Cultural History of Jews in California

Published by Purdue University Press

Cultural History of Jews in California: The Jewish Role in American Life.
Purdue University Press, 2009.
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The early history of the Jews of the American West might have been lost had it not been for the efforts of two remarkable men. Over many years, Dr. Norton Stern and Rabbi William Kramer engaged in painstaking research and diligent acquisition of materials. In the process, these pioneer historians painstakingly assembled a vast archive and founded the Western States Jewish History Journal, now in its forty-first year.

Across the United States and the world, there is an astonishingly rich repository of recorded information about, for example, the Jews who fled to New Amsterdam in 1654; about the German Jews who came to the United States in the Civil War era; and about the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews between the 1880s and 1920s. The majority of these Jews remained in the big cities, founded synagogues, service organizations and the great cultural and educational institutions that are so well known to us today.

But as Stern, an optometrist and principal of a synagogue Hebrew school, and Rabbi Kramer knew well, Jews also ventured all the way across the North American continent, traversing in relatively large numbers this vast country to reach the states and territories of the far West. They traveled in every imaginable manner: by wagon train across the prairies, by ship around Cape Horn and the tip of South America, by mule across the malarial Isthmus of Panama, then on board steamers sailing north up the Pacific coast. They came, as historian Doyce Nunis has said, for the same reasons everyone else came: “for economic opportunity, climate, health and romantic myth” (personal communication). Many came as miners or merchants due to the Gold Rush. They came, many
as young unattached teenaged or younger boys, from European countries to escape discrimination and persecution; many could speak no English when they arrived.

The Jews who came West in the early days were not as religious as some of their fellow Jews. The more pious Jews were inhibited from traveling too far from the eastern cities because they could not be sure they would find kosher food, a mikvah, and other ritual amenities essential for their daily life. Most of the early Jewish pioneers to the far west felt they needed a synagogue only once a year for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Such services were usually held in a home or empty store and led by the most knowledgeable person among them, using a printed Torah. Establishing synagogues was a low priority for these men. The most important issue for them was to take advantage of the opportunities presented them in the far West—especially opportunities that might not have been so readily available or socially acceptable in the more established eastern urban centers.

As is evident in several of the essays in this volume, these early arrivals played a major role in shaping the character and dynamism of the West. They created successful models in business, banking, politics, journalism, and culture. Most impressive was their success in maintaining their Judaism. Since synagogues were a low priority, the first Jewish institution in a Western town was usually a Jewish cemetery and burial society. As Norton Stern discovered, these cemeteries turned out to be invaluable sources for tracking regional Jewish history.

Norton Stern traveled throughout California taking pictures of tombstones in Jewish cemeteries. Armed with names and birth and death dates, he would then go to the local newspaper and meticulously search for references to the deceased. This Herculean effort was done without benefit of microfiche, let alone the Internet. As Stern researched articles, he found references to other Jews of the period or to other Jewish organizations, and he carefully noted (and usually photographed) these as well. Each step revealed yet another level of early Jewish history. The last step was to seek out the descendants of early pioneers. If he found family members, he would interview them and thereby add to the richness of the story.

When Stern began this quest he had to handwrite the interviews. The later use of a tape recorder would make the process faster and more efficient. As Cyril Leonoff, the Canadian editor of *Western States Jewish History Journal*, described this effort, Stern looked “through hundreds of haystacks for dozens of needles and for no other reason than the love of it” (personal communication).
In his single-minded pursuit of the stories and people of the western Jewish past, Norton Stern became a father of Jewish history of the American West. He and Rabbi Kramer amassed thousands of family pictures, photographs of stores, homes, and buildings, school pictures, and many other materials. They also accumulated a vast store of newspaper articles; interviews; letters dating back to the mid-nineteenth century; business receipts; membership and political lists; advertisements; government documents; and so on. In addition, they acquired a goodly number of diaries; photo albums; wedding invitations; a tallis bag made of burlap; early telephone directories; posters announcing High Holiday services; and business cards (including one of a cigar dealer that warns “Beware of Jewish Imitations”).

After Norton Stern’s death, Rabbi Kramer assumed the responsibility for maintaining the archives and publishing the *Western States Jewish History Journal*. He continued the journal for many years until his own health deteriorated, at which point he turned its management over to us. In the transition, we inherited over one thousand books plus about three hundred boxes of very loosely sorted archival material. We knew that each item would have to be examined and organized in some coherent fashion. Without organization, this massive collection would never be fully accessible to scholars, students, genealogists, and others.

Accordingly, we assembled a coterie of volunteer archivists. Norman and Mimi Dudley, who were retired from their professional archival careers at UCLA, gave us a basic how-to course, teaching us about process and materials. With their guidance we set to work.

Every piece of paper had to be examined individually, often with a magnifying glass because the photos had faded or because the newspaper pages were so fragile. All available information about content, context, or provenance was noted. It was painstaking work, invariably interrupted every few minutes by “You’ve got to hear this!” or “You’ve got to see this!” Some of the newspapers dating back to the 1800s were too fragile to unfold. We set these aside for professionals to handle. Photos had to be identified and labeled. Occasionally we would publish an unmarked picture to see if any of our readers could identify it.

Documents were carefully housed and information entered into a database for ease of retrieval. Once organized, the archives were donated to appropriate institutions to be available for research. The bulk of the written material, nearly two hundred finished archival boxes and thirty boxes yet to be completed, went to UCLA’s Charles Young Library of Special Collections. Information on the history of the West that did not pertain to Jewish settlers was donated to
the Autry National Center. Newspapers too fragile to open, as well as ephemera, letters, albums, film reels and such went to the Huntington Library. The addition of materials from this very large collection has made these institutions among the important libraries of the Jewish history of the American West.

What does all this material reveal? In some ways, it’s far too soon to tell: the documents, books, photographs, and other materials await scholarly investigation, contemplation, and eventual publication. Yet some preliminary findings, gleaned from our hours-upon-hours of sorting, cataloging, and organizing, are warranted here. In the archives, we discovered letters, business records and news articles indicating that these early Jewish pioneers were not only successful in business, politics, journalism, cultural affairs, and finance, but that they contributed much to this new world of the far West as family members, religious figures, and role models.

Their success can be attributed to many reasons. Many were young when they arrived in the West and thus able to exist with the barest necessities. They also appear to have matched their ambitions with abstemious and frugal habits. The integrity of many stands out: as merchants, bankers, or other businessmen, they offered generous credit and financial aid. Many were trusted assay- ers. When you left your gold at the “Jew Store,” it would be there when you came to claim it.

In a mining world of fairly random literacy, many a Jewish pioneer stood out in level of education; they put their reading and writing skills to work in keeping track of business inventories, loans, and the like.

As the West and our subjects matured, they became increasingly active in civil affairs; many became the pillars of local society: political leaders, attorneys, judges, legislators, peace officers, and otherwise. And while we need far more work on this topic, we suggest that the far West, at least the nineteenth century far West, exhibited less —and perhaps far less—anti-Semitic religious or ethnic hostility compared with the East Coast and the often far more intolerant European continent. This allowed western Jews a degree of freedom to dream and succeed to a remarkable and otherwise unprecedented degree in America, and this marks the West as particularly fertile land of opportunity for Jews.

To say the least, this archival work has been a labor of love for everyone involved. We are confident that we have rescued a treasure house of historical material and, with it, the life stories and legacies of an important group of early westerners. That is a gift rarely granted, and we are grateful for the chance to be a part of this ongoing history of our people.
Appendix

From this vast collection of material we have often pulled out what we like to call snippets; they provide a miniature glimpse of life for the early Jewish settlers, and it is perhaps of interest to reproduce a few of these here. Taken as individual moments in time and circumstance, or collectively as part of a much larger mosaic of history, these “snippets” evoke aspects of the rich cultural, social, and familial history of Jews in the far West.

SOME HAD TO DO WITH BUSINESS DEALINGS:
- June 23, 1882 from the Los Angeles Times: “Mr. E. Berman, of Bloomington, Illinois, an experienced watchmaker, has just arrived to take a position on the force of Platt and Page, the jewelers.”
- August 24, 1882 from the Los Angeles Times: “People vs. Martin Weiss. For keeping a place where gambling with dice is permitted; jury waived; demurrer to complaint overruled; plead not guilty; case tried; defendant found guilty as charged; at request of defendant, sentence postponed until 9½ A.M. today.”
- December 6, 1873 from the Los Angeles Times: “THE CASH STORE—Harris and Jacoby. These gentlemen, who own one of the best stock establishments in the City, have just received a shipment of new merchandise. There is hardly a thing you might ask for that cannot be found in their establishment.”
  Gents furnishing, Fancy Goods, Yankee Notions, Toys Musical Instruments, baby wagons, school books and stationery, cigars and tobacco, fresh garden seeds.
- October 19, 1860 from The Weekly Gleaner: “Mr. L. L. Dennery, formerly of this city [San Francisco], has associated himself with Mr. Willis, at San Bernardino, in the practice of the law, and, convinced of the integrity of Mr. Dennery, we wish the firm of Willis & Dennery success.”
- February 1, 1860 from The Weekly Gleaner: “Betrothed—Leon L. Dennery and Jane Jacobs.”
- April 22, 1876 from La Cronica: “We are publishing today the notice of Bernardo Salomon, tailor. His prices are not only the most modest in town, but he also colours all kinds of clothing and fixes carriage awnings.”

SOME WERE CULTURAL:
- Los Angeles 1884 from the Star: “Los Angeles has acquired a really ‘elegant’ theater: Childs’ Opera House. About this time, Al Levy took up his stand in front of the Opera House with his little push cart and his famous California oyster cocktails.”
SOME HAD TO DO WITH RELIGION:

- July 17, 1857, a letter from M. Raphael to the *Weekly Gleaner* described the “soon-to-be erected synagogue in Jackson, Amador County. We thank all who donated to the structure for Jewish worship in the Mother Lode country.”
- September 20, 1876: “Rosh Hashanah afternoon was spent in visiting, where out-of-towners renewed old acquaintances and families held pleasant reunions.”
- September 20, 1865 from *The Hebrew*: “On Monday last, the respected wife of Mr. Simon Appel, a co-religionist, was received into the Holy Covenant by the Rev. Fr. Henry A. Henry. The lady has been married to Mr. Appel about a year, and her amiable qualities have endeared her to all who have had the pleasure of her acquaintance.”

SOME HAD TO DO WITH RABBIS:

- April 15, 1887 from the *American Israelite*: “I have recently heard that the Rev. Dr. Schrieber has made a good speck in real estate. Good, I am glad if it is true, though I believe some people think it next thing to a crime for a minister to make a dollar.”

SOME DEALT WITH DAILY LIFE:

- April 18, 1868 from the *Jackson Amador Dispatch*: “A woman named Celia Levy, keeper of a saloon in Portland (Ore.), was shot lately by a man named Charles Starr. She said Starr owed her $3, and commenced calling each other names, and it ended in shooting her through the left lung.”
- June 6, 1883 from the *Los Angeles Times*: “Dr. Wise has been making some extensive improvements in his residence on Main Street. He has had the interior papered and frescoed and made use of the many aesthetic devices so fashionable at present. Altogether he has been to the expense of $3,700.”

SOME HAD TO DO WITH POLITICS:

- March 24, 1855 from the *Weekly Chronicle*: “There is nothing in the law to prevent a Jew from holding office. It does not sound well here, with all our boast of freedom and liberality, to commence a crusade against that sect because they do not agree with our faith. They are citizens, no?”

SOME HAD TO DO WITH THE LAW:

- March 10, 1888 from the *Los Angeles Times*: “B. Solomon, the notorious ‘fence’, held to answer on charge of receiving stolen goods, spent last night in jail—his bail raised from $2,000 to $3,000 which he was unable to pay.”
To be sure, these are but the briefest introduction to the fascinating history of Jews in California; yet, even their fleeting, momentary nature reminds us of the world that awaits the careful, patient researcher intent upon delving into the documentary, visual, and other records that bespeak the history of a people, a region, and a time.