

Texas Jewish Historical Society



May 2016 News Magazine

— TJHS Award Presentation to Founder — and First President, Rabbi Jimmy Kessler

Remarks by Helen Wilk, Awards Committee Chair at the Annual Gathering on
Sunday, April 3, 2016 in Beaumont, Texas

During today's meeting we will all be participating in an historic event. I want to take a few moments to provide some background for this event.

In 2014, TJHS was asked by our then president, Debbie Winegarten, to create special awards for members who had done outstanding things in the field of historic preservation. I volunteered to chair that committee and Elaine Albin, Hollace Weiner, Ruth Nathan and Sally Drayer joined me in that endeavor. As the result of our work, and with board approval, two distinguished awards have been created. One award is designated for "Preservation of a Texas Jewish Historical Site," and the first such award was presented to Mimi & Leon Toubin in October 2014 for their incredible project to move B'nai Abraham, the 1893 historic Orthodox synagogue that served the once-thriving Jewish community of Brenham, to the Dell Jewish Community Campus in Austin. Last night we watched the film that told the story of that amazing project. I was privileged to present that award to the Toubins at the beautiful and meaningful groundbreaking cer-



Rabbi Jimmy Kessler with his award.

emony held on the site the synagogue would occupy on the Dell Campus. Now the synagogue in its new location resonates with the sounds of Hebrew prayers.

The second special award is designated for "Extraordinary Preservation of Texas Jewish History" and will be presented for the first time today to our founder and first president, Rabbi

Jimmy Kessler. It seems totally evident that everything TJHS has accomplished since its beginning in 1980, thirty-six years ago, would not have happened without the dedication, determination and vision of Jimmy Kessler.

Some of you may not know much about Jimmy, so I would like to give you a little background information. Jimmy retired from the pulpit of Temple B'nai Israel, Galveston, in 2014 after serving in its pulpit for thirty-two years! He is a born and bred Texan, a distinction I have always envied... since I am only a "naturalized Texan." He holds an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas at Austin and was ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati. He also received his masters degree and doctorate at HUC. It was the first doctorate ever in Texas Jewish History. He served as director of Hillel at UT, and as I said, he served the Galveston Jewish community as Rabbi of B'nai Israel for thirty-two years. That is all the stuff you can find out if you "Google" him, but I want to

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Message from the President

by David Beer

As I start my second year as President of the Texas Jewish Historical Society, I think back over the past twelve months, starting with my installation at the Annual Gathering held in Dallas (my home town) to the places we went for our quarterly meetings. First was Salado in July; then on to Tyler in October; and starting 2016 in Galveston. By the time you read this message, we will have been to Beaumont in April for our Annual Gathering.

For those of you who have attended the quarterly meeting (you know who you are), we've had a lot of fun,



made new friends and grew to know better the friends we meet from around the state. We've learned about Jewish life in the towns and cities that we visited as they were over the past hundred plus years.

We have 586 dues-paying

members. Looking ahead, I would like to see more members who haven't taken the opportunity to participate in the quarterly meetings. Plan to attend so that you, too, can see what this organization has to offer, other than our wonderful News Magazine (so

aptly stewarded by Davie Lou Solka—thanks, DL). I want us to increase our ranks, especially for younger-would-be members, who will be the lifeblood of TJHS in the years to come. I want to ask you, who are a part of the Society, to consider giving a gift—the gift of membership to your adult children, as well as your grandchildren of college-age or young married couples. This demographic is the future of the Texas Jewish Historical Society. Please help me to expand the roles of membership in the coming year.

We are in the planning stages for meetings for the coming year—starting with our Board Meeting June 4-5 in Rockport. The summer meeting is not the typical quarterly meeting that we hold for the fall, winter, or spring meetings which start on Friday afternoon and go through Sunday noon. This meeting will begin on Saturday afternoon and go through Sunday noon, giving the members a chance to learn how the Society works. Plus, how about spending time on the Gulf with sand and surf? Our fall meeting is still in the planning stage—**so there is not a meeting registration form in this issue of the News Magazine.** That will be sent soon with all the information you will need for the meet-

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The Texas Jewish Historical Society May 2016 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

Layout/Design Editor Alexa Kirk

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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Over a Century Under the Chuppah in Fort Worth

by Hollace Weiner

A nostalgic archival exhibit, filled with mementos from more than a century of Fort Worth weddings, is on display at Beth-El Congregation's Hall of Remembrance until July 12. Wedding gowns worn by three local brides—in the 1950s, 1960s and 2000s—are delighting visitors, young and old. Together, the gowns and marriage certificates in the exhibit demonstrate changing trends under the chuppah.

The display fills the synagogue's Hall of Remembrance, a trapezoidal-shaped room with high window panes of vintage stained glass. The Temple's gauzy-white wedding canopy is set up in the center. Beneath this chuppah are vintage photos



Overview of exhibit.



The 1954 wedding dress of Louise Jacobs Jayson is displayed with ketubot. Photos by Ellen Appel.

from past decades and a mannequin in the strapless gown worn by a contemporary bride, Melissa Minker Miller, on her wedding day in 2004. Nearby, another mannequin wears a high-necked, candle-light satin dress from 1969. This gown was worn by Rachel Pikkell Goldman, who also loaned the exhibit her beaded, pillbox headpiece, reminiscent of the styles First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy made fashionable.

Draped across a display board is the third dress in the exhibit—the lacy gown that the late-Louise Jacobs Jayson wore at her 1954 wedding at the old Texas Hotel (which is now the downtown Hilton). The bride's daughter, Melinda Jayson of Dallas, has boxes of memorabilia from her parents' wedding,

including the knife that cut the cake, place cards from bridal showers, and the guest registry. She graciously loaned everything to the Beth-El exhibit.

The display room has a built-in reading shelf. For this exhibit, Beth-El's Archives Committee put out a call for wedding pictures and assembled an album with 80 wedding photos arranged chronologically. The oldest photo,

dated 1896, was taken at the double wedding of two sisters, Sarah Levy Shanblum and Maggie Levy Rubin. The most recent is from the wedding of Jessica and Carl

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Rabbi Kessler, continued from page 1

share some personal stories from a few of his friends.

He is originally from Houston, and, clearly once you are his friend, it is a lifetime friendship. That seemed evident as his friend Lonnie Schooler described the beginning of their friendship when they were four years old! Naturally Jimmy turned to Lonnie as he began to contemplate the need for creating the Texas Jewish Historical Society. I think Lonnie's legal skills were essential in incorporating our organization in 1980. He also recalled that in preparation for that first meeting

in San Antonio in January 1980, Jimmy and (his wife) Shelly and Lonnie and (his wife) Marsha stuffed bags of goodies and printed materials as the meeting date approached.

There was a lot of thought and creative planning by a small group of people who shared the vision of the Texas Jewish Historical Society. Lonnie served as the third president.

Jan and Charles Hart shared a memory of their friendship with Jimmy when they were counselors and Jan the camp secretary at Echo Hill Ranch when Jimmy was a camper. Jan shared

with me her "claim to fame" that she taught Jimmy to use the mimeograph machine that left blue stains on kids' fingers for weeks. She also recalled that Jimmy won an award for the most original group story on "Titanic Night." Those of us who know Jimmy as the most wonderful story teller, whose stories weave Jewish history in ways that are intriguing and interesting, are not surprised at these early markers of that talent. Once again that special friendship between the Harts and the Kesslers continued through the years.

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Annual Gathering in Beaumont



Jack Solka, Samylu Rubin, Abbi Michelson, Marvin Rich, Nelson and Mitzi Chafetz, and Davie Lou Solka at the McFadden-Ward House, a Historical House Museum.



We take a lot of pictures at a meeting!

Charles Hart, Sonny Gerber, Cynthia Wolf, Marvin Rich, David Beer, and Rusty Milstein at Texas Energy Museum,



Rabbi Joshua Taub and Michael Wolf at Havdalah.



Jack Solka introduced the film "Saga of a Synagogue: B'nai Abraham's Move from Brenham to Austin."

The Extraordinary Preservation of Texas Jewish History Award

Photos courtesy of Marvin Rich, Davie Lou Solka and Cynthia Wolf.



April 1-3, 2016



Plaque in foyer of Brenham B'nai Abraham Historic Synagogue in Austin



Smaller TJHS plaque on larger plaque (2nd row, 2nd from left) in foyer of Brenham B'nai Abraham Historic Synagogue.



Marvin Rich, David Beer, Dan Weinbaum, Charles Weinbaum, and Shirley Rich enjoy the film "Saga of A Synagogue: Bnai Abraham's Move from Brenham to Austin."



David Vogel and Marvin Rich celebrated their birthdays with TJHS. Happy Birthday!



The TJHS group who attended the meeting in Beaumont.

*2016-17 Officers:
David Beer, President;
Dan Weinbaum, Recording Secretary;
Ben Rosenberg, Treasurer;
Sally Drayer, Historian;
Susan Lewis, 1st Vice-President;
Vickie Vogel, Parliamentarian;
Samyly Rubin, Archivist;
Nelson Chafetz, 2nd Vice-President*



Annual Gathering in Beaumont



Elaine Albin, Helen Wilk, Shirley Rich, and Samylu Rubin at Texas Energy Museum.



Dan Weinbaum and Cynthia Wolf, Annual Gathering Co-Chairs.

TJHS members at the McFadden-Ward House.



In Memoriam

Gertrude Moskowitz Teter, TJHS member, Baytown, died March 12, 2016 in Baytown. Gertrude and her husband, Past TJHS President, Don Teter, gathered information and printed the first Burial Book for TJHS. She is survived by her daughter and son-in-law, Joan & Ruben Linares; grandchildren, Jamie Linares & Ben Alexander; Leah Linares & Benjamin Reil-



ly; and Cheto Cerda & family; her sister and brother-in-law, Dolly & Ed Golden of Austin; and many nieces and nephews. Burial was in Emanu El Memorial Park in Houston.

Judy Leonard, TJHS member, El Paso, died on December 12, 2015. She is survived by her children, Dr. Morton H. Leonard (Mary); Joan Levin (Bruce); Dr. Ellen I. Leonard (Robert); Robert J. Leonard (Valerie); eleven grandchildren; and nine great-grandchildren. Burial was in El Paso.

Raymond Lewis Ettelman, TJHS member, of Corpus Christi & Dallas, died on March 1, 2016, in Dallas. He is survived by his wife, Polly Ettelman, his daughter and son-in-law Holli & Scott Baum; his son David Ettelman; his granddaughters, Emily & Ashley Baum, all of Dallas; his sister and brother-in-law, Davie Lou & Jack Solka of Austin; brother-in-law & sister-in-law, Sammy & Carol Kins of Corpus Christi; seven nephews; one niece; many cousins; and friends. Burial was in Corpus Christi.

May their memories be a blessing.

Members Meet Olympia Dukakis in Galveston

Onstage at Galveston's historic Greenwall Opera House. TJHS members visited with Olympia Dukakis after her show, "Rose," at the the Winter Board meeting in January. Back row: Ben Rosenberg, Gary Whitfield, Jack Solka, Charles Hart, and Gordon and Diedre Cizon. Front row: Hollace Weiner, Davie Lou Solka, Barbara Rosenberg, Vickie Vogel, Olympia Dukakis, David Beer, Jan Hart, and Amy Manuel.



Under the Chuppah, continued from page 3

Lazarus on August 13, 2015.

Ketubot—Jewish marriage certificates—from the turn of the century to the present illustrate how the marriage contract has evolved from an Aramaic document discussing dowries and virginity into an illustrated text reflecting couples' contemporary concerns. At the entrance to the exhibit is an amazing, hand-lettered, illustrated *ketubah* created by Rabbi Sidney Zimelman, who, as this document shows, is an artist and calligrapher as well as a rabbinic scholar. 🇺🇸



The 1969 Wedding Gown worn by Rachel Pikkel Goldman with pillbox headpiece.

Guess This Member

No guesses yet—take a good look! This person has been involved with TJHS for a short time but has contributed a great deal of herself to the organization. She is an author among her many accomplishments. The winner will receive a year's free membership to TJHS. Email your guess to Davie Lou Solka at editor@txjhs.org any time beginning Monday, May 9. Entries received before that date will not be considered. Previous



winners and family members are not eligible to participate. Good luck!



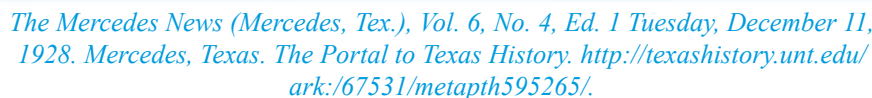
The Texas Jewish Historical Society awarded a grant to the Institute of Southern Jewish Life to research and publish the histories of Jews in Texas towns. These histories are available on the Institute's website and are called "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities." We will adapt one of these 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.

The cities of Mercedes and Harlingen, located in Texas' Rio Grande Valley near the Mexican border, did not develop until the early twentieth century. Known as "The Queen City of the Valley," Mercedes was founded in 1907 after widespread publicity campaigns drew the northern settlers in the area. It flourished as a citrus fruit producer, reaching a population of 2,000 by 1915. When oil was discovered in Mercedes in 1935, its population increased to around 8,000 residents by 1940. Harlingen, on the other hand, was incorporated in 1910 with just over 1,000 inhabitants. Its economy centered around agriculture, specifically vegetables and a distribution, ship

to the rest of Texas. As Harlingen surpassed Mercedes in both population and economy, Harlingen became a center of Jewish life for much of the Rio Grande Valley.

Little is known about the early Jewish community in Mercedes. At least one Jewish man, Isadore Moritz, lived there by 1908. Born in San Antonio in 1883 to Alsatian immigrants, he came to Mercedes to start a newspaper, *The Mercedes Enterprise*. It was the first weekly newspaper to be published in the Rio Grande Valley outside of Brownsville. Moritz was also instrumental in establishing the Lodge and was

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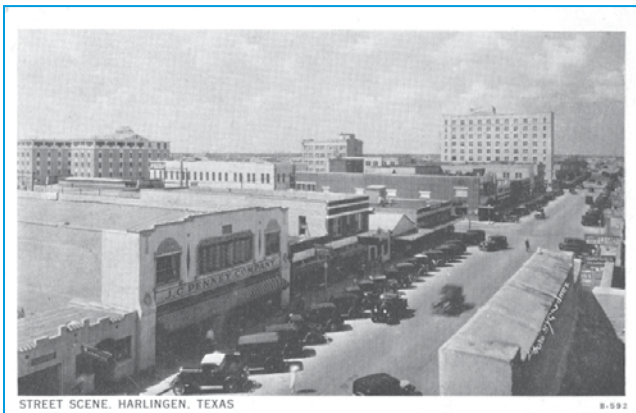


Mercedes Masonic Lodge and was

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the first Senior Warden of the Lodge. By 1912, after organizing lodges in Harlingen and other cities in the Valley, he was appointed District Deputy Grand Master for the 40th Masonic District. That year, however, he moved to Brownsville.

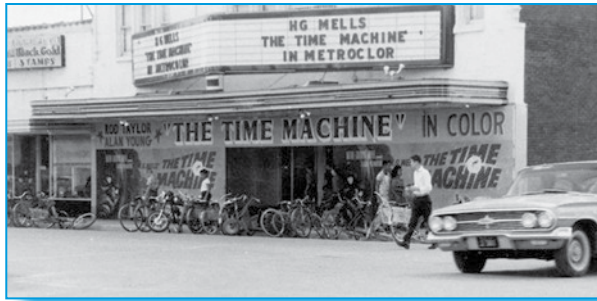
In 1927, Jews across the Rio Grande Valley established Congregation Beth Israel, which met in Mercedes. The congregation served Jews in sixteen towns in the area, including Mission, McAllen, Weslaco, San Benito, Harlingen, Donna, Val Verde and Rio Grande City. Soon after organizing, the members pledged \$400 a month to pay someone to serve as rabbi and teach their children. Hiring a spiritual leader was a higher priority than acquiring a building for Beth Israel.



Street Scene in Harlingen, Texas, in the 1920s.

With about two-hundred-fifty Jews affiliated with Beth Israel, the congregation hired Daniel Harrison, a recent Russian immigrant, as the rabbi in 1928. He left his post one year later after being named principal of the San Antonio Hebrew Institute. In 1936, the congregation finally built a synagogue in Mercedes which catered to the estimated three-hundred-fifteen Jews in the area.

In both Mercedes and Harlingen,



The Arcadia Theatre in downtown Harlingen, TX, circa 1960. Photo courtesy of RVG Oldcars.com.

Jews, many of whom were Eastern European immigrants, became successful merchants. In Mercedes, Max Mestel operated the Electric Shoe Shop, while Max Hessel owned the Popular Store. H. Hartman ran the Big Store, and Ben Golden owned a jewelry store. Other Jewish-owned stores in Mercedes in the 1930s included Brand's, Swice's, Maxpol's and Baum's.

As Harlingen's population expanded in the 1930s due to its importance as a shipping and industrial center, many Jews took their businesses there. Abbish and Rose Adolph, one of Harlingen's earliest Jewish residents, came from Baltimore in 1923 and opened a retail store, later called the New York Store. In 1934, Polish immigrant Ben Levine

established the Man's Shop. Sol Yudesis, a master upholsterer from Ukraine, opened San Benito Furniture Company and then S. Yudesis Furniture Company in 1927 in nearby San Benito. Charles Davis owned the Diana Shop, which sold ladies ready-to-wear clothing and operated for forty-two years. Ned Sondock, who had come to Harlingen during the Great Depression in search of a job, opened Delta Office Supply. Harry

Norton Greenfeld moved to Harlingen in the early 1930s, where he managed and eventually owned a dry goods business called The Economy Store. Polish-born Sam Feldman decided to move from Victoria to Brownsville in 1930, but ended up in Harlingen when his car broke down. Staying there, he entered the wholesale liquor business in 1938 and eventually turned to retail liquor sales. By 1960, the Feldman family had nine stores throughout the valley. Lee and Melvin Levy owned a TV and radio store.

While Jews ended up in Harlingen for various reasons in the 1920s and 1930s, it was the opening of the Harlingen Army Air Field in 1941 that brought Jews and others in large numbers. As the city's population soared to 23,000 by 1940, many Jews realized the business opportunities available in Harlingen. Both Joseph Braunstein and Nate Koppel sold life insurance. Brothers-in-law Sam Alexander and Max Shapiro were in the soda bottling business, with Sam owning the Hollywood Bottling Company and Max, the local Pepsi Cola bottling plant. Isadore Moritz, who had moved to Harlingen, was the news editor at the KRGV radio station and then news reporter for the *Harlingen Star*. Albert Wolf established the AOC Welding Supply Company. Harlingen Jews had begun to enter the professions. Heinrich and Annie Lamm, a German couple, were both physicians – he was a surgeon and she was an obstetrician and an anesthetist. Marcel Bedri was a doctor and Dave Ruston was an optometrist. Nate Koppel's son, Rollins, became a successful attorney and banker, as well as an important leader in both the Jewish and non-Jewish community.

By 1948, it was clear that the Jewish population of Mercedes was shrinking while its neighbors, McAllen and Harlingen, were thriving.

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ing. Members of Beth Israel from McAllen and Harlingen met separately in October 1948 to decide the future of the congregation. The McAllen group had decided to form their own congregation and had already begun constructing a synagogue. The two groups agreed to dissolve the Mercedes congregation and build two separate congregations – Temple Emanuel in McAllen and Beth Israel in Harlingen. The building in Mercedes was sold to a church, with proceeds from the sale and the remaining assets divided equally between the two new congregations. McAllen's congregation paid \$250 for the Mercedes temple's pews, chairs, Torah, dishes, cutlery and tables.

Between 1948 and the 1951 dedication of the new synagogue in Harlingen, Beth Israel met in various places, including the barracks of the Harlingen Air Force Base, where they conducted Reform services and Sunday School. Despite not having a permanent building, Beth Israel still managed to hold a confirmation ceremony in 1950. Rabbi Jonah Geller from B'nai Israel Synagogue in Corpus Christi conducted the service. On June 24, 1951, Beth Israel's building was formally opened and dedicated, with many members of the Rio Grande Valley's religious – Jewish and non-Jewish – community participating in the festivities. Ministers from four different churches in the area gave their prayers while representative from both Brownsville and McAllen's Jewish congregation addressed the crowd. Rabbi Geller gave the address, "The Role in Religion in Modern Life." At the time of the synagogue's dedication, the mem-

bership totaled thirty-four households, representing sixty-three adults.

Harlingen Air Force Base re-opened in April 1951 with the start of the Korean War. As a result attendance in Beth Israel's services was significantly higher than the membership records show. In 1953, the congregation hired Rabbi Adolph Philipsborn, a retired rabbi from Vicksburg,

when the Air Force Base was permanently closed in June 1962, the temple lost many members and regular participants. Not only did those who were associated with the base leave, some civilian members left to seek better economic opportunities. Eventually, there were not enough children to continue to offer Sunday school, forcing those left to take their children to

McAllen or Brownsville. Nevertheless, the congregation remained active. The Sisterhood organized community seders, Chanukah and Purim parties and hospitality for student and visiting rabbis. The annual rummage sale held by Sisterhood was a community event.

Harlingen Jews have been active in the city's civic life. Sam Alexander served as a city commission-



"Jackson Street—Looking West—Harlingen, Texas" 1947.

Mississippi, for \$150 a month. Unfortunately, due to health issues, he was forced to return to Vicksburg in 1956. After his departure, the congregation was never able to hire a full-time rabbi. Often student rabbis from Hebrew Union College or visiting rabbis from McAllen or Brownsville conducted services. In 1956, two rabbis from the Air Force's Chaplain School in San Antonio conducted Beth Israel's High Holiday services. Occasionally, Rabbi Sidney Wolf from Temple Beth El in Corpus Christi visited as well. In 1954, the Jewish community acquired their own burial grounds at Restlawn Cemetery, located between Harlingen and La Feria.

With its membership growing to 100 households in 1960, the congregation built a Sunday school addition the following year, with four classrooms and a recreation room. However,

er from 1953 to 1959, as did Lewis Levine from 1972 to 1974. Both Henry and Charles Feldman were president of the Harlingen Chamber of Commerce. Jerry Sondock, Mal Kasanoff, Albert Wolf, Jr., and Lewis Levine all served on the Airport Board. Rollins and Amalie Koppel founded the Rollins M. and Amalie L. Koppel Foundation which sponsored many charitable projects in the community. For its 100-year anniversary, Harlingen created a Walk of Fame, honoring its one-hundred most influential citizens. Included were Sam Alexander, Charles Feldman, Mal Kasanoff, Rollins Koppel, Annie Lamm, Heinrich Lamm, Ben Levine and Lewis Levine—illustrating the great impact Jews had on the city.

After over fifty years of wear and tear and following damage from

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Hurricane Dolly in July 2008, the congregation of Beth Israel undertook major renovation. Insurance covered the replacement of the pews and wood paneling that were damaged by the storm. Fundraising—especially the generous donations from the Koppel and Wolf families—paid for the rest of the improvements, including a new roof, new plumbing and electrical fixtures, new carpet and remodeled kitchen and restrooms. The former

school building was renovated as well, allowing Sunday school classes to resume. Due to the efforts of Fernando Russek, the Beth Israel religious school was reorganized and in 2011 had about twenty-five students.

On December 11, 2009, the congregation celebrated the rededication of the renovated building. There




This postcard from a Mercedes, Texas, train depot reads, "An Every Day Scene." Date unknown.



Downtown Mercedes, 1915.

was a membership of one-hundred members at that time. In 2016, the membership is around sixty. Rabbi Frank Joseph conducts services once a month, as well as High Holiday services. Some of Beth Israel's members are conversos from Mexico who believe that their ancestors were

Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity in the wake of the Spanish Inquisition. They have played an important part in Beth Israel's continued vitality. Harlingen's overall population is growing, increasing over twelve per cent since 2000, and the Jewish community is optimistic that it will grow, as well. 

Rabbi Kessler, continued from page 3

Charles was our 12th president.

Our friends Cynthia and Allen Mondell were also part of that initial group and were



Shelley & Rabbi Kessler with the award.

working on their singular documentary film "West of Hester Street" resulting from their discovery that the story of the Galveston Movement that brought about 10,000 Jewish immigrants to Texas from 1907-1914 had never been told.

They shared with me a copy of a letter Jimmy had written to the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame when Frances Kallison had been nom-

inated for inclusion. Frances had given strong support to Jimmy as he embarked on creating TJHS. Francis served as the second president of TJHS. See any pattern here?

Jimmy described Frances Kallison in these words:

"Frances was one of the first leaders in the recording of San Antonio's boundless history, particularly that of its Jewish residents. Moreover by her involvement in the publication of

numerous articles, both her own and with her assistance of others, Frances helped set a level of excellence that is still today's high mark."


Indeed, I agree with Allen, that does describe



Helen Wilk presented the first award for "Extraordinary Preservation of Jewish History" to Rabbi Jimmy Kessler, founder and first president of TJHS.



Rabbi Kessler thanked TJHS for the award and told a "few" stories!

Jimmy Kessler, too. So with the respect and gratitude of the members of the Texas Jewish Historical Society, I invite Rabbi Jimmy Kessler to come up to accept the first award for Extraordinary Preservation of Texas Jewish History. 

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.

From Lithuania to Lufkin

by Vickie Vogel

Harry Abram was born in the 1870s¹ in Veisiejai,² Lithuania/Poland to Nathan and Sara Abram.³ As a boy, he immigrated to New York, and from there to Pennsylvania where he took work as a tailor in Pittsburgh, making \$6 a week. His salary doubled after he demonstrated his ability as a master tailor. He arrived in Lufkin, Texas, in 1889 to live and work with his brother Simon,⁴ and there he remained. Harry was not yet fluent in English, but he quickly learned. Simon had immigrated to the US in 1866 and was in the general merchandising business. Their other brother was Joseph,⁵ and their sisters were Fannie (Markus), Zusel, and Gitl who died in 1941 in the Holocaust.

Millie Marwil was born in 1876 in Michigan, but grew up in Bryan, Texas. She married Harry Abram on January 29, 1900, as attested by a photocopy from Beth Israel archives in Houston showing a list of brides



Harry Abram, by H. O. Wiseman, Texas Jewish Historical Society Records, di_10421, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

and grooms and wedding dates. Rabbi H. Bernstein officiated. Their marriage license includes the Hebrew date for the wedding “according to the laws of Moses and Israel.” A newspaper photo of their home says it was built in 1900.

A fascinating booklet, “Lufkin: Portraits of the Past,” contains the town’s history and many wonderful

old photos. Lufkin received federal recognition as a town in 1882 when daily mail service began. Lufkin existed because the railroad was rerouted there through Colonel Denman’s (more about the Denman family below) granting right of way for the road and a depot and other facilities.

There are copies of the 1900 census list for the family, which contains a wealth of information, some of which contradicts dates found in other documents. The 1900 census for Harry and Millie also lists Will Owens, their African-American cook

and servant, who was 18. Harry’s brother Joe, it is noted, could not read or write but could speak English. Joe’s wife, Mary, did not speak English. Their children are listed as Louis (1896) and Bessie (1899). The census notes Fannie’s husband, Jake Markus, was a saloon keeper.

The 1910 census lists around a

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Harry and Millie Abram 50th Anniversary photo, 1950. With their backs to the camera are Louis & Rachel Goldberg; Lanore & Leo Abram; Millie & Harry Abram; Genevieve & Sam Robinson; Rabbi Harvey Wessel; F.A. Abram Midlo. Texas Jewish Historical Society Records, di_10425, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

dozen more Jewish families, some from Russia and Germany. A list of the “Jewish Community of Lufkin 1882-1950” contains some 27 families, and notes four who arrived later.

Harry went into the general merchandise business for himself with his new partner and brother-in-law Jake Markus. They named their firm Markus & Abram. After Jake’s departure, Harry ran the business alone until 1910 when he formed a partnership with his brother Joe: H & J Abram. In 1920, Joe died. Harry and Millie’s son Leo⁶ became the new partner in 1924 and the company was renamed Abram & Son. Daughter Genevieve (b. 1905)⁷ married Sam Robinson in 1929, and in 1931, Sam joined the partnership. The name was changed to Abram & Sons. Sam had been orphaned at an early age. He began his career at age 15 as a stock boy in a large clothing store, and moved to Texas in 1930 after spending nine years in men and boys cloth-

ing in New York and New Jersey.

Histories of the store give 1889 as the founding date of Abram’s, which presumably includes Simon Abram’s original establishment. There are photocopies of newspaper ads from 1915 and 1916.

Harry Abram was lauded as a pioneer Lufkin merchant who “came as an immigrant boy and rose to become one of Lufkin’s most prominent merchants and civic leaders.”⁸ He was a director of Lufkin National Bank, the Lufkin Federal Savings and Loan Association, the Gipson Insurance Company, and the Angelina County Chamber of Commerce. He belonged to the Oddfellows Lodge and Knights of Pythias. He was a charter member of the Lufkin Elks Lodge and a member of the Lufkin Woodmen of the World for over fifty years.

Harry and Millie were members of Temple Beth El as well as Congregation Ahavath Achim, both of Tyler. Harry was “a leading citizen

well known and greatly admired by Lufkinites of two generations” who built “one of the finer department stores of East Texas” and was a “leader in civic affairs.” He was “a youth who came to Lufkin before it existed and helped to build a city.”⁹

A tattered and crumbling copy of the Lufkin Daily News from March 25, 1953 has fourteen pages in two sections on the formal opening of the newly enlarged and remodeled Abram’s. I borrowed a pair of gloves at the Archive’s desk and handled it as gently as I could. A full page ad invites the public to the formal opening (“home owned and operated since 1889”) promising orchids for the ladies, gifts for men and children, and prizes. There are photos of Leo, Harry, Sam, Perry Markus¹⁰ and Elliot Epstein, a newcomer to Lufkin, buyer and manager of ready-to-wear. Sam headed the Men and Boys Department. There

are many articles about Abram’s history, and clothing with titles like “Abram’s Offers Dream Parade of Fashions.” All the ads in the section offer best wishes and congratulations to Abrams. There are photos and bios of key personnel, photos of gowns designed especially for Abram’s, articles such as “Abram’s Is Haven for Seamstresses.” Although Harry had retired by this time, the paper notes Leo “has spent the greatest part of his life in the Abram’s store.” “A belief that quality is the most desirable of all things a store may offer its patrons plus many years of hard and patient work resulted in the Abram’s store now familiar to several generations of Lufkinites.”

Preserved in our archives are miscellaneous store correspondence from 1944, and a spiral bound booklet by the Angelina County Historical Commission with photos of Lufkin

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from around 1909. The Abram store and house, Joe Abram's house,¹¹ as well as Jake Markus' house and saloon are identified. Along with this booklet are the Lufkin telephone directories from 1905 and 1910. H & J Abram's store number was 274, Jake Markus Saloon was 198, Harry was 46, Joe was 298 and S Abram, i.e. Simon, had the phone number 2. Rules of the directory caution the user, "Don't call number from memory, use the directory."

A charming story from a 1999 article in the *Lufkin Daily News* written by Peggy Blackburn Gipson tells of the "Abram silver dollar." Millie gave a silver dollar to Peggy's mother when she was Millie's night nurse near the end of her life. Millie said she had had it for a long time. Peggy's mother called it the Abram silver dollar and kept it in her purse until Peggy inherited it. Peggy passed it on to her nephew upon his graduation from college.

Another family story is preserved in a *Lufkin Times* article of January, 1994 by Margie Kirkland. "Nell Denman and Harry Abram: A love story remembered." Kirkland says the

love story "rocked" the little town of Lufkin in the early years of the twentieth century. Both Nell and Harry Jr. were from families that were "movers and shakers" in the community. Mary Nell "Nell" Denman was the daughter of the first and only surgeon in Lufkin in 1906. Dr. Denman turned the first floor of his three-story home into Lufkin's first hospital. Nell was born in 1891 and had Baptist/Methodist roots. A handwritten note from Florence (Leo's daughter) says "Nell had a drinking problem and attended all of our rehearsal dinners sauced! Morris Frank (the emcee and daddy's dearest childhood friend) teased her unmercifully at the dinners!"

Harry Jr (1888) was Simon's son and was named for his Uncle Harry. Harry Jr. was not connected to Abram's Store. No one knows how Harry Jr. and Nell met, although Kirkland speculates that since he was three years older than her, it was

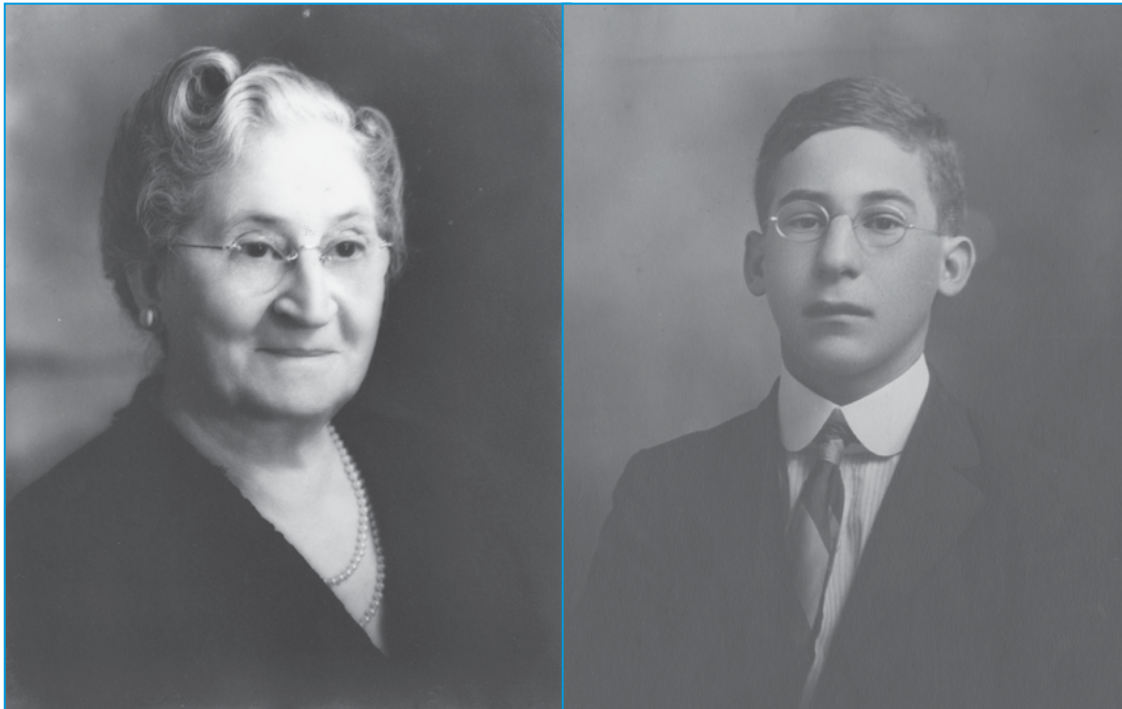
occasionally loosened the line."

Another convoluted possibility connects John Byus, a shoe salesman, with Harry Jr. who was also a shoe salesman. The Byus home was sold to Nell's sister, so there could have been a chance meeting. Dr. Peyton Denman, who owns the family Bible, discovered that the dates of marriages of all the other Denman children were plainly listed, but the record states simply, "Mary Nell Denman married Harry Abram."

At any rate, Nell, a Baylor graduate, was petite, tawny-blond and pretty, as well as outgoing and charming. Harry Jr. was a small man, recalled Dr. Denman, "clean-cut and pleasant. Harry was also a discreet person. He seemed to have a quiet assurance of himself and possibly a silent conviction about the consequences of not conforming to the rules."

Kirkland continues, "There was

probably not at school. She considers meeting through mutual friends a "some-what remote possibility, since a tight line was drawn between Jews and Gentiles; however, some social gatherings must have



In the photo on the left is Millie Marwil Abram, wife of Harry Abram. By Lufkin Photo Studio, Texas. At right is Leo Nathan Abram. Both photos are from the Texas Jewish Historical Society Records, di_10422 and di_10423, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

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a strong feeling a-plenty about the whole thing, that's for sure. Not only among the two families whose offspring had committed the unpardonable act of mixing ethnic beliefs and lifestyles, but throughout the small town of Lufkin. It just wasn't done, that's all." 1917 Lufkin had a population of 4,000. The writer speculates the romance must have been a topic of conversation for months. "Appar-

born there. Jacques became a concert pianist after studying in New York and performed extensively in Europe as well as at community concerts in Lufkin before settling down to teach at the University of Florida. Linwood played violin for personal pleasure, but became a journalist and was a long-time writer for the *Houston Chronicle*. Nell died of leukemia. Both she and Harry Jr. are buried in

around 1910, courtesy Kurth Memorial Library, and a candid shot of Nell, Jacques and Harry Jr.

According to an email, Leo sold the Abram store in 1953, ending over seventy years of Abram family service in Lufkin.

After a long illness, Harry Abram died at home August 7, 1955. A large photo captioned "Harry Abram... Death comes to pioneer Lufkin

merchant" leads one obituary. The Lufkin National Bank as well as First State Bank and Trust Co. were closed during the funeral. Millie, Leo and Genevieve survived him. Our files contain a leather bound, silk lined proclamation honoring Harry Abram by Lufkin National Bank noting the Board of Directors' sorrow for the death of their board member for over 30 years, calling him a good citizen, of a kindly nature and sterling character. Granddaughters Florence Abram Midlo, Sharlene Abram Block and Beverly Robinson Rosen endowed the Abrams Family Schol-

arship to honor the memory of Harry, Millie, Leo and Genevieve, and placed vital documents and histories in our archives that tell the Abram family story.

There is a copy of a deed dated April 1988 selling the Abram store building to the Moores who also bought the right to use the name Abram's.

In 1988, Abram's was restored as an event center. There are photos of the inside of the store in its abandoned and dilapidated shape.

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Abram family home, Texas Jewish Historical Society Records, di_10424, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

ently, few if any people commended or encouraged the young couple for braving the elements to make a life together." They soon "pulled up stakes, told the town goodbye and left to make their home in Houston." Lillian, Nell's sister, "paved the way for the family to be reconciled to Nell and Harry, Jr. After that relationships were better..."

Nell and Harry Jr. were married several years before their first son, Jacques ("that's 'Jack' in East Texas") was born in 1916 in Houston. A second son, Linwood, was also

Houston.

"Yes, indeed, love stories like Harry's and Nell's don't happen just every day—or didn't back then. It's easy to see how their story set them apart from others in that era when times were slow and gentle, and even in 1994 when the vitality and beauty of the young so-in-love couple still fires the memory with the glow of their courage, their commitment to each other, and their unique part in the history of the Lufkin that was, so many years ago." The article is accompanied by a photo of Nell Denman Abram

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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.

— Mazel Tov —

to the following **TJHS** Members

Marsha & Lewis Hoffer of Beaumont who were honored by Lamar University College of Communications and Fine Arts at the Le Grand Ball in April.

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

Contributions

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

In Memory of	From
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sent to Davie Lou & Jack Solka	

In Honor of	From
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Save the Date

October 21-23, 2016

Fall Board Meeting at
the Y. O. Ranch Hotel
in Kerrville, Texas

January 13-15, 2017


Winter Board Meeting
in Sherman, Texas

January 23-30, 2017

3rd TJHS trip to Cuba

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

President's Message, continued from page 2

ing. We will head to Sherman for the winter meeting January 13-15, 2017. If you have a thought about somewhere TJHS has not been or haven't been in some time, please let me know. This is your organization, so please give some input of where you'd like to go to learn about Jewish history in this great state of Texas. 

The *Lufkin Daily News* of August 21, 1988, carried a story about the restoration. Writer Gail Courtney describes Abram's as the store with the very newest things in fashion for the entire family. A gala opening of the restored building revealed a restaurant complete with a terrace and a skylight on the second floor. The first floor was a co-op of retail shops all done in the original art deco motif. Original mosaic tiles remained on the floor and the building front. A national registry of historic buildings designation was applied for, so the restoration required staying true to all the original building plans. The original Abram's sign in neon hung just as it did in the 1930s, and Lufkin held on to a little slice of its Jewish history.

Endnotes

- ¹ <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GS-cid=5707&GRid=64594183> & says 1871, but Michoel Ronn's genealogy research says 1878.
- ² Called Vishei in Yiddish.
- ³ All information in this article is found in Box 2F523 in the Texas Jewish Historical Society Collection, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, unless otherwise

noted.

- ⁴ Simon was born in 1838 in Veisiejai. He married Sarah Stinner. Their son Max died in 1916 at the age of 32 from tuberculosis. Daughter Flora was born in 1886. Harry, Jr. was born in 1887. He was Simon's son, not Harry's. Simon died in 1911. <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gsr&GS-cid=5707>.
- ⁵ Joseph (1868-1920) died in Lufkin. Fannie was born in Veisiejai in 1867 and died in Lufkin in 1925. She and her husband Jake had one child, Ray, who died as a child. Perry Markus may be her twin. Jake died in 1952. <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Markus&GSfn=Jake&GSbyrel=all&GS-dyrel=all&GSst=46&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=64577363&df=all&>. Also, <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Abram&GSfn=Joseph&GSby=1868&GSbyrel=in&GS-dyrel=all&GSst=46&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=64577223&df=all&>. Also, <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSsr=1641&GS-cid=5707&GRid=64577379&>.
- ⁶ Leo was born in 1901. He graduated Lufkin High School in 1919 and married Lenora Rosen of

Beaumont. Their two children, Sharlene Abram (Block) and Florence Abram (Midlo), also graduated Lufkin High.

- ⁷ Genevieve and Sam had a daughter, Beverly Robinson (Rosen) who graduated Lufkin High in 1949. Genevieve died in an automobile accident in 1958. <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Robinson&GSfn=genevieve&GSiman=1&GSbyrel=all&GSdyrel=all&GSst=46&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=64594155&df=all&>.
- ⁸ Information from three laminated obituaries in our files, but the newspapers are not identified.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Perry (1893-1958). Perry's birthdate is the same as Ray Markus, daughter of Jake and Fanny. Could they have been twins? <http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Markus&GSfn=Perry&GSbyrel=all&GS-dyrel=all&GSst=46&GSctry=4&GSob=n&GRid=64577350&df=all&>
- ¹¹ Joe's house later became the Lufkin National Bank parking lot. 🇺🇸

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January 23-30, 2017

Join us on our next humanitarian mission to the Jewish Communities of Cuba

For more information, contact Vickie Vogel, TJHS Travel Chair, at 979-966-2493 or vickvogel@yahoo.com

This mission is pursuant to a General License issued to the Texas Jewish Historical Society by the US Department of the Treasury.

— The Helpful TJHS —

Andrew Muchin (andrew.muchin@gmail.com) is looking for information on "Jewish Cowboy Harold Stern" of Centerville. In 1966, Stern was a 20-year-old college student and recorded a promotional record for Manischewitz Co. If you know him or how Andrew can contact him, please let Andrew know.

Thank you to Louis Green from Houston who helped Sandi Wissenberg with her research on her father's Boy Scout troop from the 1930s. Sandi received a grant from TJHS to help with her research and Louis contacted her after reading the article in the TJHS News Magazine. He knew each of the boys and what had become of them. He even knew Sandi's mother. We can help you, too—just send us photos, articles and wait for the phone calls! 🇺🇸

Welcome New Members!

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The exhibits have been displayed in various locations in Texas and other parts of the United States, including Rhode Island and Califor-



nia. They are an excellent program for schools, congregations, and other organizations. To schedule the exhibits, please contact Sally Drayer at 214-244-6234 or sallyedraye@gmail.com or contact Marc Wormser at 832-288-3494 or c2aggie@gmail.com.