

The Jew Peddlar Trail:



By Ann Stanton

First, a note about the name of this trail: when questioning the appropriateness of a name which in modern times would be considered perhaps pejorative, one must consider the era during which it was first applied. Other sites in Western South Dakota have been named for the Jewish people who either developed or inhabited them. The area near Wall known as Jew Flats was the home of a Jewish family by the name of Sinykin. There are no Jewish people living there today, but the memory of that odd name lingers. And some may still remember the "Jew Store" in Kadoka, a lively little business owned by named Sarah Hoffman, the energetic pioneering sister of Morris Adelstein, aunt of Stan Adelstein. Her store's name was meant only as identification, and in no way was it intended to be derogatory.

Jewish people, indeed most of us in this century, are extremely sensitive to the dangers inherent in the identifying name and the prejudicial stereotype. The uses of our name, Jew, have too often in memory been violated. The Jew as shrewd and conniving businessman is a hackneyed and unfortunate stereotype. The term

"to Jew someone down", using Jew as a verb, meaning to bargain in an unscrupulous manner in an effort to gain financial advantage, has crept into the vocabulary, if not the dictionary, as a common expression. It is usually applied in an innocent context, with the user being unaware of the offensiveness involved. Jewish people are unanimous in their considering this an affront, and much discussion has revolved around the revulsion experienced when hearing this insulting expression. Language and its usage being in constant flux as they are, it is to be wished that through education and awareness, the day will come when "to Jew someone down" is no longer considered appropriate. The Jewish Peddlars may have been seen as colorful and somewhat enigmatic characters, but nowhere in the writings or interviews which form the basis for this account do I find any negative attitudes applied to these people. Calling someone a Jew Peddler appears to have been simply a means of identification, not a slur. We must, therefore, be must be prepared to recognize a historical reality when confronted with this questionable terminology. This is the fundamental requirement for anyone relating history- to demand nothing less than the truth as it is known, and to provide an accurate and unvarnished account.

Who were the Jew Peddlars? Known in the trade as "pack peddlars", these were men who roamed the countryside on foot, day after day, with heavy packs on their backs, traveling from place to place, selling their wares consisting of dry goods, clothing, and small household necessities, and staying out until the merchandise was all gone. They would sell or trade their merchandise, expecting a steady, if not particularly profitable living. Peddling was a difficult life, with the peddler hoping for a friendly welcome and a night's lodging. Most of them were immigrants, and many spoke Yiddish as their first language. Poignant stories arising in farm country of dogs being set on the peddler were not uncommon, but more often the peddler was welcomed, and occasionally offered a lesson in English. Perhaps the difficult and wandering life of the peddler led to a farmer's deeper appreciation of a safe roof over his own head and the reassurance of good food to eat. It was a way for many a determined and ambitious young man. Many of our pioneer businessmen in the early censuses report their employment as "traveling salesman".

During the period in the 1870s and 1880s surrounding the great gold rush in the Black Hills there was a tremendous amount of prospecting activity. Hardly a square foot of terrain in the area around Mystic was left untrodden. Miners prospecting for gold in the Black Hills needed supplies delivered to their camps and it was the practice at that time to have peddlars travel out into the countryside to fill those needs. Jewish peddlars would originate from businesses in Rapid City and Deadwood carrying 100 plus-pound backpacks loaded with overalls, socks, boots, harnesses and other necessities, carrying their stores on their backs as they traveled, visiting camps along the way to sell their goods to the miners. They were known to the miners as Jew Peddlars. Russell Frink remembers his first pair of overalls at the tender age of 3 being given to him as a gift of one such Jewish Peddler, probably Harry Marks, in exchange for the hospitality extended by Russell's father, George Frink, who permitted Marks to stay overnight at the Frink home in Mystic on Castle Creek, high in the Black Hills.



President and Mrs. Calvin Coolidge visiting the Black Hills in 1927
George Frink driving the buggy

A difficult and lonely life, but it provided an opportunity to prosper. The peddlars provided goods to the prospectors and staying overnight as the hospitality of the trail afforded. The Jew Peddler trail was an effective if strenuous shortcut created in order to eliminate 3 miles of difficult travel between the town of Mystic. And Canyon City, approximately over the Volin Tunnel, between curving streams. Part of the Trail is reasonably level and easily hiked, but part of it slopes downward toward Slate Creek at a very steep angle, making for difficult footing. One can only imagine the difficulty of negotiating

precipitous mountain trails under the burden of heavy loads to begin to appreciate the stamina it

The most successful among the peddlars sometimes turned supplier went on to Chicago to buy wholesale. An experienced peddler hoping to find a job as a wholesaler in Chicago demanded.

Harry Hiram Marks, who lived from 1863 through 1953, was one of the most well known of the Jewish peddlars, and is still remembered by several people, including Wilmetta Johnson of Westhills Village in Rapid. Wilmetta believes the Jew Peddler Trail was named for Marks because he was the most persistent in the use of the Trail. Wilmetta recalls the Marks family during the time they lived in Rapid City where Marks had a little shop. The Marks' had a daughter named Elizabeth, a child with long golden curls, over whom the parents obviously doted. They had a nice home in Rapid City, as Wilmetta recalls. Marks' shop in Rapid was undoubtedly the headquarters from which Marks carried on his peddling business, carrying supplies to remote locations throughout the area. Wilmetta relates that her folks lived in Elm Springs, about 20 miles North of Wasta, where they farmed. Marks, a small, quiet man, standing no more than 5'1", known then as "The Little Jew", was good at his trade. He covered the countryside on foot, traveling from farm to farm, carrying whatever the housewives might need, threads, spices, gadgets. Whereas other peddlars used horse and buggy, as did the Watkins man, Marks carried on his trade on foot. Peddler Harry Hiram Marks is also remembered as one of Keystone's more picturesque characters. Bev Pechan refers to him in "Keystone and Its Colorful Characters", published for the Keystone Centennial in 1991. Best known as H. H., Marks, who had been a successful merchant in Rapid City, came into Keystone in the late 1920s after his wife passed away, where he opened a tailor shop. He seemed to have an aura of mystery about him, having been thought to have a hidden cache of gold, perhaps due to his previous success in business, perhaps because of his predilection for wearing gold watch-chains. One of Marks' peculiarities was his habit of eavesdropping, a tendency for which he became well-known. Wilmetta relates a custom party where she dressed up like a man, and would sidle up to people and pretend to listen in on their conversations, in the same manner as H. H., and people started calling her Marks. Perhaps because of his great sense

of curiosity, or perhaps because he just enjoyed listening to sacred music, he would stand outside the Congregational Church in Keystone listening to the singing. He finally donated a piano to that Church and requested that his funeral be held there. Among the people attending his funeral was a small contingent of Jewish people from Rapid City which included Mr. and Mrs. Julian Morris, Mrs. Morris being the former Marguerite Wiegand. The Morris's owned a dry goods store on Main St., which later became the site of the Woolworth store. Wilmetta has a remarkable memory for these events and people. She believes that Mox Poznansky was also in attendance, the Poznansky family having a long and influential place in Black Hills history. Marks is buried in-----.

It is hoped that this trail, a lasting reminder of the hardy trail blazers, will be marked so that anyone interested in the Jewish past can travel it again with an appreciation of their predecessors.

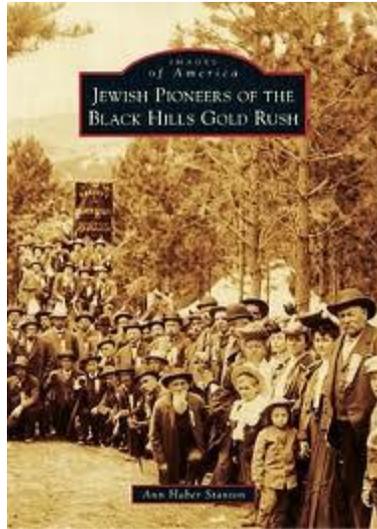
One store in Rapid City that may have been headquarters for Jewish Peddlars was Harry Brussels' menswear store. Such fundamentals as were needed for those times as Headlight overalls, similar to those worn by young Russel Frink, were sold at Harry's establishment. The Horwitzes recall the metal Oshkosh B'Gosh sign in his store window. One might conclude that Harry, himself a former wagon Peddler from Eastern South Dakota, either went himself or sent representatives out into the Hills with packs of goods.

Harry's store was eventually sold to Nathan Horwitz, who brought his wife Ruth and their young family from Duluth to join him in Rapid City in 1948. Nate completely remodeled the store, incorporating an adjoining bath house which increased the total floor space, and brought in a Western motif.

Other Jewish merchants of Rapid City during the years surrounding the Gold Rush included Lewis Morris, Jacob Morris, Nyman Levy.

Ann Stanton is the Author of

Jewish Pioneers of the Black Hills Gold Rush



<http://www.amazon.com/Jewish-Pioneers-America-Arcadia-Publishing/dp/0738577812>