

# Sinai Hebrew Congregation Jefferson, TX

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Jefferson was a thoroughly German-Jewish Reform community from the earliest days before the Civil War. By the early 1870's Jefferson was one of the most populous cities in Texas, a busy and important river port for cotton, timber, and other commodities. The synagogue was not purpose built but moved into a former convent and school, adding the ark enclosure. The exaggerated verticals give the building a decidedly noble but un-heimish quality.



The building now serves as a playhouse for regular presentations of a re-enactment of a local courtroom drama. Diamond Bessie, a local character, and paramour of a Mr. Rothschild was found murdered in the woods just outside of town. Mr. Rothschild and Bessie's celebrated diamonds were missing. He was captured, tried, convicted, then acquitted on appeal. The story is that jurors' deliberations were aided by \$1000-bills floated down through the ceiling. Diamond Bessie's dress is displayed between engagements in the school building adjacent to the synagogue.

The town dines out on its history and little else. When Jay Gould was pushing his railroad through Texas, he requested right-of-way through the town. The city council turned him down flat, at which time he remarked to the effect--if the railroad would not go through the town, grass would grow on main street. Just after that, 10 men, 8 of them Jewish, petitioned the council to reconsider. No soap! Soon after a log jam stopped up the river, which the Army Corps of Engineers dynamited.

The linked explosions had a marked effect on the river hydraulics in that area and permanently lowered the water level. The river was no longer navigable. The railroad went elsewhere, and Jefferson dried up and nearly blew away.



These days the town plies the tourist trade with its many lovely homes, restored to pre-Gould grandeur. Oddly the town acquired Jay Gould's private railroad car and displays it as a prominent civic attraction.