays. By 1930, the city's population had increased to over 25,000 with around eighty Jews. Max Weinberg, who moved to San Angelo with his family in 1926, pushed for a permanent house of worship. This

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dream was realized in 1927 when local businessman H.C. Ragsdale provided a lot for its construction. Temple Beth Israel, a small two-story structure located on West Beauregard Street, was ready for services the following August. Its March, 1929 dedication was attended by San Angelo's mayor and Christian ministers, and was broadcast over a local radio station.

More Jewish families had settled in San Angelo by the construction of San Angelo's temple, including the Gorens, Cohens, Stools and Robinsons. New Jewish businesses, such as Fine's, the Maurice Shop, Ray & Willick and the Boston Store had opened.

The Donsky family was one of the most successful of the new Jewish merchants. After graduating high school in Dallas, Nathan Donsky arrived in 1927 to operate concessions for the San Angelo Shepherders, the city's short-lived semi-professional

baseball team. He left San Angelo after the team folded, but returned in 1930 and accepted a partnership with jeweler Leon Fine. After Donsky opened Nathan's Jewelers in 1939, his operation expanded into several Texas towns with the help of his brother, Abe "Honey" Donsky, who, according to legend, was once held up by Bonnie and Clyde. Nathan was widely known for his philanthropy in San Angelo, and served as a head of the San Angelo Chamber of Commerce. He was elected the San Angelo Citizen of the Year in 1978.

The Temple never formally affiliated with a particular branch of Judaism. Nevertheless, the community was active in a number of Jewish civic and religious organizations. A chapter of Young Judea formed in the late 1920s and existed until at least 1931, and a B'nai B'rith chapter began in 1946. Beth Israel also served Jewish

soldiers from nearby Goodfellow Air Force Base. The Temple offered Sunday School classes though the building only had one classroom. Classes also met in the kitchen, sanctuary, and the meeting hall. Beth Israel hired Rabbi David Schayerson to lead services and teach Hebrew in 1951. San Angelo's first and only Rabbi, he served the congregation until his death in 1971, and is buried in Lawnhaven Cemetery's Jewish section in San Angelo.

The city's Jewish population peaked at approximately 125 during the 1970s. Since then, numbers have declined to less than twenty by 2000. Nevertheless, maintaining their tradition is important for the handful of Jewish families in the area. Lay services are still held every Friday night and for High Holidays, and the first Bat Mitzvah since 1960 was held in 2008. 

Winter Meeting, continued from page 1

share memories of their colorful ancestors. Former residents from all over the United States are expected to add information to archives in the Jewish subject files at the West Texas Collection at Angelo State University, and to TJHS's Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas in Austin.

A unique view of the West Texas Jewish Experience, where the synagogue never affiliated with any of the major religious divisions, but always remained independent, not unlike the spirit of its community, will be presented for the week-end. Registration form for the meeting is elsewhere in this news magazine. 

Message from the President, continued from page 2

of one of our members, Hershel Sheiness, the decision has been made to supply JewishGen with a copy of our burial database to be made available on its site. We will receive recognition on the site as well as a link back to our web site. JewishGen understands it is protected by copyright with TJHS as the owner. If you have not had a chance to visit the JewishGen site it is www.jewishgen.org.

Our October Board Meeting was held in Big Spring, TX and a busy, informative week-end was planned by Susan Lewis. Services and Shabbat dinner were held on Friday night, followed by a trip on Saturday to the Heritage Museum showing photos of the local early

Jewish merchants. Saturday night following dinner, a panel discussion was held regarding the Jews in the Permian Basin and the influence on each. A much deserved thanks to Susan for planning such a great week-end. Thank you, to Hollace Weiner for moderating the discussion panel.

As a reminder, there are still a few members who have not paid dues for 2012. Dues statements for 2013 will go out in a few months and it would great if we could receive your 2012 dues before that statement is sent. If you are not sure if you are current, please call me or send me an email and I will let you know if you are current. 

Visit us on the web at www.txjhs.org.

www.txjhs.org

From Our Archives

The Pryzants of Willis, Texas

by Vickie Vogel

Gedalla Yussel (Joseph George) Pryzant was born in Chervinsk, Poland (near Warsaw) in 1892 to Paisach and Chava Pryzant.¹ Two years later, his brother Chaim (Harry) was born. When Harry was two years old, Chava died giving birth to twins. When Paisach remarried, the young boys were not what their step-mother wanted, and they were apprenticed to a merchant to work for their keep. By the time they were pre-teens, they were living by their wits on the streets of Warsaw. Joseph once boiled his belt to get a little broth. They saw their father from time to time, but Paisach barely made a living selling second-hand shoes, and could not help them and keep peace with his wife. They later divorced.

When Joseph became old enough for army duty, he and a friend took off for Bremen, Germany. The friend returned to Warsaw when his mother became ill, but Joseph worked until he saved enough money for passage to America on the *Breslav*,² which arrived in Galveston in 1912. He was twenty years old.

Along with other immigrants, he was given food and shelter through the Hebrew Free Loan Society and set to peddling bananas, which is how he learned English and how to make change. Loading a wagon with hay

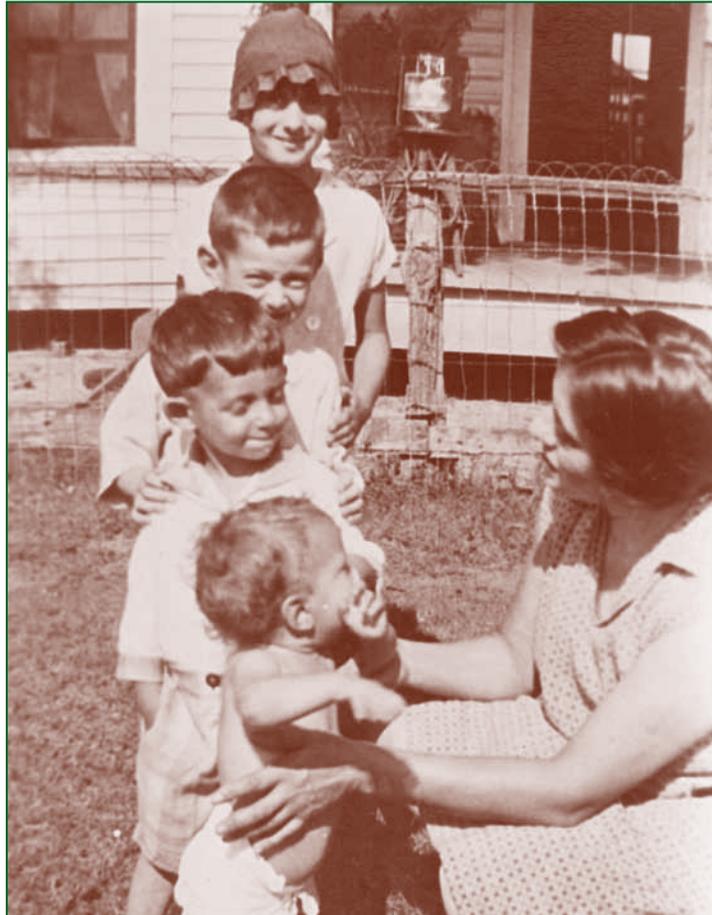


Photo courtesy of Nancy Pryzant Picus. From top: Margaret, Nat, Jack and Hertzyl Pryzant, with mother Annie.

and placing bananas and oranges atop, the peddlers worked their way towards Orange, stopping at farms and towns. At night, they would spread some of the hay under the wagon and sleep there. When the load was half sold, they turned back toward Galveston and sold the rest on the way there. After a few trips, a peddler would travel alone or take a greenhorn with him.

Joseph soon got a job at Louis Kaminsky's junkyard in Houston³ and lived in a boarding house. For once, he had leisure time and joined the YMHA

and Yiddish drama clubs where he made many friends.

He fell in love with Annie Wilkenfeld, who was born in 1894 in Austria. Her father, Hershel "Hertz" Wilkenfeld, came to New York City in 1899 and worked in a cigar factory until he made enough money to go back and get the family. Having friends in Houston, they returned through Galveston and settled on South Street. He peddled, ran a grocery store, and soon owned rental property. He wanted to buy property near where the Rice Hotel later stood, but was talked out of it as being on the "wrong side of the bayou." Instead he bought in North Houston, which proved to be less lucrative.

Annie and her sisters enjoyed a happy childhood, but did not have a lot of money. They would pool their coins and send sister Orina to the movies on their behalf, because she was the best storyteller. She would return home and reenact the show for the family.

Joseph and Annie married in 1917 and honeymooned in Galveston.

Boarding the train for Dallas, Joseph went looking for a place for him and his bride to settle down. He checked out each stop, and liked the

continued on page 13

looks of Willis, a small but clean Polish and German farming community without a dry goods store. He rented a store and a room at the boarding house and returned to fetch Annie and as much merchandise as he could carry on the train. The business flourished, as the farmers were happy to have someone with Polish language skills. The population of Willis at that time was around 300.

When the store and apartment burned while the Pryzants were in Houston welcoming their first child, Margaret, they rebuilt with the insurance money and bought a small house where their second child, Nat, was born on April 17, 1923. Nat was the first Jewish child born in Willis, and as word spread that a “Jew baby” had been born, folks came from far and wide to see if he had horns. “I was more popular than any side show attraction,” Nat joked.⁴

The Houston to Dallas train stopped in Willis, and since Dallas Cantor Reuben Caplan had gone home to Houston for Passover, Joseph was able to engage his services as a mohel on a stopover on his return trip to Dallas. The “minyan” consisted of local townspeople.

Besides Margaret and Nat, the Pryzants welcomed three other children: Jack, Hertz, and Frank. Joseph sent for his father, Paisach, to join them from Poland. He lived with them for a while, but unable to make a match in tiny Willis, he returned to Poland in 1927 where he remarried. After the Nazis came to power, the family never heard from him again.

In 1926, Joseph bought a battery-operated radio. Their porch became the center of the community as neighbors would come to hear news and music after work, while all the children played in the yard. When the radio programming ended, Joseph would play the harmonica while other neighbors played the fiddle, guitar and

banjo. Joseph had to keep the radio locked up while Paisach lived with them, because he was determined to remove the back of it and free the tiny announcer inside.

Young Nat had two good friends growing up, Snooky and Frank. He never knew Frank’s last name. He was African-American, so they did not go to the same school in segregated Texas. They enjoyed outdoor physical activities. Snooky’s father was a bit of a daredevil. He took Nat and Snooky for a motorcycle ride, with Nat sitting in front astraddle the gas tank. They went “90 miles an hour on an iron ore, red gravel highway”⁵ which cured Nat of any interest in motorcycles. Snooky’s dad had also built an airplane, but Nat was not tempted to go for a ride.

Nat and his little brothers, accompanied by their dog Billy who shepherded them across roads, would follow Frank for long hikes in the woods and along the creeks to hunt for crawdads, squirrel, rabbits, and birds which Frank would take home since Annie would not accept them. The boys built a tree house, although Jack preferred to stay under the house with Billy.

With a garden, chickens and a mare, Nat enjoyed an idyllic rural childhood. They could not keep kosher, so Annie only bought the forequarter of beef and koshered it with salt. They never ate pork at home, and matzos were bought in Houston for Passover. Their seders were just the immediate family, except when Uncle Harry or Grandpa Paisach was there. Annie lit candles and made a special dinner on Shabbat.

Joseph’s brother Harry left Warsaw and came to Willis around 1925 and opened a grocery store. Harry lived with Joseph until he sent for his family.⁶ Once a week, Harry would travel to Houston to pick up bananas, produce, and staples, the only time his Model T truck was used. Snooky’s

dad taught Snooky and Nat to drive it when they were only seven or eight years old. They had the time of their lives until Uncle Harry started missing his gas. He chained the truck to a tree.

Uncle Harry never missed the bananas that Jack figured out how to remove from the center of the bunch as they hung on the back porch. He would take them under the house where he and Billy the dog hung out.

Harry built a house next door to Joseph. When his wife and five daughters moved in, the Jewish population of Willis exploded!

When cotton was harvested in the fall, all the farmers would line their wagons up along the Pryzants’ street and wait their turn at the gin. Nat and his family bought peanuts and roasted them to sell to the waiting farmers. Later, they added sandwiches and hamburgers to the menu. The boys shined their shoes, watered the teams, or ran errands to make a little extra money. The whole family stayed at the store on Saturdays, when everyone came to town, to watch for shoplifters or otherwise help out.

Sundays were spent in Houston where the Pryzants kept an apartment. They could bathe, visit relatives, go to the movies, and on special occasions go to Mrs. Silvey’s for dinner. Joseph had invested in real estate at Chenevert and Pierce around 1921, and built a store for A & P which contained three two-bedroom apartments.

At school, Nat faced his share of anti-Semitism, as some parents had told their children that the Jews killed Jesus and were vile people. Margaret and Nat learned to fight and protect

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If you need TJHS membership applications for an event, program, personal use, etc., please contact Rusty Milstein at hrmilstein@prodigy.net.

themselves. They got the reputation of being “tough” so that by the time Jack entered school, they were not often picked on. Despite the prejudice, Joseph was accepted in the Masonic Lodge and was elected Worshipful Master.

Hertzel was born in 1927. He suffered a terrible accident which almost ended in tragedy. While the nanny was washing clothes in the backyard, boiling them in a big pot with lye soap, Hertzel dropped his cookie in the water and tried to fish it out. His arm and shoulder were terribly burned. He soon caught pneumonia, hovering between life and death for several weeks, and was left with permanent scars.

Joseph opened a second store in New Waverly, which had also attracted Polish immigrants.⁷ Annie had her own business, in addition to the store, sewing cotton sacks and dresses for large-sized women. Joseph brokered cotton and loaned money, taking cotton bales for security. When the depression hit in 1929, the New Waverly store was closed, and mortgaged property in Houston resulted in a loss. From then on, Joseph never bought anything on credit.

The WPA and the CCC brought needed improvements to Willis and the Pryzants during the Depression, including a new outhouse on a concrete floor. The family was grateful they no longer had to worry about chickens pecking them as they read the Sears, Roebuck catalogue. The highway was paved, eliminating the dust in front of their house.

In 1932, as Margaret matured, Joseph and Annie decided she and Nat should have a Jewish education. Margaret was 13 and was drawing the attention of the local farm boys. An arrangement was made for them to share a bedroom in one of the Houston apartments, and their uncle E. W. Wilkenfeld to live in the other. The routine was for the family to drive

to Houston on Sunday and spend the night. All except Nat and Margaret would return Monday morning. Joseph would pick them up Friday night and they would stay in Willis with the family on Saturday.

Education at Longfellow Elementary was a definite improvement over the tiny school with one teacher in Willis. Nat and Margaret went to Hebrew school in the afternoon. Stopping at Root Square Park one day on the way home, they met Bonnie and Clyde, but didn't realize who they were until later.

In 1934, Nat's parents bought him a bicycle, which ignited his entrepreneurial spirit. He sold magazines at St. Joseph Hospital two blocks away. In 1936, Nat became Bar Mitzvah. Joseph closed the Willis store except on weekends and later sold the store and house to his brother, Harry. The house in Willis did not have electricity installed, because Joseph always knew it was not their permanent home. They left in 1936.

A & P had vacated the Pryzant premises, but continued to pay rent on the stipulation that it could be rented to anyone except another grocery store. Joseph decided to open a grocery store himself, much to A & P's dismay. The stress of the business, however, resulted in Joseph suffering a heart attack at the age of 44. He never worked again. Annie and Nat ran the store. Unable to afford a butcher, Nat took the post at age 14. His specialty was pork sausage, which became very popular, but the store was sold the next year.

Nat went to Lanier Junior High and Lamar High School, class of 1940. At age 16, he joined the Young Judaea club at Congregation Beth El where at last he had Jewish friends. Nat applied to Rice Institute as an engineering student and was mortified to be rejected. He learned that Rice had a two percent quota on Jews - eight Jewish freshmen

per year. Rabbi Robert Kahn went to bat for him, and at last he was admitted as an academic student rather than his first choice as an engineer. Nat joined the Navy in 1941, but was not called to active duty until 1943, by which time he was a senior at Rice. He graduated after the war. He served in the South Pacific, meeting up with Rabbi Kahn in New Guinea at Rosh Hashana services. Nat participated in the liberation of the Philippines.

Margaret went to Tulane and married Sollie Hakam.⁸ Hertzel attended the University of Texas (Class of 1948), and Jack joined the Navy. Jack later became an architect, artist and sculptor after graduating from Rice.⁹

When Nat returned to Rice to complete his degree, he met Molly Miron and fell in love. Born in 1928, she was the youngest of nine children of Hershel and Essie Miron. They married in June 1948, a double wedding with Mollie's sister Goldie and Sy Mann, at Beth El on Crawford and Lamar. Nat had been unable to find a job as a Jewish accountant, so he constructed a rental building at Winbern and Chenevert. He also took a job with Finger Interests. They honeymooned in New Orleans and moved into an apartment house (Unit #1) with his parents in #2, Jack and his first wife in #3, and Margaret and Sollie in #4. Nat was recalled to active duty for the Korean conflict, stationed in Chicago and New Orleans.

Nat left Finger's and started building apartments with his partner, Henry Cherry. He received his MBA from the University of Houston in 1951. After discharge from the Navy in 1954, he returned to building and property management. In 1956, a son, Joseph Robert, joined his and Molly's two daughters, Peggy Elaine and Nancy Sue. After Nat's father died, another daughter, Connie Elizabeth, was born in 1959.

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Honor or Memorialize a Friend or a Loved One With a Donation to the TJHS Endowment Fund

When you honor or memorialize a friend or a loved one with a donation to the Texas Jewish Historical Society's Endowment Fund, you help support important programs. Send the honoree's full name, type of honor (memorial, congratulations, or occasion—birthday, anniversary, award, new child or grandchild, etc.) and your name, along with a check in the amount of your choice, to

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The Pyzants, continued from page 14

Tragedy struck in 1960, six days after Molly's thirty-second birthday. She collapsed in their bedroom and died as Nat frantically tried to revive her while awaiting the ambulance. The autopsy determined ruptured pancreas, a very rare event. Nat never entered their bedroom again. With Peggy in second grade and Nancy in kindergarten, a live-in nanny helped out.

Nat Pryzant married Stasia Tunick in 1961. In 1964, son Charles was born.¹⁰ Nat and Stasia separated in 1977, and in 1980, he married Doris Forman Wechter. In 1994, Nat recorded his family history for his children and nine grandchildren. He wanted his family to know about their roots, because his parents had concealed much of their past. Nat Pryzant died April 27, 1998. Doris Pryzant still lives in Houston.

Bibliography

- ¹ Nat Pryzant, "My Story," 1994, Box 3A190, Texas Jewish Historical Society Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. All material is from this article unless otherwise noted.
- ² The Breslau or Breslav was a German passenger steamship that worked the Bremen-Baltimore- Galveston route. She was seized in New Orleans on American entry into World War I. <http://www.petratfamily.com/breslau.htm>
- ³ "Wanted 100 cars bones, all kinds of junk, bottles, metals, scrap iron, and manila rope." Ad for Louis Kaminsky Junkyard in Brownsville Daily Herald, Vol. 13, No. 34, Ed. 1, August 12, 1904, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph146632/m1/4/zoom/?q=kaminsky>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Nat recalled there was a law that you had

to establish residence for five years before bringing your family over. Harry's wife Doris and their four daughters came in 1930.

⁷ New Waverly, Texas is a small town in Walker County, 13 miles south of Huntsville. Its current claim to fame is as the home of the gymnastics training center operated by coach Bela Karolyi. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Waverly,_Texas

⁸ Margaret died in Houston in 1986. <http://search.ancestry.com.au/cgi-bin/sse.dll?gl=37&rank=1&sbo=t&gsbco=Sweden&gsln=Hakam>

⁹ Jack married Sandra Director. They had three children: Andrew, Julie (who married Robert Shaddox) and Rodger (who married Eydie of Falmouth, Maine). Jack died in 2006. http://www.chron.com/CDA/archives/archive.mpl/obits_4048508/pryzant.html

¹⁰ Charles Zanwill Pryzant is a psychiatrist in Dallas. <http://simplee.com/doctors/charles-zanwill-pryzant> 

Fill in the Blanks

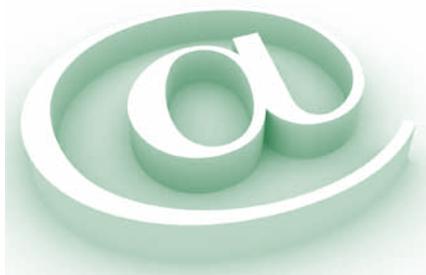
This photo, submitted by TJHS member Enid Klass, is of the Temple Israel Sunday School in Wichita Falls, Texas, November 1936. Ms. Klass is appealing to members of TJHS to help identify the children in the photos, including married names or corrections. If you can help, contact Davie Lou Solka at editor@txjhs.org.



Left to right, front row: _____, _____, Denna Levine, Enid Klass, Hannah Rabinowitz, Dorothy Perlman, Gerry Katz, Lottie Sepkowitz, Ruth Kelson, Rita Oberndorfer, Marcella Persky, _____.
Second row: Teacher _____ Ribnick, Larry Kriss, Sonny Fagadau, _____ Pink, Leo Fields, Marvin Zale, Stanley Kriss, Charles Emold, _____, _____, Rose Marion Levine.
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Does TJHS Have Your Current Email Address?

Is your email address current? Has it changed since the 2010-2011 directory was printed? Have you changed email providers? If so, please send Marc Wormser an email at marc.wormser@att.net so that he can update your information in the database. To reduce postage costs and printing delays, we are going to



be electronically sending as much mail as possible, so don't be left out or behind—send your current information today!

Please put "email change" in the subject line and with your name in the text of your message, and send it today! Thank you.

In Memoriam

Dr. Sondra Oster Kaufman,



TJHS member, died in Dallas on August 27, 2012. She is survived by her sons and daughters-in-law, Aaron S.

and Marilyn Kaufman of Dallas; Charles O. and Vonne Kaufman of Austin; and Harold M. and Lisa Kaufman of New Orleans; eight grandchildren; and one great-grandson.



William Ira Naxon, TJHS member, died on June 26, 2012, in Dallas. He is survived by his wife, Eya; his daughter, Jan

Naxon; his daughter and son-in-law, Elise Cary and Louis Leibs; his sons and daughters-in-law, Adam and Ella Naxon, and Seth and Kim Naxon; and seven grandchildren.



Sam Beckett,

TJHS member, died on April 9, 2012, in Saledo. He is survived by his wife, Anne; his daughter and son-in-law, Eliza-

beth and William Moran, and his grandson, Trey Moran.



Dr. Len Gravier,

TJHS member, died on June 17, 2012, in Dallas. He is survived by his wife, Pauline; his daughter, Lisa

Graivier Barnes and her husband and children; his son, Dr. Miles Graivier and wife and children; his daughter Tracy Graivier Bell and her husband and children.



Harold Arnold Pollman,

TJHS member, died on July 22, 2012, in Dallas. He is survived by his wife,

Leah; his daughter, Cheryl Pollman; his daughters and sons-in-law, Janet and Terry Kafka, and Marcie and Michael Brown; and five grandchildren.



David Luskey, TJHS member, died in Fort Worth August 6, 2012. He is survived by

his wife, Idelle; his children Debra (Michael) Shoftman and Michael (Amy) Luskey; four grandchildren; sister, Rebecca "Toots" Gold; brother, Alvin "Butch" (Sandra) Luskey; sisters-in-law, Bernice Luskey and Lorraine Luskey; many nieces and nephews.

May their memories be a blessing.

Texas Jewish Burials, Volume II

The Texas Jewish Historical Society has published *Texas Jewish Burials, Volume II*. The burials in this volume are an addition to *Texas Jewish Burials, Volume I*, and is available in both a hard-bound and spiral-bound edition. The hard-bound edition is \$50, and the spiral-bound edition is \$25. These prices include shipping and handling. Please send your order, with payment and shipping address included, to P. O. Box 10193, Austin, TX 78766-0193. There are only seven (7) copies of *Volume I* left, and each is available for \$23, which includes shipping and handling. 🇺🇸



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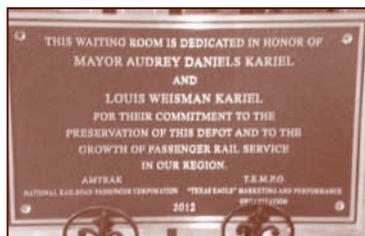
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Mazel Tov

to the following Texas Jewish Historical Society Members

Audrey and Louis Kariel, of Marshall, who were honored on September 29, 2012, with a plaque from Amtrak and TEMPO (Texas Eagle Market and Performance Organization) dedicating the waiting room in the Marshall Depot to them. The historic passenger station was saved from destruction due to the efforts of



the Kariels. The plaque reads "This waiting room is dedicated in honor of Mayor Audrey Daniels Kariel and Louis Weisman Kariel for their commitment to the preservation of this depot and to the growth of passenger rail service in our region."

Please send information for this column to Davie Lou Solka at editor@txjhs.org.

Can You Guess This Member?

The picture to the left is the photo of a current TJHS member as a young boy. Do you know who this member is? Email your guess to Davie Lou Soka at editor@txjhs.org. In order to give all of our members an equal chance, the contest does not open until December 1. The first person who guesses correctly *on or after December 1* will receive one free year of membership. Entries received before that date will not be considered. Previous winners and family members are ineligible. The winner will be announced in the next issue.

In the last issue of the news magazine, we published the photo at the right. The first person to correctly identify

this photo of Kinky Friedman (left) and Rabbi Jimmy Kessler in the summer of 1969, was Jayne Nathan of Houston, who will receive a free membership to TJHS for 2013. Three other people also correctly identified the men: Patti Maltz, David Beer, and Hy Penn. Thanks to everyone for participating!





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TJHS Traveling Exhibit

The Texas Jewish Historical Society has compiled two museum-quality photo exhibits, with explanations, depicting early Jewish life and contributions. Both exhibits highlight the lives of Jews in Texas since the early part of the century.

Each exhibit is comprised of approximately thirty-six photographs that can be either self-standing with an easel back or hung on a wall. There is no charge for the exhibits, and they will be shipped, prepaid freight via UPS in waterproof boxes, to

your location. The only expense to the borrower will be the shipping of the exhibit back via UPS ground.

The exhibits have been displayed in various locations in Texas and other parts of the United States, including Rhode Island and California. They are an excellent program for schools, congregations, and other organizations. To schedule the exhibits, please contact Jack Gerrick at 817-927-8765 or email him at texbed@aol.com.



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