

Virtual Restoration of Small-Town Synagogues in Texas

Business: How Jews Got into, Succeeded, and Went Out of Business

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Louis Kariel, Marshall, in front his 99-year-old shoe store.

Every Jew wants to be his own boss; in prewar Texas it was exactly the right choice. Towns across Texas were starved for almost every kind of small business, and many Jews raised their families, educated their children, and prospered in a variety of businesses no one else wanted.

A "good" business was easy to get into, needing little capital and less skills. In truth Jews brought with them plenty of talent and useful resources: a knack for languages and numbers, a willingness to work hard, a far-ranging self-help network, an eye for the main chance, and a "yiddische kop" ("Jesus saves, but Moses invests"). Survival in Eastern Europe, a region of shifting borders and tenuous sovereignty, was good training--the new world could hardly be worse. Although some had skilled trades (watchmaker, tailor, shoemaker, etc.), most Jewish men came with a good basic foundation learned in *cheder*, which developed memory, analytic ability, quick wit, and a keen sense of ironic humor.

After a brief "apprenticeship" with another merchant, a small nest-egg, and a few co-signers, a fellow could set up shop on his own. Retail trade offered ready opportunities at a low buy-in cost: \$200 got Ma and Pa into the grocery business in a 15-foot-front store with living quarters in the back, a daily-replenished stock of fruit, vegetables, and a few staples; \$500 put a guy in the *schmate* business in a little downtown store with a stock of "workingman's" clothing, and a cigar box cash register. There were certainly plenty of customers and Jews were more than eager to please with low prices, special service, and friendly sales patter. No one wanted to lose a sale.

Although the grocery business was largely cash and carry, certain financing mechanisms existed to dampen the usual troughs and peaks in other trades. As mass-produced furniture became common, manufacturers financed dealers' stocks to increase sales to the level of production. Clothing jobbers kept the small stores supplied and once creditworthiness was

established carried the merchants for longer or shorter periods. Business was cyclical, dependent on the cotton crop or other agricultural seasons prevailing in the area. A merchant may have to carry a customer till his crop was sold.

Then as now commerce was in constant flux. By the early '30's, JC Penney, the category-killer of its day, was muscling out the jobber-supplied small clothing stores with lower prices. The New York Store in Brenham countered by engaging a broker to buy direct from manufacturers and began to increase buying volume by opening branch stores in surrounding towns. Jewish merchants were always looking for an edge to stay afloat. Although the value angle was most common, there were several Neiman-Marcus-like stores around the state like Weissman in Marshall selling up-to-the-minute fashion in sophisticated surroundings. By WWII there was hardly a market town in Texas that did not have a range of Jewish-owned clothing stores from workman's basics to ladies ready-to-wear.

Tailoring was a Jewish trade and there was a ready market for their services: to fit garments in the clothing stores, to repair and spot clean in their own shops. If they did not act as collecting stations for other dry cleaners, they established their own plants. To provide steady volume they expanded into linen and uniform supply services. This was especially fortuitous in Texas as many military bases were thrown up in small towns during WWII to train pilots, navigators, and bombardiers, all of whom needed to buy uniforms upon graduation.

Anyone with a horse and wagon or a truck could make a living: as a drayman carrying trunks from the station, moving household effects, hauling freight; as a fruit and vegetable peddler; or as a junkman picking up discarded articles. It was not hard to pick up scrap metal, paper, rags, offal and tallow and other stuff nobody wanted. What turned it into a good business was making a market for this junk by cleaning, sorting, grading, and assembling in commercially viable lots. With a nose always out for new opportunities, salvage dealers found markets for used material that was coming in as scrap. They became suppliers of used, then new steel for construction, pipe, and drums for the oil industry. And, if they supplied a customer, they could certainly try to sell him an associated service on the same sales call.



The Queen Theater, Bryan, jewel of the Shulman Chain

Jews were pioneers in the production and distribution of popular entertainment. Jewish-owned vaudeville houses became movie theaters, and their abandoned hulks can be found in many Texas towns. At a time before air-conditioned homes, the "it's cool inside" on the marquee was enough reason to see any show playing.

At this point one could list the successes in jewelry, food distribution, clothing, scrap metal, banking, and other industries that grew from and later transcended their small-town origins. But this is about ordinary people and their businesses and what happened next. The War brought prosperity to most anyone that had merchandise to sell. And for a few postwar years business remained good as returning servicemen set up

new households and swelled consumer demand. But some, prophetically, saw the gradual movement of population from the agriculturally dependent small towns to the cities, pulled up stakes and joined the flow themselves.

Others sent their heirs off to college, soon realizing they weren't coming back to take over the family business. Or worse, if too many stayed behind, the pie could not be divided into enough nourishing pieces. Family businesses were destroyed by squandering the working capital or through acrimonious dissension among formerly close and loving relatives. One way or another the businesses that started with such promise in the '20's were mostly finished by the '60's. And with the demise of the family business most of the old folks, preferring to be closer to their children and grandchildren in the big city, did not stick around either.