

Texas Jewish Historical Society



December 2015 News Magazine

B'nai Abraham: From Brenham to Austin by Davie Lou Solka

Leon and Mimi Toubin had a dream—their dream was that the B'nai Abraham Synagogue building would one day again be a place for worshippers to hold daily minyanim, for happiness and *kvelling* at a Bar Mitzvah, at a wedding, and even at a bris. That dream came true—not

in Brenham, Texas, where the 122-year-old synagogue building was begun, but in Austin, Texas, on the Dell Jewish Community Campus. The ninety-mile journey for the synagogue began on January 3, 2015, when the building was cut into three horizontal pieces and placed on flatbed trucks to be transported to Austin.

The Toubins had lovingly cared for the building and gave tours whenever someone wanted to visit, but they began to realize that they would not be able to continue to do this much longer. Leon contacted Jay Rubin, CEO of



From Brenham to Austin. On left: B'nai Abraham in Brenham, Texas. On right: At its new home in Austin with a new sign.

for the move, including a \$25,000 grant from the Texas Jewish Historical Society. The cost of this move was over \$600,000.

In 1885, the Jews of Brenham organized a formal congregation with twenty-two charter members. The first synagogue was built in 1892, but burned down and was replaced with a new building the next year – 1893. By 1899, B'nai Abraham was organized as an Orthodox congregation

Shalom Austin, to see if he thought there would be interest in moving the synagogue to Austin. Jay immediately said yes, and the journey began. Leon and Mimi contacted family members and others who had roots in Brenham and money began to come in

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Message from the President

by David Beer

Dear Fellow Society Members,

It would appear that cooler weather has heralded the arrival of fall. (It's about time!) With summer behind us, the temperature is falling and the days are shorter, and we start to think of upcoming events. Thanksgiving, Chaunukah and finally the start of the secular New Year.

For those of you who were not able to make our fall meeting held in Tyler October 23-25, 2015, a great time was had by all, in spite of the rain (which fell continuously throughout the weekend). We were not able to



visit the Jewish cemetery or the Tyler Rose Garden due to the weather, but we all enjoyed a Shabbat Eve dinner at Congregation Beth El with services following. We had a wonderful Saturday morning panel discussion

about growing up in Tyler with some of the people who still call Tyler home. Because of the rain, Saturday afternoon was a "take it easy" affair, with everyone doing whatever they wanted. Although this was different from our usual Saturday afternoons, it

was nice to not have scheduled events.

Saturday night was a wonderful dinner at our hotel, followed by Rabbi Neal Katz giving us a presentation on "The Jews of Smith County" (where Tyler is located). This was a delightful program that really gave us a good understanding of the history of the Jewish community of that area. Sunday morning, we held our quarterly board meeting.

Plans were made for our Winter Board Meeting in Galveston on January 8-10, 2016. The founder of our organization, Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, and I have worked to put together a weekend of activities that will be a perfect way to start the New Year.

The weekend will begin with a Shabbat eve dinner at Temple B'nai Israel, followed by Shabbat services. Saturday, we will visit the old Temple, the Scottish Rite Temple and the Seaport Museum. Saturday night will be special. We will have dinner at the world famous Gaido's Restaurant and then attend a performance of *The Rose*, starring Olympia Dukakis in a one-woman show at The Grand 1894 Opera House. Sunday morning, we will meet at B'nai Israel for breakfast, followed by our board meeting. This is going to be a great weekend, so

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The Texas Jewish Historical Society December 2015 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 Editor Davie Lou Solka at davielou@solka.net or by mail to 3808 Woodbrook Circle, Austin, TX 78759, 512-527-3799. Be sure to include your name and contact information.

Editor Davie Lou Solka
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Note: The Texas Jewish Historical Society is unable to guarantee the safe receipt and/or return of documents and 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.



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The Levine Brothers of Sealy, Texas

by Melvyn Levine

My dad, Gus Louis Levine, with only an eighth grade education, opened a very small store on Fowlkes Street in Sealy in 1915, after he left Brenham at the age of twenty. In 1917 he bought the Otto Albert store (built around 1890) at 217 Main Street in Sealy across from the present Citizens State Bank. Here they sold groceries, hardware, saddles, harnesses, and feed. A few years later they had an Oliver tractor dealership and sold the first tractors in Austin County.

Uncle Abe Levine joined the business after World War I, and Uncle Maurice became the third partner in 1924 after attending Brenham's Blinn College. He pitched for the Blinn baseball team and was known as "Lefty" Levine.

In 1928, they constructed an adjacent building of equal size. Two large archways were put in the partition wall enabling customers to go from the grocery store to a new "dry goods" store. The new addition offered men's, ladies' and children's clothing, shoes, fabric, sheets and towels, tables and chairs, and Samsonite luggage.

The brothers were always looking for new ventures. In 1940, they started ranching, which developed into a cow/calf operation. Uncle Maurice usually looked after the cows and also worked at the Wednesday cattle auctions started by C.A. Mewish of Bellville.

The Sealy Elementary School (now Levine Park) was two blocks from the store. Frequently during



Levine Bros. grocery store interior, 1947. Note bank teller cage which became the office. Behind counter on left are Gus Levine, Maurice Levine, and Frank Fisher, a Katy Railroad agent. In front of the counter are William Black and Joe Block.

recess I would go to the store for a half hour to stock shelves or just "hang out." No one was concerned that any safety problems would arise as they would today.

My dad, Gus, died at a train crossing accident on December 29, 1948, when I was ten. My mom, Frieda, my sister, Dana, my brother, Sid, and I moved to Houston in 1949, but kept our Sealy home. We would go to Sealy every weekend, and Mom and I worked in the store.

When I graduated from high school in 1956, I was ready to get back

to the store. However, my mom insisted that I go to college, so I reluctantly enrolled at Oklahoma University in Norman, Oklahoma. This was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I was a member of Sigma Alpha Mu fraternity and made lifelong friends from across the United States with whom I am still in contact on a monthly basis.

When I graduated from college, I immediately returned to Sealy and worked in the store until it was closed on December 24, 1994. Until we closed the store, I believed that

I would be in the store every day of my life. I married Barbara Macow, who was from Houston (her parents are Moses and Shirley Macow) on February 3, 1953, and we have three wonderful children—Janis, Mike, and Sharon—all of whom graduated from Sealy High School. Sharon died of cancer at the age of thirty-nine on December 29, 2008. My father-in-law, Moses, grew up in Austin across the street from the Treaty Oak.

From 1930 until the late 1950s, tokens and coupon books were used

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Save Postage

Please notify TJHS when your address has changed or if you may be temporarily away from home when the News Magazine is to be delivered. These issues are returned to us at a postage due return of \$1.52 (at printing date) per Magazine. These amounts add up—it's your money we are trying to save!



TJHS Winter Meeting in Tyler

October 23-25, 2015



Members mingled in the Hospitality Room.



Rabbi Neal Katz presents "A History of the Jews of Smith County."



Saturday night panel: Jimmy Franks, Mike Gross, Ronnie Horsley, and Donn Bindler.



Sitting in the back row: Debbie Winegarten and Joan & Louis Katz. In the front row: Samyhu Rubin.



Members visited before the meeting began on Sunday morning.



Susan Lewis, Recording Secretary, and David Beer, President.



Rusty Milstein and Gary Whitfield.



Ruth Nathan; Sonny & Sharon Gerber; Dick & Claire Brooks; Vickie & David Vogel.

Photos by Sally Drayer and Gayle Cannon

and had an active religious school with twelve students. It remains an Orthodox congregation to this day, and Orthodox services will continue in Austin as a home for Tiferat Israel, a modern Orthodox congregation. The inside of the building was based on Eastern European synagogue design, and the exterior was designed to blend in with similar religious structures in the area.

In addition to cutting the building into three parts for transport, permits had to be obtained, and architectural drawings for the restoration and upgrades. In order to meet City of Austin building codes, the electrical and air conditioning systems had to be completely replaced, along with handicap accessibility and a separate building for restrooms.

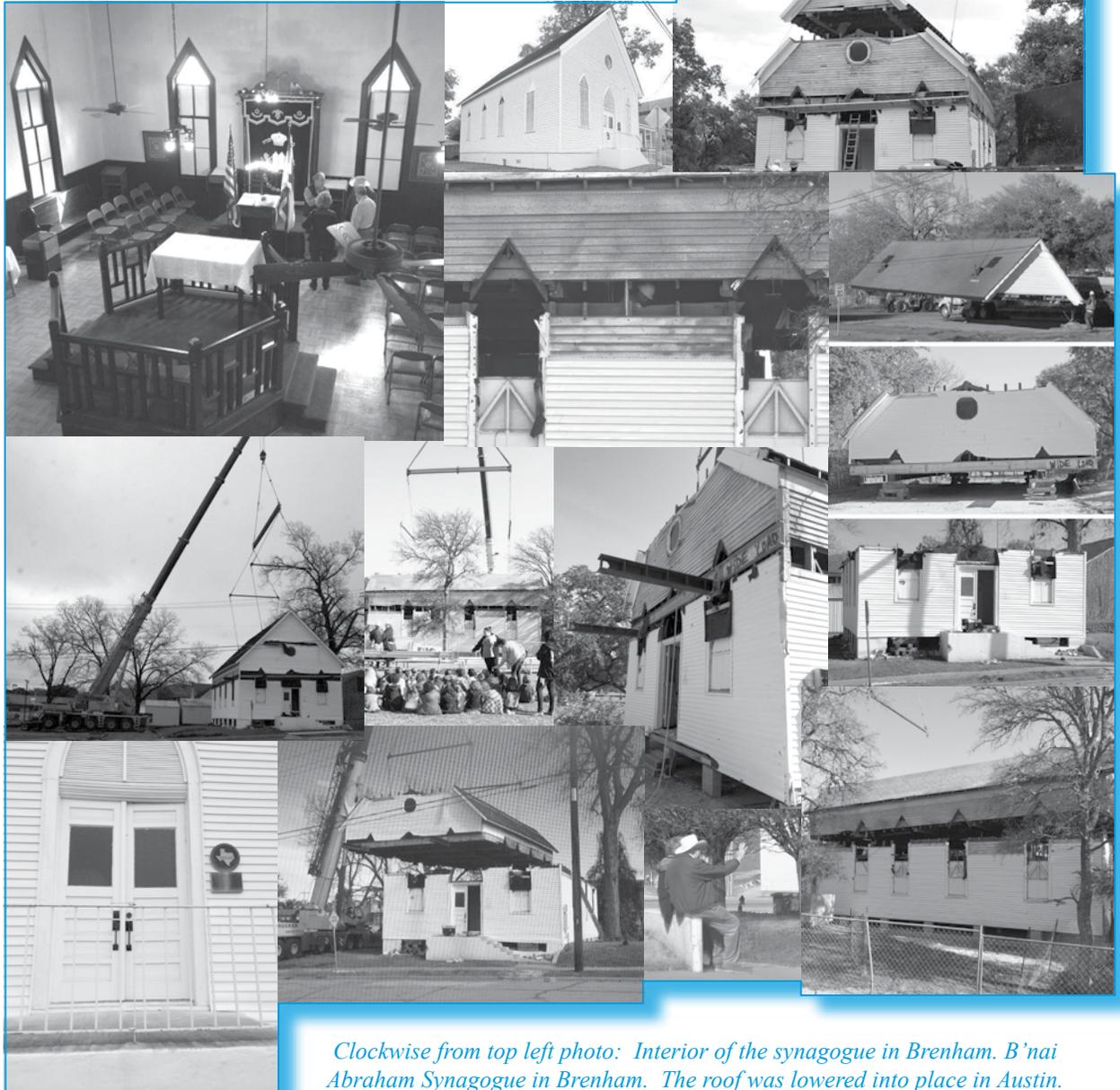
Prior to making the move to Austin, the Ark and Bimah were taken apart by Tom Schiffour, a longtime

Central Texas resident who now resides in Israel. Once the building was moved and reassembled, he returned to Austin from Israel to reassemble and restore the Ark and Bimah to their present conditions. Some of the work required included a new roof, new exterior siding, new flooring and new paint throughout the Sanctuary. The contractor was instructed

to maintain the character of the synagogue as it was when it was located in Brenham.

Groundbreaking for the move was held on October 26, 2014, on a beautiful, hot day. Soil from Bren-

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Clockwise from top left photo: Interior of the synagogue in Brenham. B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Brenham. The roof was lowered into place in Austin. Each section of the building was trucked separately on a flatbed truck (three photos). Attaching the middle section. Mimi & Leon Toubin waved good-bye as B'nai Abraham began its journey to Austin. The middle section was lowered into place in Austin. The doors in Brenham with the Historical Marker. The crane took the synagogue apart to prepare for the move. Three center photos clockwise from top: The sides were carefully attached into place. The supports that held the middle section in place on the truck. Even the smallest ones watched as the building was reassembled.

ham, Austin and Israel was placed in the ground where the synagogue would be located. The first third of the roof arrived on the Dell campus on January 15, 2015, after spending seven nights in Rockdale due to rain and winds. The second section arrived January 27-28, and the final third arrived February 5, 2015. The roof was reattached on February 13, 2015, with many people watching, including children from the Austin Jewish Academy and the Preschool. The work began at 8:00 am, and continued throughout the day, finishing in time for the beginning of Shabbat.

Dedication of B'nai Abraham Brenham Historic Synagogue was held on August 30, 2015, with over 500 people in attendance, including Austin Mayor Steve Adler; Austin City Council Member Sheri Gallo; and Brenham Mayor Milton Tate. Tours of the building were held for attendees in groups of forty at a time. The B'nai Abraham building is owned by the DJCC Development Corporation and will operate as part of Shalom Austin, a nonprofit community organization.

In addition to Orthodox services conducted by Congregation Tiferet Israel, Shalom Austin plans to hold adult educational and cultural programs in the building and make the space available to other

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Clockwise from top right photo: Ark & Bimah with Mechitza in Austin. Brenham soil that was combined with soil from Austin & Israel that was placed under the building. The congregation brought the Torahs to their new home in Austin. Helen Wilk, Awards Chair, presented the TJHS Award to Mimi & Leon Toubin. The original bench with a new cover. The view of the synagogue from the balcony in Austin. Debbie Winegarten, then-TJHS President, and Jack Solka, Grant Committee Member, present TJHS's check for \$25,000 to Jay Rubin, CEO, Shalom Austin.

Encyclopedia of Texas 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 adapt one of these histories in each issue of our News Magazine. Thanks to the History Department of the ISJL for permission to do so. To see other towns, go to the TJHS website at www.txjhs.org, or the Institute's website, www.isjl.org, click on the "History Department" and look for "Encyclopedia" in the drop-down menu.

Galveston

Driving down Broadway Avenue, one can see the splendors of Galveston's past in the enormous Victorian homes that once housed the commercial magnates who transformed this small island into the largest city in Texas. Yet these historic homes also reflect a city whose peak was over a century ago. Ravaged by hurricanes and competition from nearby Houston, Galveston has survived largely on vacationers and tourists who flock to the island to enjoy its beaches and unique history. The Jews of Galveston have been an integral part of the city's epic rise and decline. Arriving just as the town was laid out in 1838, they continue to maintain a vital presence today, though the Galveston Jewish community struggles with many of the same challenges faced by small Jewish communities across the South.

Jewish immigrants who saw tremendous economic potential in the port city were among the earliest settlers in Galveston. Joseph Osterman, a Dutch native, moved to Galveston from Baltimore in 1838 after doctors



Market Street in Galveston, late 19th or early 20th century.

recommended a warmer climate for his wife, Rosanna, who had a heart condition. Osterman became one of the first merchants to set up shop in the new town and quickly amassed a significant fortune through the cotton trade. Rosanna had a strong business acumen and helped him run the store. After only a few years, Osterman sold his store, then the largest in town, to his brother-in-law, Isadore Dyer, and focused on real estate ventures. By 1860, Osterman was worth \$191,000. When the city government had trouble paying its debts in the early years, Osterman would often lend it money.

Michael Seeligson, who also came

to Galveston in 1838, quickly became a town alderman and was elected mayor in 1853. In a letter to the national Jewish newspaper, the *Occident*, Seeligson explained that he ran for mayor to "thwart the Designs of a certain Clique" [sic] who had been speaking out publicly against Jews. Seeligson's comments indicate that while there was a degree of antisemitism in

Galveston during these early years, the town's Jews were willing and able to confront and defeat it. Seeligson was not the only officeholder among these early Jewish settlers. Isadore Dyer served as an alderman in the 1850s, '60s, and '70s.

While a growing number of Jews moved to Galveston during the 1840s and 50s, they were slow to establish Jewish institutions and often struggled to maintain their religious traditions. In 1852, one local Jew reported to the *Occident* that E. Cohen chose to circumcise his own son since he was unable to bring in a *mohel* from

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New Orleans to perform the ritual. A local surgeon supervised as the untrained Cohen performed the procedure. That same year, Galveston Jews dedicated their first cemetery, bringing in Rev. M.N. Nathan from a New Orleans synagogue to lead the ceremony. According to the local newspaper, there were not enough Jews in Galveston to support a congregation. Rev. Nathan chided Galveston Jews during his remarks for neglecting their religious

traditions and even attending Christian churches. Nathan admitted that while they were too small in number to build a synagogue, “you can pray at home, instead of inconsistently going with your families to church and chapel to pray to a mediator who is not instructed in Israelite beliefs and listen to dogmas and doctrine to which you cannot subscribe.” Despite Nathan’s entreaties, Galveston Jews did not hold religious services until 1856, when they prayed together in the home of Isadore Dyer. By 1859, they were meeting for the high holidays. The progress of the Galveston Jewish community was interrupted by the Civil War. When the Union military captured the city early in the conflict, most Galveston Jews moved to Houston, while others went to Matamoros, Mexico, where they were able to ship cotton through the Union blockade. Rosanna Osterman, whose husband, Joseph, had died in 1861, remained in Galveston during the war, nursing the wounded of both sides in her home. According to legend, Osterman overheard crucial troop information while nursing Union soldiers and shared it with Confederate forces, enabling them to retake the city in early 1863. Nevertheless, the Union continued its blockade of the port, as business in the city suffered



Jewish immigrants arrive in Galveston, ca. 1907-1914.

severely during the war.

Rosanna Osterman was dedicated to building the local Jewish community. After she tragically died in a steamboat explosion in 1866, her will provided money to start various Jewish organizations in Galveston. Her bequests included money to buy additional land for a cemetery, \$1,000 for a Jewish Benevolent Society, \$1,000 for a Jewish school and \$5,000 to go toward construction of a synagogue. Osterman also left money to the state’s only chartered congregation, Beth Israel in Houston, as well as other Jewish organizations and charities around the country. Through her will, Osterman was able to jump-start the Galveston Jewish community after decades of lethargy.

With Osterman’s money as the impetus, eight Galveston Jews established a benevolent society in 1856 and soon discussed forming a congregation. A local gentile butcher began to supply kosher meat to the Jewish community. All of the founding members of the Hebrew Benevolent Society were merchants, while most were young. Only one, Isadore Dyer, was over thirty-five years old. All but one was foreign born, with most from Alsace and the German states. Two of the eight were listed as living

in Galveston in the 1860 census. The local newspaper praised the creation of the benevolent society, but called on Galveston Jews to go further and construct a house of worship, arguing that if they were religiously observant Jews, they would be better citizens and would help uplift the entire community.

This development was slowed by a major yellow fever outbreak in 1867, which killed as many as

forty Jews in the area, forcing Galveston Jews to buy land for a new cemetery. Isadore Dyer, president of the Hebrew Benevolent Society, made an appeal for financial help in the *Occident* newspaper since the society had already spent all of its money helping the sick and burying the Jewish dead. Despite this setback, the Jewish community moved forward as external pressure, Osterman’s financial largesse and the growing size and wealth of the Galveston Jewish population finally led to the formation of Congregation B’nai Israel in 1868 and the construction of a grand synagogue in 1870.

After the Civil War, business as usual was restored in Galveston and a growing number of Jews from Alsace, Germany, and Poland came to the port city to seek their fortunes. By 1868, an estimated 125 Jews lived on the island. Leon Blum left Alsace in 1852, and spent the first eighteen months in the U.S. as a traveling peddler in rural Louisiana. He came to Galveston with his older brother, Alexander, in 1859, but fled the city after the start of the war, moving their business to Houston and later, Matamoros, Mexico. Right after the war, the Blums returned to Galveston and opened a wholesale dry goods house, which became a quick

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success. In 1879, the firm did over one million dollars in business; that same year they opened a huge new building on the downtown Strand. By 1863, Leon Blum's business was one of the leading wholesale houses in the South employing 200 people. Blum became one of Galveston's business titans. A member of the Cotton Exchange, Blum led the effort to construct a grand building for the organization. He worked to improve the city's port and its rail links to the Texas interior, helping to found the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railroad. Blum also established the People's Street Railway, a public transportation system that was later absorbed by the city.

Blum was just one of a number of prominent Jewish business magnates who helped to make Galveston the economic and cultural center of the southwest in the 19th century.

an important civic leader, serving as a city alderman before being elected to the state legislature in 1876. He was also very philanthropic, supporting the local Protestant Orphans Home, which named the Kopperl Infirmary in his honor.

The Jewish family that had perhaps the most lasting impact on the island was the Kempners. Polish-born Harris Kempner came to the U.S. in 1854, settling initially in Cold Springs, Texas, where he worked as a peddler. After fighting for the Confederacy, Kempner moved to Galveston in 1870, opening a wholesale grocery and liquor business with partner Max Marx. According to a Galveston Business Review published in 1884, Marx & Kempner had built up "a colossal trade, whose ramifications extend beyond the confines of Texas, and reached into the land of the Montezumas." In 1885, Kempner became

Harris Kempner's death, his son, Isaac Harris Kempner, took over the family operation, which included a wide array of businesses, including railroads, insurance, ranching, oil, real estate, and cotton. In 1902, Kempner bought Island City Savings Bank, later changing its name to Texas Bank & Trust Company. He also served as president of the Galveston Cotton Exchange. In 1907, he bought a regional sugar company, renaming it Imperial Sugar.

Several other Jews opened successful businesses in Galveston in the years after the Civil War. Felix Halff moved to the city just after the war ended, starting a wholesale dry goods firm. In 1872, he opened a high-end clothing store with Albert Weis on the Strand. Brothers Joseph and Ben Levy started a livery and undertaking business that remained in operation for over a century. Their sons later took over the business. Joseph's



Boulevard and Bath Houses, Galveston, Texas, 1910s.

Moritz Kopperl came to Galveston in 1857, but especially thrived in the post-war period, establishing a successful cotton commission and coffee import business. In 1868, Kopperl became president of the National Bank of Texas. Nine years later he was president of the Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe Railroad. Following the pattern set by the earliest Jewish settlers in Galveston, Kopperl became

president of the Island City Savings Bank. Kempner was also a cotton factor. When he died in 1894, he was one of the largest cotton dealers in Texas and left an estate worth \$1.25 million. His wife, Eliza, was very active in local charities, spending fifty years on the board of the Galveston Orphans Home. She also donated a house to B'nai Israel, which was used as a parsonage for the rabbi. After

grandson, Joe Levy, ran the funeral home from 1930 until he sold it in 1969. When newspaper editor Charles Wessolowsky visited Galveston in 1879, he noted how many Jews owned large commercial firms, declaring that such a number "are seldom to be found in any city in the South." Wessolowsky claimed that "our Israelite brethren are adding vastly to the

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Grant Committee

by Hollace Weiner, Grant Committee Chair

The TJHS Grant Committee awarded research funds to an architectural historian, a college writing teacher, and a Jewish day school for projects that further the Society's mission to disseminate information about Jewish involvement in the state's social, economic, religious, professional, and cultural history. The Grant Committee accepts applications year round, with quarterly deadlines on December 1, March 1, June 1, and September 1. The application is online at www.txjhs.org.

Hollace Weiner of Fort Worth chairs the Grant Committee. Serving with her are Sonny Gerber of Houston, Guy Manaster of Dallas, Jack Solka of Austin, and Michael Wolf of Beaumont.

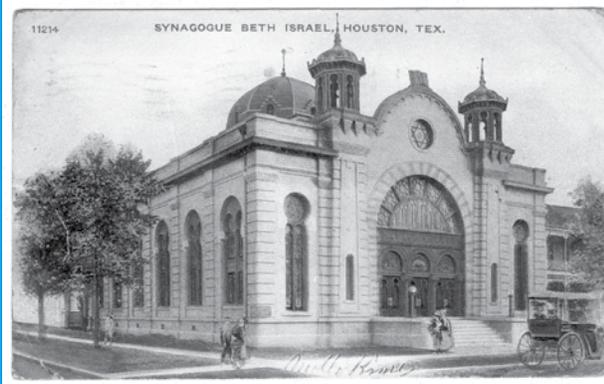
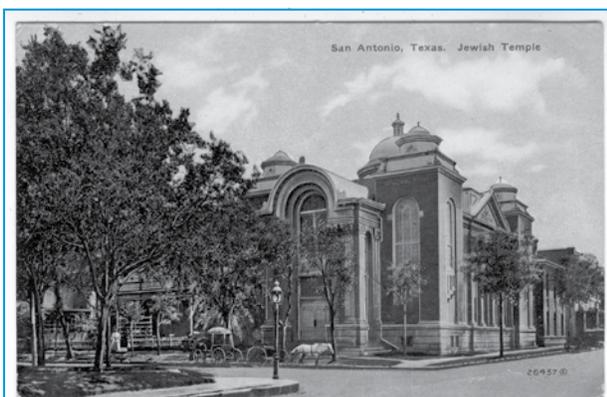
At its quarterly meeting, conducted via conference call, the Grant Committee approved allocation of funds for three projects. They are:

1. *Synagogues of the South: An Online Architectural History*

This exhibit, spearheaded by Samuel Gruber, president of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, will include 19 images of Texas synagogues. Many of these houses of worship have been demolished, adding importance to this in-depth look at the past.

Gruber, the keynote speaker at our 2014 Austin meeting, is collaborating with the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston in South Carolina on this project. Utilizing picture-postcard images already in the college's William A. Rosenthal Judaica Collection, this exhibit will include essays about changing styles in synagogue design, the fate of historic synagogues, and the Jewish architects who designed many of these religious landmarks.

Gruber requested and received \$2,500 for the Texas portion of the project. (The exhibit's total cost is pro-



Vintage picture postcards show the facades of three synagogues, subsequently demolished. From top to bottom: San Antonio's Temple Beth-El, 1910-1919; Austin's Congregation Beth Israel, 1913; and Houston's Beth Yeshurun, 1908 (which the photographer identified mistakenly as Beth Israel). Courtesy William A. Rosenthal Judaica Collection, College of Charleston.

jected at \$26,300.) When completed, Synagogues of the South will be easily accessible to our membership through a link on the TJHS website. Gruber, who lives in Syracuse, New York, traces his family roots to Brenham,

Texas. He is the author of two books, *American Synagogues: A Century of Architecture and Jewish Community* and *Synagogues (The Great Architectural Series)*.

2. *Memoir: What Became of Houston's Boy Scout Troop 27 and Other True Tales*

Third-generation Texan S.L. "Sandi" Wisenberg, a prolific author who teaches creative writing at Chicago's Northwestern University, is researching a nonfiction book on the South that includes pieces about her family's experiences from the 1930s into the twenty-first century. In her words, "Texas-centric pieces in the book are about integration in Houston (including the integration of Kolter Elementary in 1967), flooding in Meyerland, and the Houston Jewish community in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries." She is also writing about Texans Clara and Sam Feldman, who lived in Victoria and Harlingen.

Wisenberg's writing style is that of an engaging story teller, yet her essays are entirely factual and based on interviews and research. Her books include *Holocaust Girls: History, Memory and Other Obsessions*; *The Sweetheart is In*; and *The Adventures*

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Jewish organizations and for Jewish life cycle events.

Because the building is no longer on its original site, it will lose its official historic status with the State of Texas. However, it will remain a visible part of the Jewish history in Texas and represent the continuation of Jews whose roots began in small communities around the state. 



Clockwise from top right photo: Klezmer band played during a gathering of attendees at the dedication on August 30, 2015. Key players in the move (left to right): Rick Goldberg; Jay Rubin; Mimi & Leon Toubin; Tom Schiffour, the craftsman who handled the moving of the Ark and reading stand; Chris Sharp, with the construction company; and Jack Solka. Mayor of Brenham, Milton Tate and Mrs. Tate attended the Dedication Ceremonies. Mimi & Leon Toubin.

President's Message, continued from page 2

mark your calendars now. Think of it this way—how often do you have the opportunity to visit a sub-tropical seaport in the dead of winter? I encourage you to plan to attend and send your registration as soon as possible since we need to order tickets for *The Rose*. I promise you that a good time will be had by all!

Have a good rest of your year, and we'll see y'all in Galveston.

Your President, David Beer 

Mazel Tov

to the following
Texas Jewish Historical Society Members

Debbie Winegarten was awarded the Gold Medal from the Military Writers Society of American for her book, *Oveta Culp Hobby*. She is also a finalist for the Willa (Women Writing the West) Literary Award.

*Please send information for this column to
David Lou Solka at davielou@solka.net.*

From Our Archives

This column is based on information in the TJHS Collection, housed at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas campus in Austin. It has been supplemented with online research. If you have corrections or additions, please submit them in writing to the TJHS editor at editor@txjhs.org. We want our archives to be as complete as possible.

— The Jewish Literary Society of Houston —

by Vickie Vogel

A few years ago while rummaging through the index to the TJHS Collection at the Briscoe Center for American History, I noted an interesting title, “Sylvan Beach Party.”¹ I finally got around to looking it up. I was surprised when the aide brought me not a typical file box, but a large flat box like an evening gown would be packaged in at a department store.² I lifted the lid and saw an oversized photograph of the late Congressman Mickey Leland that was used for a

commemorative postage stamp. The desk attendant helped me remove it and the next layer until we reached the three TJHS items. The first was an 8 x 10 photograph of a mock trial from May 10, 1915, given by the Jewish Literary Society of Houston.³ A program of the event accompanied it. The case was styled *State of Texas v. Reginald Shimsha Muchwed* and was a charge of polygamy. Clearly, it was an amusing evening with characters like Winem & Losem, Attorneys

for the Defense and Sheriff Ketchum I. Lynchem, and an astonishingly full cast of thirty-five actors, including prominent Houston names like Westheimer, Weingarten, Dannenbaum, Lippman, and Hurwitz. The staff loaned me a magnifying glass so I could read the signs posted on the stage set, such as “A Great Dowry is a bed full of troubles,” “Witness Room: Dice, cards and whiskey may be had from the judge,” and “A deposit of 97¢

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Sylvan Beach Picnic, 1913. Texas Jewish Historical Society Records, di_10287, T

required on all cases before trial.”

The third item was an amazing panoramic photograph of the promised Sylvan Beach party of 1913. It is about 7" tall and 20" wide. The participants are dressed mostly in white with boater straw hats, many wearing ties even for a beach picnic. I counted about 132 people. There is no further description and no one is identified.

My curiosity piqued, I returned to the index to see what else we have on the Jewish Literary Society, and I was not disappointed. We have their constitution and bylaws from 1907, an article on their history from 1906 to 1916, a roster of members in 1916, along with several bulletins from 1915 to 1917 and a small amount of correspondence. It was organized for the purpose of promoting “culture and character along lines approved by Jewish thought and ethics.” This was expanded to include the support of any literary, musical or scientific undertak-

ing, the maintenance of a library, and the support of other arts. Their annual activities included the mock trial, a boat ride, a declamation contest, a public Seder, a Purim ball for Sunday School children, a carnival ball, a new year’s ball, a musical, monthly literary meetings, dances, a bulletin of activities and editorials, a weekly debating club, an orchestra, and public athletic games. There were also daily athletics, and the building could be used by members “when nothing special is going on.”

The Society came into being when Max Flaxman, H. Grossman and Boris Litowich called a meeting to organize a Zionist society at Adath Yeshurun Synagogue. The young people who showed up, however, wanted a different kind of society on a broader basis, and the Jewish Literary Society of Houston was born. Isidor Tiras was elected President; other offices were filled by Sadie Eden, Max T. Karkow-

ski, and Jessie Stark. An Amusement Committee was formed.

The rabbis of Houston became interested and offered their services. Meetings were held in the Mason Building. Congregation Beth Israel used the same hall for Friday night services during the construction of their temple. The first debate was held in 1906 on the topic “Are We Better Than Our Forefathers?” The affirmative side won the debate. 1907 saw Henry Dannenbaum elected president, the presentation of the first mock trial (Jewish Literary Society v. J. L. Mendlovitz for Breach of Duty), and the annual boat ride to the San Jacinto Battleground.

In 1908, a library was started with Max Westheimer’s gift of a twenty volume set of Charles Dickens. Classes were organized to teach English and American customs to immigrants.⁴

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The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

The first Carnival Ball was October 27.

In 1909, a \$2 initiation fee for male applicants and a 50¢ fee for

room, dressing rooms with showers, and storage space. On September 12, the first dance in the new building was held.⁵

directed the show in April. Basketball and baseball teams were organized. To express encouragement and welcome to young men and women graduates and confirmands, an annual Kadimah Reception was started. A girls basketball team was formed, and a Sunday School opened with Dr. W. Willner as superintendent.

By 1913, businessmen were starting to take note of the growing organization, and a special sustaining membership of \$10 was created for them. Joseph Fels gave a talk on single taxation.⁶

The annual outing in 1914 was a trolley ride via the interurban to Galveston Beach, joined by 147 members and friends. About 2,500 people attended the Cabaret Play presented at the City Auditorium, netting over \$900 for the Society.

In 1915, the Society filed suit against Galveston-Houston Interurban

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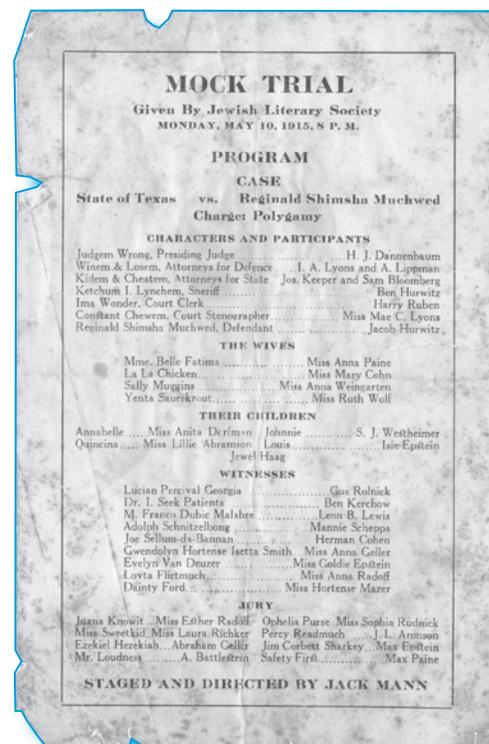
The Group Photo, Mock Trial, 1915: Texas Jewish Historical Society, di_10290, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin (the group photo)

females was instituted. A major effort was made to abolish Jewish stereotypes in the theater. A resolution was passed that any theater presenting a Jewish character “giving offense to our people or casting a reflection on them” would be boycotted. All theaters were informed, and they promised cooperation.

A committee was formed to raise money and purchase land for a building of their own. They began negotiations to buy the Adath Yeshurun vacant lot. The lot was purchased in 1910 and the use of the Mason building was discontinued. The Society was granted use of Montefiore Hall by CBI for public meetings and Adath Yeshurun Hall for business meetings. A temporary building was constructed with an auditorium for dances and public meetings, a library, directors

Membership increased with the new building. Any Jewish organization without a hall of its own could use this one. Galveston’s Rabbi Henry Cohen, a great supporter of the organization, was the speaker in December. There was also a lecture about Russian Jewish immigrants, and Literary Wednesdays was instituted. The office of General Secretary was created to look after the affairs of the group. Sam Bloomberg of San Antonio was elected General Secretary in 1911. He was closely connected with the JLS of that city, which was formed two years after Houston and patterned after it. S. J. Westheimer was elected president. There were 170 members.

In 1912, Bertha Westheimer suggested a vaudeville show and a committee was formed. Bertha



Mock Trial Program, 1915. Texas Jewish Historical Society, di_10291, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

for placing tracks in the street in front of their building, claiming damage to their property. The trial court ruled in their favor, but the appellate court reversed the judgment. The Society maintained it owned to the middle of the street, and the railroad laid tracks down the middle without condemning the property and making compensation. The Defendant said it was using Houston Electric Company streetcar tracks and was entitled to do so. The court stated it was a difficult case, but that the use of the street by the inter-urban railroad was basically the same as the street railway company.⁷

The JLS reached its peak around 1916. Large crowds attended the mock trial, the annual Kadimah Reception, the kosher public Seder, and the tenth anniversary celebration, a Musical Night with the JLS Orchestra and others. Leona Westheimer⁸ gave a reading from *Anne of Green Gables*. 200 attended the Shirtwaist Dance in June. They were still trying to pay off the building.

At its height, the JLS had some 400 members, but World War I apparently took the wind out of the sails, and the group disbanded in 1920.⁹ For ten years, though, the Jewish Literary Society was an important organization in Houston and widely praised and supported by the community. Rabbi W. Willner called it “one of the best assets of our community.” Rabbi Henry Barnstein said it filled “a grievously needed want among the young Jewish people of Houston,” teaching them how to use their leisure hours “pleasurably and profitably in the cultivation of athletics, by social intercourse, and by literary exercises.”

Dr. Radoslav Andrea Tsanoff of the Rice Institute praised the group, putting it in an even larger context. “American nationalism does not rest upon racial homogeneity, nor upon a common language bond. It

cannot be the result of a process in which the ethnic distinctiveness of the immigrant is melted out... Hence, whatever agency helps any one of the various racial elements constituting the American people to gain a clearer and a deeper appreciation of the peculiar contribution which it can make, out of its own culture, to the upbuilding of the American character... is an agency deserving all praise and welcome. This... is the fundamental aim of the Jewish Literary Society.”

Endnotes

- ¹ Sylvan Beach is in La Porte.
- ² Unless otherwise stated, all information is from Box 3So3 (photos and program) and Box 3A191 of the Texas Jewish Historical Society Collection, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.
- ³ With gratitude to J. L. and Rose Keeper for donating this photo for preservation.
- ⁴ Eventually, the City of Houston opened night schools for this purpose.
- ⁵ The October 19 *Jewish Herald* contains a good description of the dedication ceremonies.
- ⁶ A single tax is a system of taxation based mainly or exclusively on one tax, typically chosen for its special properties, often being a tax on land value. The idea was proposed by both John Locke and Baruch Spinoza. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Single_tax.
- ⁷ https://books.google.com/books?id=OnVFAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA325&lp g=RA1-PA325&dq=jewish+literary+society+houston&source=bl&ots=fie_fK9LRp&sig=25Inj8AAUa4adeRvvY3KTPp5Mlg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CDAQ6AEwBGoVChMiybXB4OSTyAIVQZQNCh0eegxr#v=onepage&q=jewish%20literary%20society%20houston&f=false.
- ⁸ See TJHS summer news magazine, 2010, “From the Footlights” about Leona Westheimer.
- ⁹ <http://www.isjl.org/texas-houston-encyclopedia.html>.

TJHS Travel

by Vickie Vogel

Members of the Texas Jewish Historical Society are a curious lot. As an organization, we want to collect and preserve all we can about Texas Jewish history, but as individuals in our spare time, our curiosity expands to the ends of the earth!

Since it's more fun to explore with each other, we occasionally organize Jewish-themed trips outside Texas. Each participant is responsible for his/her own travel expenses, and TJHS funds are never used in planning, organizing, or implementing. In fact, the tour company for our Cuba trip made a generous donation to our general fund because we had so many participants.

We hope you will travel with us soon, on a faraway trip or to one of our quarterly Texas weekends. Come have fun with us, and learn something new! 🇺🇸



**The deadline for
the February
2016 TJHS
News Magazine
is Friday,
January 4.**

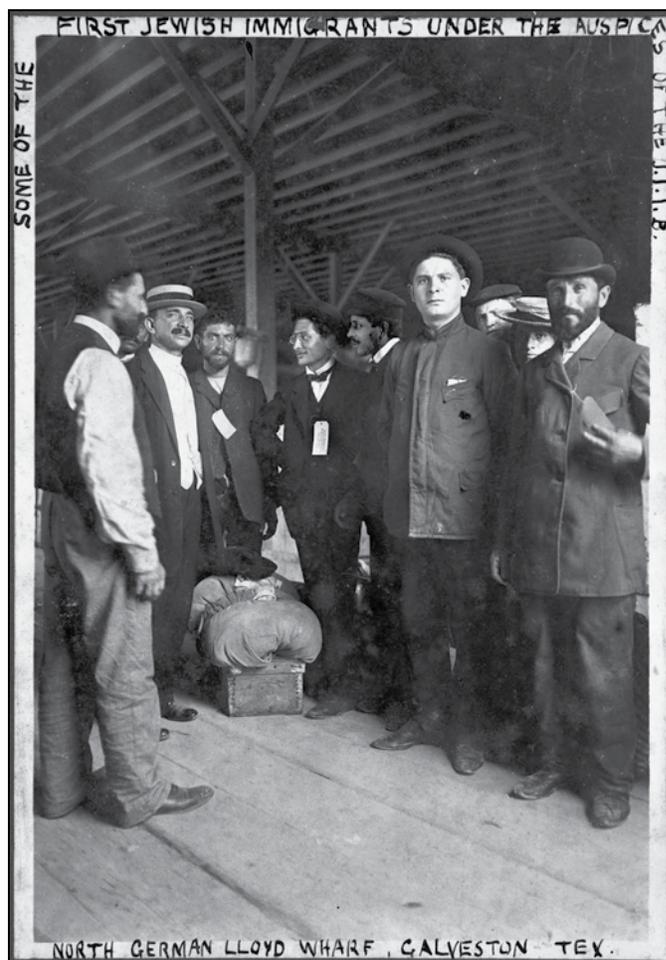
progress, advancement and promotion of the city.”

B'nai Israel's first synagogue building was dedicated on June 9, 1870. The cornerstone for the building was laid by Mr. Tuck, Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge of Texas. From its founding in 1868, B'nai Israel was a Reform congregation, befitting the cultural assimilation and German heritage of its members. Soon after they organized, the members hired Alexander Rosenpitz as their first spiritual leader. In 1870, the Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society was created. Caroline Block was its first president, and she served thirty years in that position. In 1871, B'nai Israel hired its first ordained rabbi, Abraham Blum, who led the island congregation for the next fourteen years. During his tenure as rabbi, Blum received a degree from the local medical college and became a member of the State Medical Association of Texas. Rabbi Blum took part in a statewide circuit riding rabbi program, visiting small Jewish communities throughout Texas. Rabbi Blum was able to help start religious schools in Brenham, Waco, Fort Worth and Brownsville. B'nai Israel was relatively small but had lots of young families. In 1880, the congregation had sixty-one member households but 188 students in its religious school.

The course of B'nai Israel and the Galveston Jewish community was forever changed when the young rabbi Henry Cohen arrived on the island in 1888. For the next sixty-four years, Cohen put his indelible stamp on B'nai Israel and set a remarkable standard for rabbinic involvement in the larger community. Rabbi Cohen was a strong advocate for prison reform, serving on the Texas Board of Pardons and working to rehabilitate released prisoners. After the great hurricane of 1900, Rabbi Cohen helped to maintain order in the city and organized a central executive relief commission.

According to local legend, Cohen, along with his close friend, Father James Kirwin of the Catholic diocese, prevented the Ku Klux Klan from marching on the island by blocking them on the causeway bridge. When Cohen learned that the U.S. Navy had no Jewish chaplains during World War I, he lobbied successfully for special legislation allowing for rabbis to serve as Navy chaplains. President Woodrow Wilson sent Cohen the pen he used to sign the bill into law. An obituary that ran in the Associated Press described Cohen as “one of the greatest crusaders and inspirational and spiritual leaders in Texas history.” According to historian Jacob Rader Marcus, Cohen was a “pastor whose field was not the small confines of the Jewish Parish but the entire community of which he became the throbbing heartbeat.”

Rabbi Cohen was not the only Galveston Jew to play a role on the national political stage. Leo N. Levi, a native of Victoria, Texas, moved to Galveston after graduating from the University of Virginia in 1876. Levi became active in the local B'nai B'rith lodge, which had been established in 1874. He also served as president of B'nai Israel from 1887 to 1899. In 1900, Levi moved to New York to become the national president of B'nai



Text around the photo reads “Some of the First Jewish Immigrants under the auspices of J. I. B. North German Lloyd Wharf, Galveston, Tex.”

B'rith. Levi lobbied the government to do something about anti-Semitic laws in Romania and Russia and drafted the protest petition sent to the czar by President Theodore Roosevelt after the Kishinev Pogrom. After Levi died in 1904 at age 47, B'nai B'rith named a hospital and rehabilitation center after him in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Located on an island in the Gulf of Mexico, Galveston has often found itself in the path of hurricanes. In 1900, the city was struck by a tremendous storm that helped end Galveston's prominent role in the state's economy. The hurricane killed between 6,000 and 8,000 people and caused over twenty million dollars in damage. As community leaders, prominent Jews

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played a big role in the rebuilding effort. I. H. Kempner gave interest-free loans to B'nai Israel, several local churches, the library, and the local orphans' home to help them get back on their feet after the storm. In 1901, Kempner became Galveston's first finance commissioner and helped the city regain its economic footing. Despite the work of Kempner and Rabbi Cohen, Galveston would never be the same after the storm. With the rise of industrial and railroad centers like Dallas, Galveston had already slipped to the fourth largest city in the state by the time of storm. With Galveston devastated by the hurricane, nearby Houston moved forward with its plan to build a ship channel from the Gulf, completing it in 1914. The Port of Houston soon outstripped Galveston, eventually becoming the second busiest port in the country. By 1980, Galveston was the 25th largest city in the state with its economy based largely on tourism.

Despite this impact on Galveston's economy, the city remained a port of arrival for many European immigrants in the early 20th century. While Galveston paled in comparison to the great East Coast immigration ports like New York and Baltimore, one effort sought to transform Jewish settlement in America, by encouraging immigration through the Texas port. National Jewish leaders like Jacob Schiff worried that the growing number of poor Jewish immigrants concentrating in northern cities like New York would lead to calls to restrict Jewish immigration to the United States. Schiff's plan was to disperse these newly arriving Jews more evenly throughout the country by encouraging them to come through the port of Galveston instead of New York. Galveston was selected because it was a western terminus of several railroads, had Rabbi Henry Cohen, and because the city was too small to entice many immigrants to remain there. Instead,

the immigrants would be placed on a train heading to another town in Texas or the Midwest, where they would be given a job and a place to live initially. During the brief time they were in Galveston, the immigrants were often visited by Rabbi Cohen, who could serve as a Yiddish translator. The "Galveston Movement" took place from 1907 to 1914. About 10,000 Jewish immigrants came to Galveston under its auspices. Most of them did not remain on the island, though twenty-five percent ended up settling elsewhere in Texas, the most of any state.

The first Jews to live in Galveston were from Alsace and the German states. By the late 19th century, another wave of Jewish immigrants began to settle on the island. Desiring a more Orthodox religious practice, these Eastern European immigrants established their own congregations with the encouragement of the Reform B'nai Israel. In 1888, B'nai Israel lent a Torah to a group of Russian Jews who had begun to pray together in Galveston. In 1894, they established a Young Men's Hebrew Association with the express purpose of creating a place for poorer Orthodox immigrants to worship. In 1895, the group formally established its own congregation, known initially as Ahavas Israel. The Orthodox congregation hired Jacob Geller as its rabbi. By 1907, Ahavas Israel had sixty members and daily services, with a Hebrew school led by Rabbi Geller.

In 1905, there was a split within Galveston's Orthodox community, with Jews from the Austro-Hungarian Empire forming their own separate congregation. It's unclear what exactly caused the split, but differences in Minhag (religious customs) along with disagreements over the certification of kosher food likely played an important part. One group, made up primarily of Russian Jews, became known as the Young Men's Hebrew Association and

continued to worship in the Avenue I synagogue. The other, made up of immigrants from Galicia and Austria, created the Hebrew Orthodox Benevolent Association, which met in a building on Avenue H. During these early years, Rabbi Geller led the Austrian shul, while Abraham Gordon led the Russian congregation. Both were shochets (kosher meat slaughterers) and had a hard time earning a living providing kosher meat to the Galveston Orthodox community. After Gordon left for Fort Worth, Rabbi Geller led services at both congregations for the High Holidays before he moved away in 1910. The rift between these two Orthodox congregations was often bitter and personal. It would be a quarter of a century before Galveston's Orthodox Jews reunited.

While the island's two Orthodox congregations did not get along, they seemed to have cordial relations with the much larger and wealthier B'nai Israel. For many years, Orthodox children attended Sunday school at the Reform temple. Rabbi Cohen fought to ensure that their families did not have to pay to send their children to the Sunday school. Cohen wanted to ensure that these young people received instruction in the tenets of their religion, in addition to the Hebrew language lessons they learned in their own congregation's weekday Hebrew schools. In 1917, of the 200 children in the B'nai Israel Sunday School, about 160 were from the Orthodox community. In 1919, Galveston's Orthodox Jews finally created their own religious school.

While they were divided in their religious worship, Galveston's Eastern European immigrants came together to support larger Jewish causes. In 1898 they founded the B'nai Zion organization which worked to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. While the Zionist movement was never particularly strong in the city, Galveston Jews

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were able to raise a significant amount of money to support the Jewish settlement in Palestine. Women later established a Hadassah chapter on the island. In 1952, Etta Lasker Rosensohn of Galveston became the national president of Hadassah, the first Texan to hold this position. Rosensohn also served on the board of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Eastern European Jews founded a Galveston branch of the socialist Workmen's Circle in 1912. Frieda Weiner, who came to the island in 1915, was a longtime leader of the group, which advocated Yiddish culture and working class politics. Weiner later founded a chapter of Pioneer Women, a labor Zionist organization and served as its president for thirty years.

By 1907, approximately 1,000 Jews lived in Galveston. For the next half century, the Jewish population on the island remained on a plateau, reaching 1200 people in 1937. Nevertheless, B'nai Israel enjoyed a period of growth in the first half of the 20th century, increasing its membership from 150 dues-paying families in 1910 to 190 in 1930. In 1928, the congregation added a community house named after Henry Cohen, next to their synagogue which included new classrooms and an auditorium.

The economic hardships of the Great Depression affected each of the city's congregations, but its most significant impact was on the Orthodox community. With both Orthodox congregations facing financial hardship in 1930, they finally agreed to set aside their differences and unite to form a new congregation. Beth Jacob was officially chartered in 1931. The new congregation hired Rabbi Louis Feigon, who helped negotiate the merger of the two factions. Max Baum, who had been president of the YMHA congregation became the first president of Beth Jacob. In 1932, the new congregation built a brick synagogue at 24th Street and Avenue K. The old

synagogue of the Hebrew Orthodox Benevolent Association was used as a Talmud Torah, holding both weekday Hebrew school and Sunday school for the children of the congregation. Rabbi Feigon led the Orthodox congregation for twenty-nine years until his retirement in 1959. Beth Jacob remained Orthodox for several decades, holding daily minyanim in both the morning and evening. George Berkman served the congregation as a *shochet* for over twenty-five years. In 1971, Beth Jacob decided to affiliate with the Conservative Movement and hired Jerome Epstein, a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary to be their rabbi.

B'nai Israel continued to be influenced by Rabbi Henry Cohen, even after he passed away in 1952. His vision of social justice undoubtedly inspired the congregation's leadership to open the Temple Academy in 1957. At a time when Galveston was still socially segregated and there was no public kindergarten for blacks, the temple's preschool and kindergarten accepted students of all races. After the Selma march in 1965, B'nai Israel's board voted to give money to Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. B'nai Israel reached its peak membership in 1945 with two-hundred thirty-nine families. After Rabbi Cohen retired in 1950, B'nai Israel had a series of rabbis over the next several decades. Rabbi Jimmy Kessler came to B'nai Israel in 1976, leaving after five years. He returned to the congregation in 1989, and was B'nai Israel's rabbi until his retirement in 2014. Kessler is a historian and the founder of the Texas Jewish Historical Society. The current rabbi is Marshal Klaven, who arrived in 2014.

In 1953 B'nai Israel decided to move out of its grand synagogue and build a more modern, functional one. The new one-story building was completed in 1955. By 1976, B'nai

Israel had 177 dues-paying members; in 1996, 132 families belonged to the congregation. This corresponded with a decline in the city's Jewish population, which went from 1200 people in 1948 to 680 people in 1968. Despite this decline, the financial generosity of a few members, including the Kempner and Seinsheimer families, kept B'nai Israel afloat.

Despite the decline, Galveston Jews have continued to play a leading role in the civic affairs of the city, following a pattern set in the earliest days of Jewish settlement on the island. Morris Lasker represented Galveston in the state senate in the 1890s. Isidore Lovenberg spent thirty years on the Galveston school board, and a local junior high school was named in his honor. I.H. Kempner served as mayor from 1917 to 1919. Two decades later, Adrian Levy became mayor, leading the city from 1935 to 1939. During his tenure, Levy cracked down on gambling and had slot machines removed from restaurants and other public establishments. Eddie Schreiber was selected by his fellow city council members for the position in 1961, but then was elected directly by the voters in 1965, 1967 and 1969.

Ruth Levy Kempner became the first woman elected to the city council in 1961. Barbara Crews served as Galveston's mayor from 1990 to 1996 after spending several years on the city council. A. R. "Babe" Schwartz represented Galveston in the Texas Legislature as a liberal Democrat from 1955 to 1981. Schwartz was a strong supporter of environmental laws and civil rights. Once, when the Ku Klux Klan sent each legislator an honorary membership card, Schwartz denounced the organization on the floor of the Texas House, declaring that one couldn't be an honorable member of a dishonorable organization.

While the phenomenon of Jewish mayors and officeholders has been

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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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Your gift will further the efforts to record, preserve, and disseminate historic information about Texas Jewish culture.

In Memoriam



Morris Atlas, TJHS member, died on October 4, 2015, in McAllen, Texas. He is survived

by his wife of sixty-eight years, Rita; his son and daughter-in-law, Scott & Nancy Atlas; his daughters and sons-in-law, Lauren & Alan Silverblatt and Lisa & Jeff Genecov; his daughter Debra Atlas; and five grandchildren.



Henrietta Krumholz, formerly of Bay City, Texas, and long-time TJHS member, died on October 6, 2015, in Fort

Worth, Texas. She is survived by her son and his husband, Karl Krumholz & Dick Limoges; her son and daughter-in-law, Richard and Betty Krumholz; her daughters and sons-in-law, Rozanne & Billy Rosenthal and Pearl & Marc Kudisch; nine grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.



Ellen Rae Hurwitz Penner, TJHS member, died on September 4, 2015, in Houston, Texas.

She is survived by her sons and daughters-in-law, Murry & Karen Penner and Howard & Nancy Penner; her daughter, Shari Penner Risenfeld; and seven grandchildren.

May their memories be a blessing.

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.

of *Cancer Bitch*. She has written for *The New Yorker* and is the recipient of the Pushcart Prize, awarded to writers published in small presses.

The Grant Committee approved \$950 to fund a two-week trip to Texas to research a 1933 photo of her father's Boy Scout Troop 27. Wisenberg is tracking down what became of those eight youths. "I want to interview surviving family members in Houston and possibly Austin. I want to find ways to bring the boys/men back to life and show what their lives meant." She will compare their life experiences with Jewish youths in the Trumpeldor Boy Scout troop that met during the 1930s in Paris, France.

At the Houston Public Library, Wisenberg plans to review San Jacinto High School yearbooks and microfilm reels of *The Jewish Herald-Voice*. In Austin she will comb the archives of the Texas Jewish Historical Society, housed at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas. Specifically, she plans to examine TJHS files on Houston, Victoria, World War II Letters, and the family of Sam and Clara Feldman, as well as UT



Boy Scout Troop 27, Houston, 1933. Photo, courtesy S.L. Wisenberg.

Hillel files on the World War II era.

3. *Elementary Pupils to Profile "Jewish Stars in Texas."*

Houston's Beth Yeshurun Day School plans to initiate a social-studies unit for fourth and fifth graders called "Jewish Stars in Texas." Cathryn Mellon, director of curriculum as well as a social-studies and history teacher,

will have her students profile Texas Jewish pioneers and civic figures. The biographical essays will be mounted and framed along with photos of their subjects. The resulting exhibit may be shared with other schools and synagogues. The Grant Committee allocated \$250 toward this educational project. 🇺🇸

Can You Guess This Member?



Congratulations to Cynthia Wolf of Beaumont who guessed the cutie in the "romper" was none other than Charles Hart! We thought that it would take several months to guess this one, but Cynthia did it in two! She will receive a one year's free membership to the TJHS. We're not showing a person this issue. If you have a suggestion, send it to Davie Lou Solka at davielou@solka.net. 🇺🇸

We need Your Stories!

We are earnestly 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 News Magazine. Everyone has a story to tell, long or short. To submit your story, or if you need help writing your story, contact Davie Lou Solka at davielou@solka.net or 512-527-3799.



in the store. We had a large number of share-croppers and farmers as customers, and this offered them a simplified manner of managing their accounts. This also fit within our scope of business since we were the major cotton buyer in Austin County. Usually a family, depending on their cotton acreage and family size, could get about \$10-40 monthly to be paid in full upon the sale of cotton and corn in the fall. Tenant farmers paid as rent to their landlords one-quarter of their cotton harvest and one-third of their corn harvest. If there was a crop failure, the unpaid balance would

be carried over without question until the next year. I cannot remember any account not being paid. At that time, sugar was eighty-nine cents for ten pounds, flour was \$3.50 for fifty pounds, coffee was thirty-five cents a pound, and blue denim button fly Levi's were \$2.99 a pair!

The store was converted to only clothing in 1966 and a new front was added to the building. Looking back, we probably should not have changed the front exterior of the building. In 1981, we built a strip center that was anchored by us, Wal-Mart, and Bill's Supermarket on Highway 35 south of town. Levine Brothers always offered excellent customer service and tried to treat each customer as if "they were the only customer we would have that day."

John Selman, Citizens State Bank president, asked me if I would consider being a director on the board in 1966. I told him that I really didn't know the "difference between a bank director and a traffic director and would try it for six months to see if we would be a fit." It continues to be a "fit" since I continue to be a director forty-nine years later. To me, it has been like being enrolled in graduate school.

A very important part of the success of the store is the wonderful loyal employees who helped us through the years. Some of them include Leonard Hintz, Ms. Nentwig, Louis & Julia Zapalac, Willie Davis, Henrietta Froebel, Thelma Stock, Mildred Surovik, Mary Pagel, Grace Viereck, Bobbie Hintz, Lyn Novicke, Amy & Chad Novicke, Louise Kuchara, and Elaine Kulow. I know I may have omitted some, but it was not intentional. The store was closed on December 24, 1994, after being in business seventy-seven years.

Barbara and I moved to San Antonio, Texas, on May 20, 1995. Our son, Mike, lives in Chicago, and our daughter, Janis, and her husband, Larry Stone, live in Austin with their three children, Jake, Rachel, & Kayla Rosanno. 🇺🇸

Save the Date

January 8-10,
2016

Board Meeting in
Galveston

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

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Like us at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Texas-Jewish-Historical-Society/187629054741368>.

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If you have any changes in your information, please contact **Marc Wormser at 1601 S. Riviera Ct., Pearland, TX 77581, 832-288-3494, or c2aggie@gmail.com**

Galveston, continued from page 18

rather common in the South, the number of Jews elected to political office in Galveston is quite remarkable and reflects a unique level of integration into the larger community.

Over the last several decades, Galveston Jews have largely moved out of the commercial sector of the economy, although a few have remained. Most notably, in 1972, Meyer Reiswerg opened the renowned “Col. Bubbie’s Strand Surplus Senter,” a purveyor of authentic military surplus merchandise. Though Reiswerg died in 2009, his iconic store remained in business on Galveston’s downtown Strand until 2014. By the 1970s, Galveston Jews were more likely to work at the University of Texas Medical Branch on the island than to own a downtown store. According to Rabbi Kessler, about one-third of B’nai Israel’s members were affiliated with the medical school in 1976. Dr. William Cohn Levin served as president of the medical school from 1974 to 1987,

Today, the Jewish community of Galveston continues to shrink. B’nai Israel has 130 member households, while Beth Jacob’s membership is less than half that number. Currently, Beth Jacob brings in a visiting rabbi a few times a year to lead services. The congregation has not had its own religious school since the early 1990s. Hurricane Ike, which hit Galveston in 2008, had a big impact on the Jewish community with both synagogues sustaining storm damage. After Beth Jacob’s sanctuary and chapel were flooded during the storm, the congregation met for services in their front lobby. Rabbi Kessler led High Holiday services outdoors that year since the B’nai Israel building had no electricity. Perhaps most ominously for the Jewish community, the UT Medical Branch announced a significant downsizing in the wake of the storm. Galveston also has to deal with the ever encroaching borders of the Houston metropolitan area. Many Jews who work on the island choose to live in the southeastern suburbs of Houston. New congregations in cities like Clear Lake have cut into the Galveston congregations. Whatever the future holds for the Jewish community, its legacy as a central part of Galveston’s history and development is assured. 🇺🇸

Does TJHS Have Your Current Email Address?

Is your email address current? Has it changed since the 2015 directory was printed? Have you changed email providers? If so, please send Marc Wormser an email at c2aggie@gmail.com so that he can update your information in the database. To reduce postage



cost 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!

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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 late nineteenth 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 exhibit and they will be shipped,



prepaid freight via UPS in waterproof boxes, to your location. The only expense to the borrower will be shipping 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 Sally Drayer-

er at 972-458-7298 or sallyedraye@gmail.com or contact Marc Wormser at 832-288-3494 or c2aggie@gmail.com.

Texas Jewish
Historical Society
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Contributions to the Texas Jewish Historical Society are tax deductible within the limits of the law.