

— Tied and Tethered (*Geknippt und Gebinden*): Jews in Early Fort Worth —

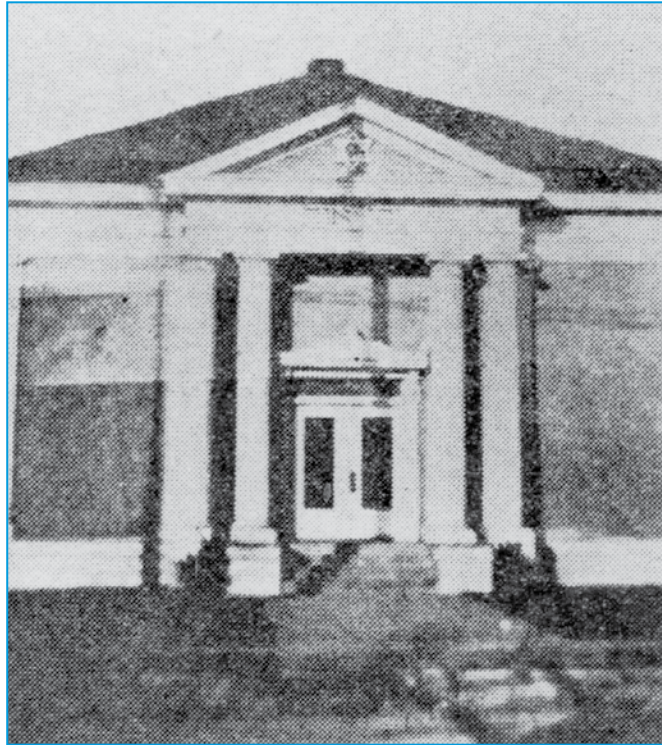
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During the Eighteen Eighties and the Nineties, Fort Worth had a considerable Jewish population . . . [yet] cold indifference to affairs of a religious nature prevailed.

That was the observation of Fort Worth's first Jewish historian, Flora Weltman Schiff. Writing in 1914 for Chicago's *Reform Advocate*, she reported in a front-page story that the pioneer Jews in her Texas hometown were so irreverent, "the very mention of [worship] services would subject one to ridicule. . . . Such was the reputation of Fort Worth throughout the State of Texas that the mere mention of the name in Jewish circles would suggest the abandonment of all hope for the Jews of that City."

Unlike other major Texas cities—such as Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and Galveston—Fort Worth, during the final decades of the nineteenth-century, had no B'nai B'rith lodge and no Reform synagogue. In this frontier county seat, 40 miles west of Dallas, Jewish institutions were slow to develop. When they did, the pattern was unlike most American Jewish communities where the creation of a Hebrew cemetery came first, followed by a burial society that administered charity, then a religious school, and ultimately a congregation. Fort Worth basked in its reputation as a rugged, irreverent town where drunken cowboys unloaded six-shooters into the air and a panther was spotted napping in the middle of a



Beth-El Congregation's first Temple at 601 Taylor Street, 1908 - 1920. (Fort Worth Jewish Archives)

downtown street. Unlike the neighboring county seat of Weatherford, a dry town that promoted itself as a "city of churches," a propensity for prayer was not part of Fort Worth's profile.

Fort Worth's religious laxity, particularly among its 150 Jews, was such that in March 1879 a circuit-riding rabbi from Galveston attempted to start a Sabbath school, to little avail. "There seems to be a lack of zeal among parents," a journalist with the *Jewish South*, an Atlanta, Georgia, weekly, reported three months later. The reporter, Charles Wessolowsky, reprimanded his brethren for having the numbers but not the inclination to follow Jewish traditions.

A Jewish cemetery, Emanuel Hebrew Rest, was not started through

the efforts of Jewish residents, but rather by a civic leader who deeded property in 1879 for several graveyards, including one for the "Israelites" of the city. The Hebrew cemetery's origins demonstrate that Fort Worth's Jews, while an integral part of the landscape, were passive about creating their own religious institutions. A B'nai B'rith lodge, launched by out-of-town organizers from Waco and Dallas in 1876, disintegrated during an economic downturn in the early 1880s. In 1888, a local Jewish resident wrote a letter to the editor of Cincinnati's *American Israelite* lamenting: "We have no congregation, no B'nai B'rith, and the only society we have is the cemetery association . . . and now

interest in that most laudable enterprise is flagging."

Meanwhile, Jewish settlers in other Texas cities—mainly Houston, Victoria, Galveston, San Antonio, Dallas, Waco, Tyler, Gainesville, and even Hempstead—were coalescing into congregations. These pioneer congregations gravitated toward American Reform Judaism which shed ancient traditions like eating kosher meat, wearing yarmulkes, praying in Hebrew, performing weddings under a *chuppah*, and closing their businesses on Shabbat, the most profitable day of the business week. Reform Judaism emphasized moral teachings and stressed Judaism as a religious denomination, rather than an enveloping

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culture. Modeling itself after Protestant denominations, Reform Judaism allowed mixed seating of men and women, organ and choral music.

Despite adaptations allowed by the Reform movement, Fort Worth's pioneer Jews were reluctant to commit to religious institutions. Not that they denied their Jewish identity.



Emanuel Hebrew Rest pictured at an 1898 funeral. The entire Jewish community used the cemetery until 1910 when Congregation Ahavath Sholom objected to the burial of a non-Jewish spouse and started an Orthodox cemetery. Hebrew Rest has received Historic Texas Cemetery designation thanks to efforts of the TJHS. (Photo by Swartz Bros., courtesy Fort Worth Jewish Archives.)

They displayed a sense of cohesion and ethnic homogeneity. Jewish men formed commercial partnerships with other Jews, engaging in business with brothers and brothers-in-law or recruit-



Outing in Forest Park, ca. 1915. Kneeling: Sara Eckert (Gernsbacher); middle row: Libby Simon, Rose Label (Levenson), Ida Fred (Cohn), Dorothy Hornstein, Dora Eckert (Herman); Back row: Fannie Fred (Jacobs); Ida Brodkey (Fred); Fannie Katz (Baum). (Fort Worth Jewish Archives)

ing relatives and Jewish friends in a chain-migration pattern. The Columbia Dry Goods Store, for example, had financial backing from three local Jews: Sol Mayer, a liquor store proprietor, Marcus Alexander, a haberdasher, and Alexander's brother-in-law Joe Pommer. Jake Washer, a men's clothing merchant who arrived from Memphis in 1882, opened a haberdashery and was soon followed by his brother, Nat, and fellow Jews Alphonse and Larry August. These men worked together until 1887

when the Augusts opened a competing store. Sam Levy, a wholesale liquor and cigar distributor who had worked in Dallas and Decatur, took over the Fort Worth-based Casey-Swasey Co. liquor enterprise in the 1880s. Levy employed his stepsons—Alvin and Mannie Kramer—and recruited at least three other Jewish salesmen (Oscar Seligman, Herman Lederman, and Herman Marx) to canvas the countryside.

Socially, groups of Jews gathered for games of whist. Their evening card parties were written up in the social columns of the *Southwestern Jewish Sentiment*, which described the soirees in detail, down to the food served during six-course dinners, the décor, and the prizes: a cut-glass cigar stand for the gents, a satin pin cushion for the ladies, and egg beaters for the losers. Weddings were announced in the Jewish press and the daily papers. The sons and daughters of Fort Worth Jews

often married other Jews from within the local community or out-of-town relatives of business partners. Fort Worth's Jews may not have supported any local religious organizations, but they retained ties with Jewish communities elsewhere. Amongst themselves, they had a strong network of social and business ties. Sociologically, they perceived themselves as an ethnic community, sans formal institutions.

Religion was simply not a priority. These self-reliant individuals had not come to Fort Worth for religion but for the independence and entrepreneurial opportunities inherent on the frontier. They self-selected Fort Worth, making a conscious decision to leave urban landscapes and urban expectations behind. As historian Sander Gilman observes in *Jewries at the Frontier*, many a Jew elects to settle on the margins of settlement because it is perceived as a peripheral space where one may function alone, free of communal expectations. Fort Worth, physically and psychologically, was just such a place, a locale without traditional constraints.

Welcome to Cowtown

Founded in 1849, Fort Worth had begun as a military camp, one of eight strategic outposts between the Rio Grande and the Red River designed to protect Texas settlements from marauding Native American tribes. Fort Worth's strategic location was on a bluff overlooking a twin fork in the Trinity River. The city prided itself on its frontier origins, its nickname (Cowtown), and its location on a feeder road into the Chisholm Trail, one of the Southwest's oldest cattle-to-market routes. As the last major town on the route north to Kansas, Fort Worth became a watering spot for cowboys seeking supplies as well as recreation in the city's Hell's Half Acre. Trail bosses stocked up on flour at Jacob Samuels' dry goods store and sampled tobacco at Harris Eichenbaum's cigar

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shop, establishments owned by Jewish entrepreneurs.

Fort Worth's earliest settlers were young single men drawn to the challenges of the frontier. The city's first Jewish pioneer, German-born Simon Gabert, 20, arrived in 1856. Lured by gold-rush fever, he ventured even further west. He was returning via St. Louis in 1861 when the Civil War erupted, and he enlisted in the Union Army's 4th Regular Missouri Cavalry, aka Fremont's Hussars. By 1880 he was back in Fort Worth with a bullet in his leg, a wife, six children, and a cotton-buying business. The city's second Jewish pioneer, Warsaw-born Jacob Samuels, was 20 when he arrived in 1857 via Louisiana and Waco. When Texas seceded from the Union, Jacob Samuels and his horse joined a unit mustered on Main Street. He served as a cavalryman with Co. F, Waller's Battalion, in Gen. Tom Green's Brigade, Walker's Division of the Trans-Mississippi Department. Private Samuels was skilled

at foraging food for the troops and making harnesses for horses. After the war, he operated a store on the Fort Worth town square. During the Reconstruction era, commerce slowed. He left the city, journeying back to Louisiana where in 1870 he married Bertha Wadel, the daughter of Prussian-Jewish immigrants. The couple's first child, a son named Sidney, was born in Louisiana. The family soon moved back to Texas where five more children were born.

Another Jewish pioneer in Fort Worth was teenager Isidore Carb, a

Singer Sewing Machine salesman. Carb ventured to Texas from New Orleans in 1872 in search of cowboys. The train went as far as Dallas, a city that disappointed him because there were no cowboys or Indians there. Selling his possessions to buy a horse and buckboard, Carb proceeded to Fort

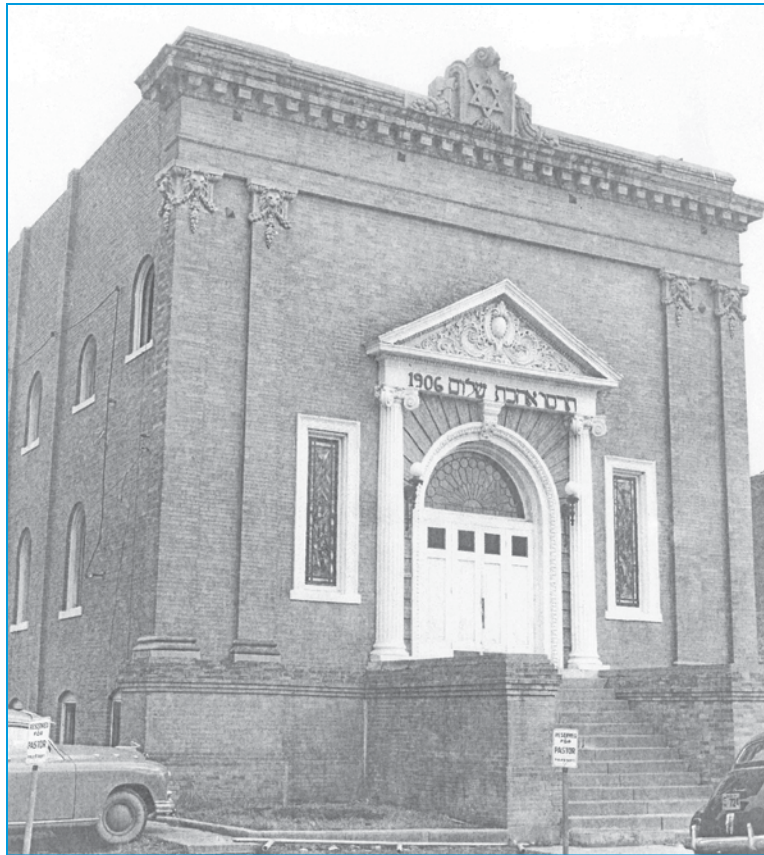
native of Alsace, to follow.

The Carb and Samuels families were living in Fort Worth during July 1876 when pioneers and merchants pitched in with money, labor, and provisions to construct the last miles of track connecting Fort Worth to the nation's rails. Teams of horses were supplied by Ike Gronsky, a colorful Russian Jew who had immigrated via Canada. With the Texas & Pacific Railroad's arrival, the local Jewish population blossomed as trains brought to Fort Worth dozens of traders, peddlers, hucksters, and shopkeepers.

Still, Jewish settlers trickled into Texas at a slow, irregular pace compared with the migration of Jews to cities in the nation's Northeast. Texas' Jewish population grew from an estimated 200 at the time of independence in 1836 to approximately 5,000 in 1880. These Texas Jews were largely secular souls of German and Alsatian heritage. They were not refugees fleeing Europe for their lives,

but entrepreneurs seeking opportunities on American soil.

After the Civil War, a large portion of the Jews who moved to Texas were migrants from the Deep South, refugees from Confederate regions ravaged by Union armies. The railroad-construction boom in Texas, beginning in the 1870s, facilitated their arrival in the Lone Star State. The Carb brothers, for example, were born in Hillsboro, Mississippi, on a family farm torched by Union soldiers. Joseph Mayer, a Union Army



Ahavath Sholom's shul at 819 Taylor St. served the congregation from 1906 to 1950. (Fort Worth Jewish Archives)

Worth. According to his son David's autobiographical novel, *Sunrise in the West*, Carb wrote home: "I'm here in Fort Worth now, and I'm gonna stay . . . It's got cowboys and everything. . . . There's only a few houses, and then a great big thick forest, and on the other side of that just plains that are all white dust. There's buffaloes and bears and Indians and cowboys out there . . . They's no railroad comes here but I like it." Isidore Carb's enthusiasm persuaded his older brother, Charles, his sisters Sarah, Bertha, and Annette, and his widowed mother, Babette, a

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veteran, his wife Amanda, their three small children, and Joseph's brother Jake were living in Indianapolis when they decided to move south to Texas in 1876 and open a liquor store. They fit a typical pattern of frontier entrepreneurs for whom business was the primary draw. Religion was perhaps secondary or tertiary in their lives. This demographic pattern was to change.

Half a world away, the assassination of Russian Czar Alexander II on March 13, 1881, unleashed reactionary violence against Jews who became the scapegoats for his murder. Pogroms erupted across Russia. A drastic set of decrees, the first enacted during May 1882, authorized eviction of Jews from non-Jewish villages, and later from the Russian interior and cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev. Jewish homes were pillaged and tens of thousands of Jews slaughtered. Mass migrations to America's shores began, averaging more than 100,000 refugees a year. Unlike previous waves of Jews to America, this flood-tide brought involuntary immigrants, traumatized travelers, people accustomed to insular communities where the practice of Judaism had scarcely changed since the Middle Ages. Peniless, these refugees arrived speaking Yiddish and lacking the *savoir-faire* that marked the adventurous, more secular Jews of previous migrations.

Again, the trickle of Jews into Fort Worth was slow. Among the first from this wave of refugees were Rachael and Joseph Jacobs who arrived in the early 1880s and opened a restaurant and saloon. When their nephew Moses Shanblum, 30, reached New York harbor in 1887, he followed them to Texas. Borrowing money from fellow Jews, Shanblum filled a backpack with household notions and peddled to surrounding farm and ranch towns. With his earnings, he bought a cart, then a horse and buggy, and finally opened

his own fruit stand. By 1891 he was raising a family with his young wife, Gitel, also a refugee.

Dozens more destitute Jews from Russia followed him to this Western town. Among them was his younger brother, Louis "L.F." Shanblum, 22, who fled Warsaw where he was studying law until a czarist decree blocked Jews from the legal profession. In Fort Worth, like his brother, L.F. borrowed money to fill a peddler's pack.

Moses Shanblum, however, was adamant that a backpack was not enough. The Jews of Fort Worth needed a place of worship, a communal dwelling where they could connect with each other and the faith of their ancestors. In traditional Judaism, the basic congregational unit is a minyan of ten adult men who convene for worship twice a day, morning and evening, and give spiritual support to those in mourning. To Moses Shanblum's dismay, this basic unit was absent in his new hometown. "When I came to Fort Worth in the year 1887, I found only six Jewish families who worshipped in a private house on the Holidays," he wrote in a memoir published in the *Jewish Monitor* on December 11, 1925. Judaism was becoming a casualty as immigrants acquired the ways of the new land. Shanblum began organizing a minyan that met in homes and stores. He envisioned much more—a shul. Wearing his trademark black coat and black derby—a decidedly alien form of dress in West Texas—Moses Shanblum went door to door, shop to shop, and from peddler to peddler persuading fellow Jews "that a synagogue was more important than a new buggy or suit." It was time to create a congregation.

On October 9, 1892, Moses Shanblum, his uncle, and his brother were among more than a dozen Jewish men who gathered in the living room of another immigrant, William Goldstein. According to minutes written in

Yiddish, they organized Congregation Ahavath Sholom, Hebrew for Love of Peace, reflecting the sentiment that had brought them to America. They elected officers, with Goldstein president; Moses Shanblum, vice-president; his uncle, Joe Jacobs, secretary; and scrap-iron dealer J.B. Colton, treasurer. Within two years, the congregation purchased a \$1,000 lot at Jarvis and Hemphill streets, a remote corner twenty blocks away from the courthouse square. By 1895 the men had raised another \$640 to construct Fort Worth's first Jewish house of worship. But attendance was low. Shanblum was confident that greater participation would follow if the synagogue relocated closer to areas of Jewish concentration. (There were not, and never would be enough Jews in Fort Worth to constitute a Jewish neighborhood.) By 1899, Shanblum had raised \$1,600 to purchase a 50-by-100-foot downtown lot at 819 Taylor Street, a thoroughfare already home to several churches. Two years later, Ahavath Sholom's little frame synagogue was moved from Hemphill to Taylor Street, giving Jews a visible place in the small, local religious constellation.

Ahavath Sholom's charter members were mainly recent Russian immigrants, refugees of the pogrom era. They modeled their congregation after institutions left behind in the shtetls of Eastern Europe. But for Fort Worth's longtime Jews, especially those born or raised in America, the shul was an uncomfortable space. They were too much a part of the Texas mainstream to feel at ease in an institution where women sat behind a curtain, where prayers were chanted in Hebrew, and where board minutes were written in Yiddish.

Almost all of the Jews who had settled in Fort Worth prior to the pogrom era remained unaffiliated with the new synagogue. Notably absent

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from the synagogue roster were Civil War veterans Simon Gabert, Joseph Mayer (whose son, Max, did legal work for the synagogue), and Philip Greenwall. The latter, a Louisiana native, managed the Greenwall Opera House. Nat Washer, whose tenor voice was so melodious he sang in local church choirs, did not join Ahavath Sholom, nor did any of the men who had once affiliated with the defunct B'nai B'rith lodge. Haberdashers Larry and Alphonse August did not affiliate, nor did their wealthy cousin, Felix Bath, an attorney and cotton broker. Bath donated money to Ahavath Sholom but would not participate.

The establishment of Ahavath Sholom did prod the city's unaffiliated Jews to revive the dormant cemetery association. Under the leadership of Babette Carb, the Emanuel Hebrew Association was reactivated in 1896 with monthly dues, meetings, and a roster that climbed to 95 persons.

The entire Jewish community participated in annual Purim balls, masquerade parties to which the public was invited. Fort Worth's Purim ball of 1896 was attended by Mayor B.B. Paddock and written up in the next day's *Fort Worth Gazette*, indicating the Jewish community's high profile and its involvement in the fabric of the town.

Leadership

In 1900 efforts to organize Reform Jews gained momentum with the arrival of Henry Gernsbacher, a Weatherford entrepreneur, politician, and civic leader. The New Orleans-born Gernsbacher was a kitchenware merchant and a member of Fort Worth's Knights of Pythias lodge. The main reason Gernsbacher, his wife Julia, and their six sons moved to Fort Worth was to affiliate with a Jewish community. "In the neighboring town of Weatherford ... neither he, nor his family had the advantage of social intercourse with the people of his faith, and the elder

members of his family were reared in ignorance of Jewish affairs, social and religious," according to the city's first Jewish historian, Flora Schiff. Shortly after Gernsbacher's arrival in Fort Worth, he spearheaded the movement to organize American Jewish institutions.

In June 1901, Gernsbacher learned that B'nai B'rith's Gulf Coast region, headquartered in New Orleans, had passed a resolution to organize "a number of new lodges . . . during the next six months." He contacted

regional representatives and on the date of their arrival in late July, he called a meeting at the Knights of Pythias Hall to launch a Fort Worth B'nai B'rith lodge. "About 40 of our prominent Israelites assembled . . . and under the auspices of Mr. Charles Sanger of Waco and Mr. [William] Waldstein of Dallas assisted by Messrs. A. Weber, L. Hirschhorn and Jules Dreyfus of Dallas, effected the organization of a lodge of the Independent Order of the B'nai B'rith,"



Polish immigrant Moses Shanblum was the founder in 1892 of Ahavath Sholom, Fort Worth's first Jewish congregation. In this 1940s photo he is standing on the steps of the congregation's second shul. Note the siddur in his pocket and his cowboy boots. (Fort Worth Star-Telegram Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries)

the *Southwestern Jewish Sentiment* reported.

The Fort Worth lodge's charter members were merchants and professionals who reflected the city's Jewish demographic mix. A number of the "brothers" were Eastern European immigrants, founders and officers at Ahavath Sholom. Others hailed from

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Tennessee, Indiana, Louisiana, and Germany. The lodge's elected leaders included Gernsbacher and L.F. Shanblum, the Warsaw law student who had become an affluent Texas scrap-iron dealer. The common denominator among these Jewish men appears to have been commercial success.

Three months after the B'nai B'rith lodge got its start, Jeanette Miriam Goldberg of Jefferson, an organizer with the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), traveled across the state with a parallel mission. Her visit to Fort Worth led to an October meeting at the Delaware Hotel and formation of a local NCJW section with 26 charter members. Unlike the new B'nai B'rith lodge, with its mix of men from East European and American backgrounds, the local Council drew only five women from the Orthodox Jewish community. Nationally, the NCJW appealed to educated American women, the so-called German-Jewish elite with ties to Reform rather than traditional congregations. The creation in Fort Worth of both an NCJW section and a B'nai B'rith lodge helped move the unaffiliated Jews closer to creating a Reform congregation. There were now two institutional nuclei from which to draw support for future organizing efforts.

As the Jewish High Holy Days

neared in the fall of 1902, Gernsbacher convened another meeting, again at the Knights of Pythias Hall. This time, according to the minutes, he issued a call to Jewish men who desired to hold "independent" religious "services for the coming holidays on the Reform plan." Over the next few weeks, 43 men pledged monthly dues to support a congregation named Beth-El, Hebrew for House of God. They rented a hall for worship services and elected Sam Levy to serve as president, Marcus Alexander as vice president, and Gernsbacher as treasurer. Isidore Carb, the group's secretary, wrote to Dallas's Temple Emanu-El asking to borrow a Torah and shofar during the High Holy Days.

On October 11, 1902, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* published a

one-column article announcing, "Reformed Jews Are Organized." The story noted that Beth-El's 43 charter members included 25 "heads of families." The implication was that some of the founders, like Henry Gernsbacher's sons Aaron, 17, and Jake, 20, were single and living at home. Other charter members, like Joseph Mayer, 58, lived with married children and grandchildren. Still others, like Isadore Marx, were bachelors living alone or with siblings, nieces, and nephews. To the *Star-Telegram*, Beth-El's members may have appeared to hail from 25 separate households, but their interrelationships reduced them to perhaps ten extended families. To use a Yiddish expression, they were *geknippt und gebinden*—tied and tethered—in-

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terrelated at so many levels that their family trees intersected at multiple points. They formed a veritable cousins club.

Despite the Reform congregation's late start, layers of commercial, familial, and fraternal ties linked members in overlapping spheres. They shared a pride of place, a sense of kinship, and a feeling that Beth-El Congregation was an extension of home and business. The young, rugged, independent Jews who had ventured to Fort Worth decades before, spurning organized religion, were now mature business leaders in their forties, fifties, and sixties. Many had children and grandchildren for whom formal religion would be important.

As these developments occurred within the Jewish community, changes were brewing in the city's business climate. The Chisholm Trail era was long past. Fort Worth had become a railroad hub. By 1900 its population had grown to 27,000 residents, including more than 600 Jews. During the summer of 1902, Fort Worth business leaders and city commissioners persuaded Swift and Armour, two giant Chicago meatpacking companies, to invest \$10 million in Fort Worth for regional plants. These packinghouses would create thousands of jobs and transform Fort Worth into a regional economic capital, a magnet for related industries as well as retailers and bankers. The city was coming of age. The Inter-urban, an electric trolley, inaugurated hourly service between Fort Worth and Dallas. Cowtown had moved well beyond frontier status and was courting respectability. Institutions were changing and stabilizing. The city began promoting its virtues in an effort to lure laborers with families.

Religious institutions became more esteemed. In 1900, the Chamber of Commerce boasted that three new churches were under construction, a fact that might have been ignored or overlooked a decade before. As the city climbed toward its next phase of development, so, too, did its Jewish residents, with two synagogues within walking distance from the courthouse square. The city was maturing, and so was the Jewish community. 