

# From Our Archives

## — The Only Jewish Family in Hereford —

by Vickie Vogel

Gaston Baer was born in Paris<sup>1</sup> on August 11, 1898.<sup>2</sup> By the time he was 13, he was working in wholesale houses in Paris, selling ribbons and corsets.<sup>3</sup> The family left France on the “last ship out” in flight from World War I.<sup>4</sup> The year was 1914 and 16-year-old Gaston was living in Paris. His father, Bernard, a German national, feared French hostility toward those who had not been naturalized as French citizens and secretly prepared to evacuate his family. Gaston was working at a department store when his mother called one morning and told him to come home for lunch. This was not his custom, as home was far from work. Suspecting there was a good reason, Gaston took the long trolley ride home and found the family already packed with tickets to America. Gaston left Paris without his last week’s wages.<sup>5</sup>

Gaston remembered that the ship was overloaded. With German submarines<sup>6</sup> all around, they zigzagged their way across the Atlantic. “People stayed up on deck, praying and moaning,” he recalled. Baer bore a scar on his hand from a bayonet wound he received while working for the Red Cross.<sup>7</sup>

When the Baer family reached the United States, they went from New York to Michigan<sup>8</sup> in 1915, where other family members lived, but they soon moved to Vaughn, New Mexico,<sup>9</sup> where two uncles, Julius and Sig Moise,<sup>10</sup> had a brisk retail business. Two of Gaston’s brothers, Adolph and Louie, worked with their uncles. Adolph took over the Vaughn branch of the Moise enterprise when his cousin, Gus Stern, died.<sup>11</sup> Julius had a cattle ranch in Santa Rosa, which he turned over to Gaston’s cousin and



Courtesy of Kay Schacter

*Gaston and Pauline Baer, 1960*

wife, Joe and Marguerite Moise,<sup>12</sup> since Gaston, a large man with a limp, was not cut out to be a cowboy.<sup>13</sup> Two sisters, Martha and Germaine, also settled in Vaughn. Gaston did not speak English, but he picked it up along with Spanish.<sup>14</sup> He already spoke French, German, Italian, Yiddish, and “a smattering of what he claims is Chinese.”<sup>15</sup> Life in Vaughn could be difficult, according to Baer. A drunken cowboy nearly shot and killed him for talking to a waitress. “Life was cheap and times were rough,” he said.<sup>16</sup>

Gaston met Pauline Berg in



Courtesy of Kay Schacter

*Popular Store in 1933. From right to left: a young Gaston with Teddy, age 12, and Pauline Baer*

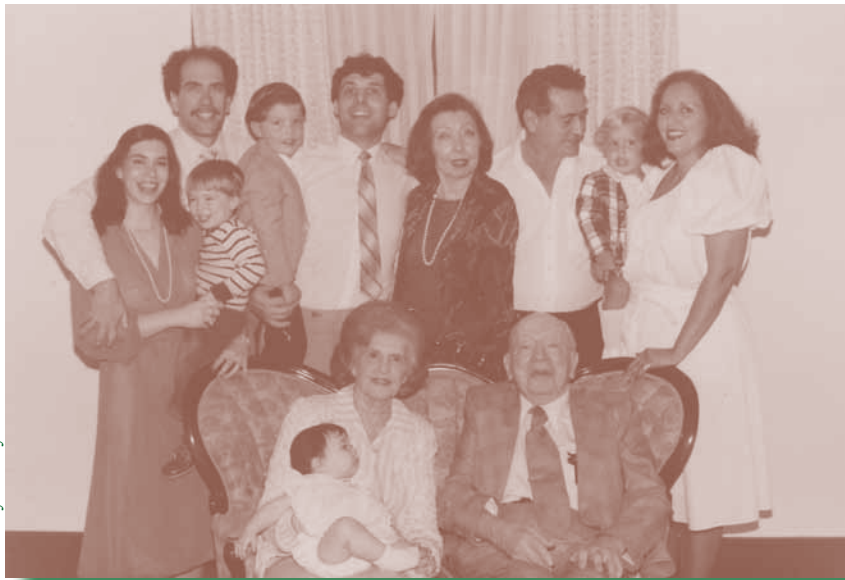
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Vaughn, and they married in Wichita Falls on August 25, 1921, which was Pauline's birthday.<sup>17</sup> Pauline was born in 1901 in New York City but moved to Oklahoma City as a child. She lived in Dallas, and then on a ranch near Santa Rosa, New Mexico.<sup>18</sup> The Berg family was actually named Goldberg, but they dropped the first half of the name to sound more "American." Family lore says they fled Germany with Mrs. Berg's jewelry sewn into her clothes.

With the sale of the jewelry, they were able to get into real estate in Canada and later owned a hotel in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Pauline (who changed her name from Pearl) had two sisters, Rose and Ruth, and a brother, Max.<sup>19</sup>

After a short stay in Tucumcari, Gaston and Pauline moved to Hereford, Texas (200 miles east of Vaughn),<sup>20</sup> in 1921.<sup>21</sup> Pauline later recalled that they came in a stripped-down Ford and low-powered truck. When the heavily laden truck was unable to make it up the hill at Ragland, New Mexico, a part of her new furniture had to be unloaded and was damaged in the process.<sup>22</sup> The newlyweds had been sent to liquidate the inventory of a dry-goods store that Mr. Berg, "a wealthy Eastern merchant,"<sup>23</sup> had bought. After looking it over, Gaston told his father-in-law that he believed that he could make the store work.<sup>24</sup> It became their wedding present.

Gaston named it the Popular Store after a shop in El Paso that he liked.<sup>25</sup> The store sold men's and women's



Courtesy of Kay Schachter

*Gaston Baer family, 1982.*

*Gaston's 84th birthday celebration. Gaston seated with his wife of 14 years, Esther, and their great-granddaughter, Bessie Schachter. From left to right in back: Kay holding son Ben with Cary Schachter, Jason held by his father Sheldon Alexander, Harriet and Irving Alexander, Emil held by Sheldon's wife, Carolyn Alexander.*

clothing and furnishings. In the early days, plenty of brogans, overalls, and print dresses were stocked.<sup>26</sup> Baer's stated goal was to provide for the needs of the local people, since most of his business came from farmers in the area.<sup>27</sup> Baer handled his own alterations, cleaned his own store, and stocked his own inventories. In the 1920s, the big trade day was Saturday, when the farmers would come to town to sell their eggs, cream, and produce.

"They'd come and buy a suit, then go on and do other shopping while I did the alterations," Baer recalled. "Many times, they'd wind up going to a movie before picking up the suit, but I would always stay open. Sometimes it would be one o'clock in the morning."<sup>28</sup>

"What I miss most is the time when the wheat harvest was the big event of the year," Baer reminisced in 1965. "I remember when those trucks lined up and somebody would hold the driver's place and move his truck up nearer the elevator so he could come

to Main Street and buy a new pair of boots."<sup>29</sup>

Baer emphasized customer service and took pride in being the first merchant to open in the morning and the last to close at night. He would open after hours or on holidays in an emergency. Gaston's was a meeting place for farmers and ranchers in town for Saturday shopping.<sup>30</sup> Some Deaf Smith County settlers spoke only German or Spanish and were happy to find a store where they could be understood in their own language.<sup>31</sup>

Of the seven similar stores in Hereford during the Great Depression, the Popular Store was the only one to survive under the same ownership.<sup>32</sup> Baer "took about everything you can imagine in exchange for clothing," such as eggs, chickens, old batteries, and radiators. "You name it, and we got it."<sup>33</sup>

For a county historical publication in 1982, the Baers recalled one of the most frightening experiences of their early days in Hereford. A "black dust-er" blew in while they were attending a movie in 1928. Gaston could barely see to drive, and when they finally reached their home, he turned in the wrong driveway. He had driven with his head out the window and was "crying mud tears with his face completely covered in mud." At first, they lived in an apartment in the rear of the store,<sup>34</sup> but they soon moved into the house in which they would live for the rest of their lives. Located at 135 Avenue B, it was remodeled in 1954.<sup>35</sup>

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The Baers had one daughter, Hertha, named after Pauline's grandfather Herth,<sup>36</sup> and they nicknamed her "Teddy." Gaston was sometimes called

Street, was expanded and redecorated in 1953, giving Hereford one of the most modern ready-to-wear stores for men, women, and children.<sup>39</sup> A second

child and playing with this non-existent out-of-date merchandise, such as "old galoshes and other weird stuff." She also remembers "Big Papa's" love of sweets, kept in a refrigerator in the back of the store. In the afternoons, he'd share them with anyone working or shopping in the store. "As kids, we would always go check out what was there, knowing that we'd get to have some if we stayed at the store long enough. It used to drive Nana crazy since Big Papa, as you may have noticed, was not a slender man!"<sup>45</sup> Kay also remembers that Gaston bought a new Cadillac every year, and every one of them was named "Feefee."<sup>46</sup>



Courtesy of Kay Schacter

Gaston, Germaine, Martha, Bernard Baer, France, 1912

"Papa Baer" or "Big Papa" by his grandchildren.<sup>37</sup> Teddy married Irving Julius Alexander on November 21, 1948, and in 1949, he joined the family business. Born in New York City, Irving met Hertha at a resort in the Catskills, and they fell in love. Their son Sheldon was born on July 24, 1951, and daughter Kay arrived November 22, 1952. At first, they lived in New York, as Teddy did not want to return to Hereford, but the opportunity to learn dry goods and open a store of their own was a compelling reason to go back. Irving's previous experience had been in jewelry and dry cleaning.<sup>38</sup>

The Popular Store, on Main

store, called Gaston's, was added in 1965 at Hereford's new Sugarland Mall.<sup>40</sup> Baer continued to manage the downtown store until 1978.<sup>41</sup> The Alexanders opened Alexander's, Inc., in the Western Plaza in Amarillo and also helped Baer manage the two stores in Hereford.<sup>42</sup>

Baer blamed an economic decline in the 1970s on the frequent sales of other stores. Baer believed that sales "spoiled the public" so that their shopping schedules revolved around sales. He also lamented the decline in the quality of clothes made by machine rather than skilled tailors.

"We've been faithful to just a few lines of clothes," said Baer. "I've always tried to

stock the best merchandise at the least cost to the customer. Like at any other store, many people who stop here look for close-out merchandise. People now tend to shop around more than they used to. People who once only shopped at your store, are everybody's customer."<sup>43</sup>

Baer noted that fashions began to change faster than when he started out. As a shrewd observer of fashion, he never got "stuck" with out-of-date merchandise. Shoes, he noted, were the worst item as far as keeping up with changes in style.<sup>44</sup> Granddaughter Kay Schacter, however, recalls going up to the attic of the store as a

Pauline Baer died August 1, 1970, after a long battle with cancer. Her funeral was at First United Methodist Church, conducted by Rabbi Maurice Feuer of Temple B'Nai Israel of Amarillo, where the Baers were members. She was buried in Amarillo's Llano Cemetery. Her husband and daughter survived her, along with grandchildren Kay Lynne and Sheldon Alexander.<sup>47</sup>

Gaston used to say that as Hereford's only Jewish family, they never planned to stay there very long. "That's why my wife never would let me buy any land. I wish that I had now, considering how valuable it has become."<sup>48</sup>

When Pauline died, Gaston realized that they could never have left Hereford because of the people there. They were different from city folks.

"When my wife died, we received a stack of letters, and cards and telegrams this high," he said, holding his palm about eight inches above the polished desk top of his office in the rear of the store.<sup>49</sup>

Gaston Baer, with Pauline's help, operated the store for almost sixty years. Daughter Teddy hosted a party for his 84th birthday, and it was written up in the *Amarillo Daily-News*. "Old friends and customers last night

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continued to marvel at his uncannily accurate memory—not just the names and family connections of people he may not have seen in years, but even such information as shirt sizes and preferences in merchandise. Most Hereford oldtimers have a store of ‘Gaston’ stories.” Many of the stories were about the Depression, and Gaston was praised for his ability to adapt to the times.

Hereford Postmaster Nolan Grady told about buying a jacket as a youngster. He worked at the local movie theater and paid off his bill at 25 cents per week. Hereford was a small town of 2000 when the Baers arrived, and Gaston was seen as “an exotic addition”<sup>50</sup> and Hereford’s “flamboyant polyglot.” (“Se Habla Español” read the sign in his window).<sup>51</sup>

After Pauline died, Gaston’s friends urged him to take a Caribbean cruise. He missed the boat. He booked

the last cabin on another ship and enjoyed visiting Haiti, where he could speak French with the locals and sing “La Marseillaise” with a cab driver.

At a party for singles on the ship, he met Esther Hauser of Los Angeles (a former teacher<sup>52</sup>), and they married in 1971.<sup>53</sup> Baer told reporter Bob Davis, “I’m a fast worker, aren’t I?”<sup>54</sup>

Esther spent her first few days in Hereford looking for trees.<sup>55</sup> “She is still looking,” Gaston quipped, “But just to cheer her up, sometimes I take her down to the creek [Tierra Blanca] so we can look at some trees.” When Gaston met Esther, “She thought that since I was from Texas I had oil wells, but my oil wells turned out to be socks.”<sup>56</sup> Esther assisted with activities at the Hereford Senior Citizen Center.<sup>57</sup>

Gaston Baer was active in Rotary Club and was a charter member of the Hereford Country Club (at Pauline

and Teddy’s insistence<sup>58</sup>), as well as a member of B’Nai Israel in Amarillo.<sup>59</sup> He received a special award from the Distributive Education Department for his role in hiring high school students when that program was started.<sup>60</sup> He was known for his generosity to local charities, and, for many years, he sent the store’s overstocks to an orphanage in Colorado.<sup>61</sup> After his nominal retirement in 1978,<sup>62</sup> he still came to the store a couple of times a week to check on business. Thelma Mercer, who had worked with the Baer family for thirty years, and her husband Robert were the new owners. Thelma said, “We’re doing our very best to follow in the traditions set by Mr. Baer. We believe we have the best teacher on earth...”<sup>63</sup>

Thelma Mercer was more than an employee. Starting as a maid at the downtown store at the age of 16, she

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became a family friend and confidante, babysitting the grandchildren when the grownups went to market in Dallas or New York. In her 20's, Thelma became a saleslady at the store and, later,



Courtesy of Kay Schachter

*Thelma Mercer, who took over the stores when Gaston Baer retired, inherited the family home.*

the manager. Irving Alexander helped her to get a bank loan to buy out the inventory around 1990. His daughter, Kay Schachter, sold the building to Thelma in 2005 after Irving's death. Gaston left the family home to Thelma in his will, knowing his grandchildren would not be living in Hereford.<sup>64</sup>

Gaston attributed his success in taking a bankrupt clothing store and making it profitable to his dogged determination. "One must have his heart in what he is doing to be a success. Otherwise, you'll probably fall flat on your face unless you're very, very lucky."<sup>65</sup>

When Orville Howard interviewed him for a newspaper feature around 1989, Gaston said, "Let's see, you wear about a 46 coat...and we have a selection that's just right for you."<sup>66</sup>

The Baer's grandson, Sheldon Alexander, operated the store at the Mall for a time,<sup>67</sup> closing it in the late 1980s. Teddy died on January 21, 1986,<sup>68</sup> and Esther on May 4, 1989.<sup>69</sup> Gaston moved to the Golden Plains

Care Center for the last two years of his life. In 1991, he died at the age of 92 at Deaf Smith General Hospital and was buried in Llano Cemetery in Amarillo.<sup>70</sup> Just before his 92nd birthday, Gaston was heard to say, "Clothes may not always make the man, but sometimes it sure may help."<sup>71</sup>

#### *References*

<sup>1</sup>"Mall Store," unidentified, undated newspaper clipping from Kay Schachter. All newspaper articles (except this one and Naomi Hopson's) are found in Box 3A 168, Texas Jewish Historical Society Collection, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.legacy.com/Obituaries.p?Page=OBITFINDERSSIREULTS>

<sup>3</sup>Naomi Hopson, "Baer is Oldest Main St. Firm," Hereford Brand, July 25, 1965.

<sup>4</sup>His older brother had come three years earlier, having missed the boat on his first attempt to immigrate. That ship was the Titanic. Bob Davis, "Clothing Store Wedding Gift Launched 50-Year Career," Amarillo Globe-News, May 23, 1971.

<sup>5</sup>"Mall Store," op cit.

<sup>6</sup>German U-Boats (unterseeboot) were used in World War I against unarmed civilian merchant ships, including the Lusitania and even a ferry. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U-boat>

<sup>7</sup>Davis, op cit.

<sup>8</sup>Some accounts say that Gaston went to New Mexico, then Michigan, then back to New Mexico. See "Mall Store," and Hopson, op cit.

<sup>9</sup>Population 539 in 2000. Vaughn was at a junction of the railroad at the turn of the last century. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaughn,\\_New\\_Mexico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaughn,_New_Mexico) See also <http://www.ghosttowns.com/states/nm/vaughn.html>

<sup>10</sup>The Moise family is prominent in the history of New Mexico. S. S. and J. J. were both active in the political and public life of the area. S. S.'s son Irwin became a district judge in 1937. <http://books.google.com/>

[books?id=HoPeuOvwZ1IC&pg=PA161&lpg=PA161&dq=santa+rosa+NM+jewish+history&source=bl&ots=IKlXLYgwkV&sig=gGqJbNP2d8wxDRgaPDswtnj90AY&hl=en&ei=u-UcTH-98AaY7ejIDQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CDQQ6AEwBA#v=snippet&q=moise&f=false](http://books?id=HoPeuOvwZ1IC&pg=PA161&lpg=PA161&dq=santa+rosa+NM+jewish+history&source=bl&ots=IKlXLYgwkV&sig=gGqJbNP2d8wxDRgaPDswtnj90AY&hl=en&ei=u-UcTH-98AaY7ejIDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5&ved=0CDQQ6AEwBA#v=snippet&q=moise&f=false)

<sup>11</sup>Noel Pugach, Moise Family History, New Mexico Jewish Historical Society publication, p. 9. Email dated January 2, 2011.

<sup>12</sup>Their son Steve Moise went to the University of Colorado with Gaston's grandson Sheldon Alexander. Email Kay Schachter, January 4, 2011.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Orville Howard, "Gaston Baer: a part of business community for almost 70 years," Large print photocopy, c. 1989, Hereford Brand.

<sup>15</sup>Davis, op cit.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 4, 2011.

<sup>18</sup>"Pauline Baer Dies; Rites Held Friday," undated and unnamed newspaper (probably Hereford Brand re Kay Schachter email January 4, 2011) article photocopy.

<sup>19</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 4, 2011. Ruth married Jacob Lewin and, after living in Amarillo, they moved to Wichita, Kansas and opened their store, Lewin's.

<sup>20</sup><http://www.randmcnally.com/mileage-calculator.do?from=Dallas%20TX&to=Little%20Rock%2C%20AR>

<sup>21</sup>"Baer, 92, pioneer businessman, dies Friday." The Hereford Brand, Sunday, May 23, 1991.

<sup>22</sup>"Pauline Baer Dies; Rites Held Friday," op cit.

<sup>23</sup>Davis, op cit.

<sup>24</sup>Howard, op cit.

<sup>25</sup>Davis, op cit.

<sup>26</sup>Untitled newspaper invitation to Gaston's 84th birthday party.

<sup>27</sup>"Baer Knows Hereford after 50 Years of Selling," The Hereford Brand, Thursday, April 8, 1971.

<sup>28</sup>Howard, op cit.

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- <sup>29</sup>Hopson, op cit.
- <sup>30</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/623/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>31</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/623/?q=gaston%20baer>. John Henry Behrends tells about shopping at Gaston Baer's store for shoes, where "they could talk their native language." <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/221/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>32</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/623/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>33</sup>Howard, op cit.
- <sup>34</sup>The Land and Its People, 1876-1981: Deaf Smith County, Texas, Deaf Smith County Historical Society, 1982. <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/623/?q=gaston%20baer>.
- <sup>35</sup>"Pauline Baer Dies; Rites Held Friday," op cit.
- <sup>36</sup>Not liking the name "Hertha," she changed her legal name to Harriet when she came of age. Email Kay Schachter, January 6, 2011.
- <sup>37</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 4, 2011.
- <sup>38</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 6, 2011.
- <sup>39</sup>Bessie Patterson, A History of Deaf Smith County, 1964, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16011/m1/138/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>40</sup>The store name of Popular was changed to Gaston's Popular Store and later just Gaston's, like the new store. Untitled newspaper invitation to Gaston's 84th birthday party, and Howard op cit.
- <sup>41</sup>"Baer, 92, pioneer businessman, dies Friday," op cit.
- <sup>42</sup>Davis, op cit.
- <sup>43</sup>"Baer Knows Hereford after 50 Years of Selling," The Hereford Brand, Thursday, April 8, 1971.
- <sup>44</sup>Davis, op cit.
- <sup>45</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 7, 2011.
- <sup>46</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup>"Pauline Baer Dies; Rites Held Friday," op cit.
- <sup>48</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 7, 2011.
- <sup>49</sup>Davis, op cit.
- <sup>50</sup>"Longtime Hereford businessman honored," Amarillo Daily News, Thursday, August 12, 1982.
- <sup>51</sup>Davis, op cit.
- <sup>52</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/219/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>53</sup>"Baer, 92, pioneer businessman, dies Friday," op cit.
- <sup>54</sup>Davis, op cit.
- <sup>55</sup>Davis, op cit.
- <sup>56</sup>Gaston Baer: a part of business community for almost 70 years," by Orville Howard. large print photocopy, year unknown, presumably Hereford paper.
- <sup>57</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/219/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>58</sup>Email Sheldon Alexander, January 7, 2011.
- <sup>59</sup>"Baer, 92, pioneer businessman, dies Friday," op cit.
- <sup>60</sup>Howard, op cit.
- <sup>61</sup>"Baer Knows Hereford after 50 Years of Selling," The Hereford Brand, Thursday, April 8, 1971.
- <sup>62</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/623/?q=gaston%20baer>
- <sup>63</sup>Howard, op cit.
- <sup>64</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 6, 2011.
- <sup>65</sup>Howard, op cit.
- <sup>66</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup><http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth16010/m1/623/?q=gaston%20>. Baer says that he left Hereford in 1979 and the Alexanders managed it.
- <sup>68</sup>Email Kay Schachter, January 7, 2011.
- <sup>69</sup>texashistory, op cit. Alexander's in Amarillo closed in January 1989. Irving moved to Boca Raton, Florida, near his cousin, Marion Beren. His last months were spent with Kay in Dallas, where he died in 2003. Email Kay Alexander Schachter, January 4, 2011.
- <sup>70</sup>"Baer, 92, pioneer businessman, dies Friday," op cit.
- <sup>71</sup>Howard, op cit. 