

Beth Sholom Kilgore, Texas

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With the discovery of oil in 1931 Kilgore jumped from a sleepy mudhole of 700 people to a round-the-clock mudhole of over 10,000. Jews were attracted to the opportunities here as they had been in Beaumont, Breckenridge, and Odessa, and quickly established small supply, service, and general mercantile businesses. No matter what business, everyone was "in oil;" even a pair of pants could be exchanged for a % interest in a well or lease.

Meeting first in the back of a store the Jews of Kilgore built a shul in 1937 on land donated by the non-Jewish Crim family. Having been the first congregation among the surrounding, even larger towns to take that step, Kilgore became the center of organized Jewish life in the area until well after WWII.



This unassuming little shul was not unlike many built by similar congregations at the time. One large well-lit and naturally ventilated room with as little else to make it a practical congregational meeting place.



The restoration above comes largely from an interior wedding photograph of the late '40's. Memory is not the only problem. At some point in the recent past a storm blew the roof off and the congregation, having dwindled to dormancy, let the building stand for 5 or 6 years before selling the half-rotten hulk to Buster Dickerson, a local real estate agent and health food store owner.



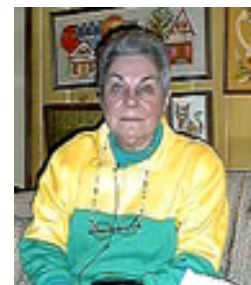
The view at left is of the old synagogue in its present incarnation. Buster (on phone at far right) moved the building out to his farm, put on a new roof, made a few changes to the layout, and turned it into a club room and party house. Unfortunately the last congregants were not careful to remove all the temple fittings before the sale, and just who hung the Ner Tamid in their living room is a lingering regional question. Buster likes the odd knick-knack, and a representative sample is displayed in his health food store.



The social hall/kitchen annex (left) still sits in its original location, though much renovated and converted to apartments by Buster. This building began life as a river-front honky-tonk beer joint, which was purchased by the congregation when they moved next to the shul just after the war.



A Jewish family still lives in Kilgore and the Daiches Jewelry store does business on the main street, but a migration to the more sedate town of Longview was nearly complete when a new Temple Beth Shalom was completed there in 1957. A year later the name was changed to Temple Emanu-El to make it clear that history would begin anew. Francene Van Os, a former Kilgore



Rangerette, was among the 30% who fought hard to keep the Kilgore Beth Shalom alive. After the sale and dismemberment of the Kilgore property in 1979 Longview's 70% share of the proceeds helped them overcome a financial crisis.



Many of the mementoes and artifacts from Kilgore ended up in Longview (like the stained glass above). A certain bitterness in Kilgore remains which will not be dispelled.