

The Hugo Loewenstern Family

by Dr. Noel H. Pugach

Below I have provided excerpts from the paper that I delivered to the Texas Jewish Historical Society at its meeting in Amarillo, October 2007. Hugo Loewenstern was born in Cassel in 1890, and immigrated to the United States in 1904. Within a month after he arrived in Philadelphia, the fourteen-year-old was put on a train to New Mexico. His uncle Morris had invited him to work for him at his general store, the largest in Clayton. After five years of hard work, Hugo was ready for bigger things.

Indeed, in 1909, Morris sent Hugo to manage his branch store in Nara Visa, which hugged the New Mexico-Texas border. Several months later, he offered him a partnership, entitled to one-third of the profits. Since Hugo invested no capital, he had to plow back his share into the store. For the time being, Hugo was allowed to draw \$20 per month as wages. Hugo also homesteaded 160 acres about three

Little Cowtown in New Mexico" in the early twentieth century, had a lively commercial center and almost 1,000 residents in 1910. The main line of the Rock Island Railroad came through in 1900 and it was a water stop for the thirsty steam engines. Shortly afterwards, homesteaders poured in from the Midwest and laid claim to their 160 acres. Meanwhile, cowboys from the surrounding large ranches drifted in and out of the town, trading at the several retail businesses and visiting its many saloons.

Nara Visa had a reputation as a brawling, tough town, with few women and frequent fights. Perhaps these two facts were connected. At one time, Nara Visa boasted of five, some say as many as eight or nine, saloons, and the town was known for its old town dances. Nara Visa was later famous for a string of bank robberies from the 1920s to 1953. By then, the last bank had closed its doors and Nara Visa was almost a ghost town. The decline

was begun by the great fire in 1909 that destroyed at least eighteen business establishments, including M. Herzstein & Co. Herzstein's and most of the other stores were rebuilt, but the town never recovered, mainly because of the growing exodus of homesteaders, who could not make a living on 160 acres on the dry

high plains. There was, however, a brief revival in the mid-1920s when Humble Oil brought in a successful oil well east of Nara Visa.

M. Herzstein & Co. continued to prosper under Hugo's direction. It

would be the first of a long string of successful enterprises for Hugo. In 1917, he bought out Morris and his nephew Simon, and renamed the store as the Nara Visa Mercantile Co. He now had a family to support. In 1912, Hugo married Mildred (known to all as Effie) Henderson. She had come from Lineville, Iowa to teach school in Nara Visa. She quickly caught Hugo's eye and his heart; he used to wait for her to pass his store on her way to school. They were probably married in a civil ceremony, because Effie was a gentile. Hugo was obviously very embarrassed that he had to inform Morris, who had done so much in his behalf, of his decision to wed Effie, "against your wish and conviction." In a touching letter to Morris, he assured him that Effie would become a "Jewess" and compared her to Moses's wife Zipporah and Ruth who became model Jews. He also asked Morris to allow him to draw \$1,000 from the business to build a fine home in town. We do not have Morris's reply, if he wrote one. But there is no indication that Hugo's marriage had an adverse effect on the relationship between Hugo and the Herzsteins. Hugo and Effie had three children, Morris, Julia, and Hugo, Jr. Although Effie never converted, the children considered themselves at least partly Jewish. Effie gave up school-teaching and helped Hugo in the store at least until the children came.

Hugo also expanded into ranching by joining with Roland Bell to run a few head of cattle. By 1920, Hugo and Roland acquired over 6,000 acres, about six miles north of Nara Visa, and greatly increased their herd. In 1925, they dissolved the partnership because they differed over the kind of cattle they would raise. Roland wanted

continued on page 7



Nara Vista Mercantile Co.

miles from town, to which he commuted on a bicycle. Later, he acquired the first automobile in Nara Visa, a two-horsepower, one cylinder Brush with wooden tires.

Nara Visa, known as the "Biggest

to concentrate on "Grade" cattle while Hugo wanted to specialize in Registered Herefords. The separation was amicable. Hugo bought out Roland and established a thriving cattle business, selling Herefords all over the Western states, but especially to Native American tribes, the Apache, Papagos, Yavapai, and even to the Seminoles in Florida. Later, he added another 12,000 acres to his holdings. It had become a sizable operation and Hugo hired Joey Bell to live on the ranch and manage it, especially after the Loewensterns moved to Amarillo. Hugo ran cattle until 1949 and sold the ranch the following year....

In 1928, Hugo and Effie decided to leave Nara Visa because they wanted their children to have better educational opportunities. They decided to make their home in Amarillo, Texas.

In 1929, Hugo, Effie, and their three children moved to Amarillo. Up to this point, Hugo's and Effie's story was pretty conventional in the context of the history of Jewish Pioneer families in the southwest. He was given his start in business by sympathetic relatives who brought him out to New Mexico, trained him in retail merchandising, and helped him establish his own business. By dint of ability and hard work, Hugo became a successful retail merchant and a leading citizen in his community. Like other Jewish and gentile merchants, he branched out into ranching, which he found satisfying and challenging. But with the family's move to Amarillo in 1929, Hugo would employ his self-confidence, determination, business acumen, and feeling for the times in a very different field. He would carve out a major niche for himself in many segments of Amarillo's real estate market and assume a leadership role in the industry in Texas.

We do not know why Hugo turned to real estate for a living, or if he had

made prior arrangements in Amarillo. In a way, it seemed contrary to Hugo's very nature to go into anything without careful thought and planning. It is true that he had money from the sale of the store and he could fall back on the ranch. But he was too smart and too concerned about his family's welfare to gamble recklessly. In fact,



*Hugo Loewenstern with sons,
Morris and Hugo, Jr.*

shortly after he arrived in Amarillo, the nation was hit by the Great Depression.

In any event, Hugo learned the real estate business on the job and from the ground up. In those days, one did not need a real estate license in Texas; only three people had to vouch for your character. He quickly became a prominent and respected figure in the field. He started out renting homes in partnership with Homer Wheeler. Then, with the Great Depression wreaking havoc, Hugo noticed that there were many abandoned homes, especially on the west side and in the country club area. But they were in bad shape, with broken doors and windows. Hugo, Don Mason reported, was very handy and thought he could fix them within a short period of time and a little capital. Hugo negotiated with a savings and loan company in

Wichita Falls, Texas to take over 104 homes. He then teamed up with Fred Seale to form the Globe Realty Co., with offices in the Amarillo Building. Within eighteen months, Hugo and Fred sold all the homes. A pattern began to emerge. Hugo knew his limitations and realized that he could not do everything by himself. He therefore employed able people to work for his companies and he teamed up with bright and ambitious men in numerous enterprises. Soon, other businessmen recognizing Hugo's special business sense, intelligence, talents, and honesty approached him to partner with them.

In spite of the Great Depression, Hugo was making a good living and launched his own company in 1935, setting up his office at 415 W. 10th. A new building was put up in 1957, but his company remained at that site until it was dissolved early in 2007. He had a vision of Amarillo's future and he saw beyond the current slowdown. He also understood that while the nation was still mired in the Depression, ranchers in the area had a steady flow of income from their gas wells. They could wait out the decline in cattle prices and even increase their herds.

Hugo jumped into real estate development with the Bivens family, who made their fortune in oil and gas and ranching. They owned a large tract of land in town, but had not done anything with it. The Bivens now turned to Hugo and contracted with him to develop the land and sell it as home lots. In a relatively short period of time, Hugo had successfully developed the Bivens subdivision, one of the largest he worked on. Towards the end of the decade, Fred Seale came back with a proposal to build apartment houses as a rental investment. He owned a lumber yard and had an option on land near Amarillo College. Hugo agreed and he saw another good opportunity. United States entry into World War II

continued on page 8

restricted home construction, so Hugo adapted and engaged more heavily in buying and selling homes. Still, he managed to sell the last of the Bivens lots in 1944.

In the late 1930s, Irwin Ochsner, an attorney and friend of Hugo's, had been unable to sell vacant lots, north of the Country Club area, that were part of the Busch estate. Ochsner asked Hugo to join the project and together they started the development of the West Hills subdivision. In 1952, Hugo turned his attention to building homes in the subdivision. He asked Don Mason to join him in the project. Hugo had finally hired this persistent acolyte to work for his real estate company in 1950. Hugo learned that Mason was interested in home construction, so the two of them formed L&M Builders and started to put up homes in the sizable subdivision. It was very successful enterprise. Later, Hugo and his sons engaged in other subdivisions, such as Crestview and Eastridge. In the meantime, Hugo was building shopping centers in West Hills and Eastridge as well as warehouses and commercial buildings all over the city. Over several decades, Hugo Loewenstern, his sons Morris and Hugo Jr., and various partners shaped the housing market of Amarillo, a major achievement.

Hugo never slowed down, but continued to branch out into other businesses. Shortly before the United States entered World War II, Hugo and Gene Klein formed First Federal Savings & Loan, which lasted until the mid-1980s. One of his great successes was the State Chemical Company. The Fain family asked Hugo to sell their janitorial supply company. Hugo took the listing but soon realized its potential. The Amarillo National Bank was willing to finance the purchase. Indeed, Arch Lydia, one of the vice presidents, agreed to join the enterprise if Hugo could find a third partner.

Hugo invited Gene Klein to join them and State Chemical was off and running. Hugo was not concerned with titles, and he accepted the office of senior vice president. The State Chemical Co. soon expanded its product line and opened a division in Lubbock, Midland/Odessa, and Roswell, New Mexico. The partners made a great deal of money from the company.

By the late 1940s, Hugo was a major figure in the real estate business in Texas. He was well-known, liked, and respected by his colleagues, and he became a spokesman for the industry. The honors and offices multiplied over the years; they are in fact too



Hugo Loewenstern in middle age.

many to detail here. Hugo was elected president of the Amarillo Real Estate Board and the Texas Real Estate Association. He was chosen Texas Realtor of the Year in 1962. Hugo organized and served as President of the effective Potter County Taxpayer's Association. He also was a director of the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce and the Amarillo Area Foundation, which helped to develop the city's highly regarded medical complexes and a major contributor to the area's economy. Hugo was also an architect

of the Amarillo Industrial Plan, which was designed to draw new industry to the area.

Hugo was increasingly consulted by his peers, attorneys, accountants, and politicians, especially in the area of taxation. Hugo made himself an expert on real estate taxation and wrote columns that appeared in many newspapers. He was also sought after as a speaker and traveled throughout Texas and beyond its borders to lecture on real estate for the National Association of Realtors and other groups. He was also invited to give courses on real estate taxation. Out of his lectures he wrote a book, *Tax Facts*, on the subject, which went through seven printings and circulated widely. Hugo readily accepted the invitations because he believed strongly in advanced education for real estate brokers and businessmen.

Hugo and Effie had an active social life and were involved in many civic, charitable, community, and fraternal organizations. Hugo liked people and was a joiner. Hugo often rose to leadership positions in them. He organized a Masonic Lodge in Nara Visa and was a Shriner in Amarillo, serving as Potentate of the Khiva Shrine. Hugo was also a member of Kiwanis for thirty-five years. Effie belonged to Eastern Star, the female counterpart to the Masons. She was also an avid and knowledgeable gardener. She served as president of the Garden Club and was a founder of the Rose Society; in fact she was a consultant for three states.

The Loewensterns were engaged in charitable work. Hugo's favorite charity was Cal Farley's Ranch (a place to give troubled children a second chance), and was one of its founders. He had a strong attachment to Khiva Shrine's Crippled Children Fund. He also donated to Jewish charities and his sons believe he sup-

continued on page 15

— Tradition Returns to Temple Beth El — Corsicana, Texas



by Deanna Plemons

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Corsicana's rich heritage is full of contributions made by a once thriving Jewish community. This group of people, who began to arrive in 1871, is responsible for the Temple Beth El, an historic landmark. At one time, most businesses on Beaton Street were owned by Jewish merchants, and closed every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In addition to the Temple Beth El Congregation, a synagogue also had a large congregation, and the numbers swelled between both to number members in the hundreds.

Through the years, however, as the elder members passed on and younger generations moved to larger cities for work, the numbers dwindled to a point where both congregations ceased to exist, and the few remaining members of the Jewish community were forced to travel to Waco or other cities for services.

Saturday, August 4, 2007, the first Bar Mitzvah in thirty-seven years was held at Temple Beth El.

"The last Bar Mitzvah (in Corsicana) was in 1970, when my son Douglas was thirteen," said Babbette Samuels. "That was thirty-seven years ago. Rabbi Ernest Joseph, the father of Rabbi Frank Joseph, officiated at Douglas' Bar Mitzvah."

In 2005, Rabbi Frank Joseph responded to interest in the remaining Corsicana Jewish community, and obtained permission from the City of Corsicana to hold services once a month on Friday evenings at Temple Beth El. Judi Cohen Wyatt and Babbette Samuels of Corsicana played instrumental roles in this endeavor. Judi's brother, Mark Cohen, a Corsicana native who now resides in Rockwall, began bringing his family to services at Temple Beth El. His son,

Jeffrey (who is called J.J.) started his Hebrew instruction in November, 2006, and was ready for his Bar Mitzvah. "This is normally done at age thirteen and J.J. is fourteen, so we're running a little late with him," Mark Cohen said. "You can have a Bar Mitzvah any time, but thirteen is the age you're considered an adult in Jewish life. We thought it would be neat to have it come full circle, since my brother had his here with Rabbi Frank's father, and have a Bar Mitzvah, a starting over, to hopefully rebuild the congregation."

Cohen's daughters, Samantha, fifteen, and J.J.'s twin, Mallory, chose not to have a Bat Mitzvah, the rite of passage for Jewish girls. According to Jewish tradition, this is the age when a boy or girl becomes morally aware and sensitive, and capable of channeling the natural tendency to put their own needs ahead of others.

"It is a wonderful thing," Cohen said. "It brings the family together for a large celebration, and has lot of meaning. It is a nice reason to gather, not like gathering for funerals."

The Bar Mitzvah involved family and friends, and all the members of the burgeoning congregation, which numbers nearly twenty. All ages were represented, and the service was in English and Hebrew. "Jeffrey will serve as a wonderful role model to others,"

Rabbi Joseph said. "He represents hope, which is everything the Jewish people believe in."

Temple Beth El was dedicated by the Jewish community in 1900, when the congregation consisted of sixty



families. The congregation finally dwindled to the point where it disbanded in 1981. The building, with its distinctive architecture, octagonal towers and two onion domes, was in a state of dis-

repair and scheduled for demolition.

A group of concerned citizens formed a "Save the Temple" group, and held dinners, style shows, and musical reviews. With the help of private donations and state and local grants, the group was able to raise more the \$100,000 to restore the building, and deed it to the City of Corsicana. It was rededicated in 1987, and is now used for activities and club meetings. "It is old, old architecture, and the city maintains it nicely," Cohen said. "It's a house of worship, and we're glad to see it utilized. We're keeping the tradition alive."

"Growing up, we lived in Waxahachie for a while, and my Dad drove me, my brother and Judi to Corsicana every Sunday for Hebrew lessons. Now it's come full circle." ❄️

Loewenstern, continued from page 8
ported the new state of Israel after its creation in 1948. Hugo and Effie also supported Temple B'nai Israel and were members until their death. Rabbi Arthur Bluhm officiated at her funeral in 1956 and Rabbi Maurice Feuer officiated at his funeral at the temple in 1973....

The complete story of Hugo and his children will be told in a booklet that should be published in the spring of 2008. ❄️