

Sun Valley, Idaho, and the Jews



Bald Mountain, Sun Valley

By Jerry Klinger

The other day, Emily Sue, a dear friend from Spokane, wrote to me she was headed to visit her *kin* at their family's Sheep Ranch in Howe, Idaho. She was planning on a side trip to the annual Trailing of the Sheep festival in Ketchum, Idaho. www.Trailingofthesheep.org.

I had never heard of the festival or for that matter Ketchum, Idaho. Out of curiosity, I Googled Jews, Sheep, and Idaho. The query returned the Wood River Jewish Community - History. The abbreviated teaser text read...

"We believe in challenging the Jewish mind and soul, through a creative and ... S.J. Friedman arrived in Idaho in 1869 to raise cattle and sheep and was elected mayor..."

It was a *'huh'* moment. My Jewish knowledge of Idaho was limited to Moses Alexander, the first Jewish Governor of any U.S. State. He was elected in 1914. On a much darker note, Hayden Lake, in Northern Idaho, had been the home to a disturbingly large Neo-Nazi/Aryan Nation community under Richard Butler. In Boise is the Anne Frank International Human Rights Memorial, by far the most magnificent Anne Frank memorial in the world.

I looked up the Wood River Jewish Community.

They are a Reform Jewish community which began slowly in 1955. They established themselves in the "Ketchum area as a place of physical beauty and spiritual renewal."

During the 1980's, St. Thomas Episcopal Church offered them their sanctuary for Friday night and High Holiday services.

1989, the synagogue received its first Torah, a Holocaust Torah entrusted to them by the Westminster Synagogue in London. The Wood River Jewish Community wrote, "Our 150 year old scroll survived WWII in one of the desolated synagogues of Bohemia or Moravia, a remnant of the lost communities of

Czechoslovakia. Our scroll comes from Strasnice, a town near Prague, and contains calligraphy flourishes and oversized letters reflecting its Kabbalistic origin. We meticulously restored our Torah and celebrated its return to health in 2003.”

The Wood River Jewish Community uses, honors and respects their Holocaust Torah more than many other recipients of Czech Holocaust Torahs.

Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel spent a scholar’s Shabbat weekend one year with them. In their early years, they had visiting or temporary Rabbis. Rabbi Martin Levy became their first full-time Rabbi, 1998-2006. Not too many synagogue communities can claim their Rabbi is not only a spiritual guide, a scholar and a mensch but Rabbi Levy was also a Gold Medal Senior Ice Skater. He used to promote “Skate with the Rabbi” weekends.

Jewish survival in places one would not expect requires flexibility and innovation. It can be done.

Yet, it was the Jewish history of Idaho that intrigued me the most.

From the Wood River Jewish Community site, “The Sun Valley area was originally a mineral mining and sheep ranching community. Averill Harriman and the Union Pacific Railroad put Sun Valley on the map as a winter and summer resort in 1937. The Jewish community was, even at that time, no stranger to Idaho. The oldest synagogue west of the Mississippi River was built in Boise in 1895, founded by Moses Alexander who served as Mayor of Boise and, in 1914, became, as Governor of Idaho, the first Jewish Governor in the United States. S.J. Friedman arrived in Idaho in 1869 to raise cattle and sheep and was elected Hailey’s first mayor. Friedman Memorial Airport, the gateway to Sun Valley, is built on land donated by the Friedman children and named in memory of their father.”

Jews were part of Idaho life long before the Neo-Nazis moved in awarding themselves the claim of first rights.

The original Idaho boom industry, mining, played out quickly. Sheep ranching became the next big business in Idaho. Idaho sheep ranching was so big it was only second to Australia. In 1918, there were 2.6 million sheep in Idaho. The human population was a tiny fraction of that number.

Sheep ranching declined. Idaho needed an industry.

Averill Harriman was an industrialist, politician, diplomat and Chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad. As a financier, he was very successful merging his Harriman banking interests with the brokerage business of Brown Brothers in New York. Brown Brothers Harriman and Co. became the principal banking house for German companies and especially for Fritz Thyssen, a principal financial backer of the Nazi party. After the U.S. declared war on Germany, the firm was taken over by the government under the 1917 Trading with the Enemies Act. It was returned to the owners after the war.

An economic visionary, Harriman sent his agent, Count Felix Schaffgotsch, an Austrian-Bohemian nobleman, to scout out possible winter resort locations in 1935. With Schaffgotsch’s recommendation, Hammerman recognized the Ketchum/Hailey valley could become a winter wonderland of skiing for the who’s who of American Society.

An ardent Nazi and supporter of Adolph Hitler, Schaffgotsch returned to Austria. He became an officer in the Waffen SS Florian Geyer division, known for perpetrating the Holocaust. Schaffgotsch was killed outside of Moscow, August 11, 1942.

The “swells”, especially Hollywood “swells”, did come to Sun Valley. Some stayed. Ernest Hemingway is buried in Ketchum. He ended his days there with a shotgun. A Jewish Nobel Prize winner in physics, Melvin Schwartz, is buried in Ketchum.

Harriman opened the Sun Valley Resort in 1936. The name “Sun Valley” was coined by Harriman’s Union Pacific Publicist. The world’s first ski lift was invented by Union Pacific’s James Curran for the Resort.

Aviation came to Sun Valley as early as 1916. It was an infant industry that grew slowly. Simon J. Friedman had come to Idaho in 1869. He was elected the first mayor of the newly incorporated “town” of Hailey, Idaho. Simon and his second cousin, S.M. Friedman, were two of the most significant and wealthy personages in Hailey when they died in the 1920’s. As a memorial, the Friedman family gave a large tract of land suitable for an airport to the town of Hailey as a gift. They had one requirement. The airport was to be named Friedman Memorial Airport.

Friedman Memorial Airport, 1932, may be the first airport in the world to have been named for a Jew. The second airport named for a Jew was Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport, 37 years later.

I contacted Friedman Memorial Airport and asked if they had any historic signage telling the story of the Airport and the early Jewish pioneer to Hailey it was named after. They did not. The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation said we will donate one to you if you want one.

Ketchum and Hailey are in Blaine County. There is a Blaine County Historical Society. They run the local museum. One of the exhibits is about a famous son of Hailey, the famed American poet, Ezra Pound. The exhibit notes he was *controversial*.

Controversial is an understatement. He was a rabid anti-Semite and a pro-Fascist puppet who broadcast pro-Nazi propaganda from Italy during World War II.

I contacted the museum and asked if they had a storyboard about the Jews of Blaine County juxtaposed with the exhibit on Pound. The Museum did not. I offered to fund one for them. They will take the offer up at their next board meeting. They said it was a good idea.

How does this all link to the Trailing of the Sheep Festival honoring the great sheep ranching tradition of Idaho?

Part of the Festival will be Sheep Dog Trials. The Festival was looking for sponsors for the Sheep Dogs. Every time a sponsored Sheep Dog runs, the announcer will announce the name of the sponsor. On the Festival web page there will be a picture of the sponsored Sheep Dog and the sponsor’s name.

The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation is sponsoring a Sheep Dog for the Festival. My wife and I named our dog, at least for the Festival, *Mutzi, the Sheep Dog*.

Even when you are not looking, there is a Jewish story somewhere.

Jerry Klinger is President of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation
www.JASHP.org