

Oklahoma - a Jewish Story

Temple B'Nai Israel, the first permanent Jewish House of Worship in Oklahoma

By Jerry Klinger



Land Rush - 1889

At precisely 12:00, April 22, 1889, the roar of cannon began one of the most incredible races in American history. The tension of an estimated 50,000 people, up and down the starting line, burst like an overinflated balloon. Riders reared in their saddles, dug in their spurs and urged their horses, wagons filled with families surged, men on foot, packs on their backs, all raced forward, out unto the vast empty plains before them. All of them dreamed of the opportunity to stake a claim for free land. The opportunity was real. The opportunity was now. The free government land could be theirs for a home, a farm, a new life. But, they must be willing to settle the land, sacrifice and develop the land, or it would be lost to them.

Thousands, upon thousands surged ahead. People from many lands, backgrounds, races, and religions were part of the stampede. For Jews, incredulously to those few fortunate Jews who were in the dangerous, unknown remote across the Hudson River of Oklahoma, America was offering them the opportunity for free land. A few Jews could be identified in the massive run. America was offering them land not on the basis of religion, but on their willingness to reach for the Golden Ring.

Men like Moses Weinberger.

Standing in line, waiting to file his land claim with the registrar, he was tired and hungry. His Yiddishe Kopf looked around. If he was hungry, so were others. He ordered a shipment of bananas from Wichita and sold them to the hungry claimants. The Weinberger fruit business boomed. He expanded into a less perishable business, opening the first legal saloon in Guthrie. Weinberger eventually became one of most prominent merchants and promoters in Guthrie.

Oklahoma Jewish history has much deeper roots. The Jewish connection traces to 1541 and the Spanish explorer, Francisco Coronado. His wife, Marina Flores Gutiérrez de la Caballería, was from a very

wealthy “*New Christian*”, Jewish family. “*New Christians*” had been given a simple choice, convert, exile or die. Coronado’s wife’s family provided Coronado with the money and influence for his quest through the Americas for gold. He did not find gold but he did find the Grand Canyon and the Colorado River.

About 1865, the first identifiable Jew in “Indian Territory”, as Oklahoma was known, was a Civil War veteran, Boggy (Beauregard) Johnson. There were not a lot of nice Jewish girls in the neighborhood. He married a girl from outside of the *Tribe*. He married a Chickasaw Indian girl.

1870, Adolph Kohn, a *nebeshe* (Yiddish for unfortunate) Jewish peddler, was captured by Apache Indians in Texas. The Apaches sold him to the Comanches in Indian Territory. Kohn must have done well with the Comanches. He ended up riding the War Path with them for three years, eventually earning his freedom; so much for being a *nebeshe*...

What became of Johnson and Kohn and other Jews, mostly traders, who melted into the Indian Territory, are good campfire stories. It can safely be speculated, keeping Kosher was not an active part of their day to day lives. Don’t know if they advertised, *Have Tefillin - Will Travel*. In other parts of the West, some Jews carried Mohel kits and they did travel.

The six great land rushes in Oklahoma, between 1889-1895, transformed the future state. An unknown number of Jews moved and settled in and around the developing communities, towns and emergent cities such as Ardmore and Muskogee. Jews were farmers and ranchers in Oklahoma. Even more Jews came and opened small businesses in the towns. They were tailors, bakers, restaurateurs, merchants and more.

Because the towns and cities of Oklahoma were new, there had not been time for a social or stratified elite to form. It is a fact that has been repeated throughout the American frontier experience. People were first judged on their abilities and their contributions not who they were or what religion they practiced. A politically incorrect quip today explains the phenomena of the American Jewish frontier experience the best. When the Indians were coming over the hill, no one said give everyone a gun but the Jew. Surprisingly, large numbers of Oklahoma Jews involved themselves in the political and social life of their new communities. Quite a few Jews became Mayors.

Jews prospered as Americans in Oklahoma.

Life as Jewish Americans lacked much in early Oklahoma. Jews need communities and a central focus to help them maintain their cultural and religious identities. A Jewish burial ground and social welfare organization are generally the first things Jews do communally. Ten Jews under a tree can pray together and call themselves a religious community – or Minyan. A good rain or snow and the Minyan under the tree does not last long.

By 1890, Ardmore, Oklahoma had about 50 Jews living in the community. They founded the first organized Jewish community and began to holding occasional storefront services in town. Twenty-two years later, the Jewish community of Ardmore purchased their first synagogue, the vacant First Christian Church. The re-consecrated the building was renamed Temple Emeth.

Ardmore was not destined to be the first Jewish community to have a permanent Jewish house of worship in Oklahoma. That distinction belongs to Oklahoma City.

The population of Oklahoma City doubled between 1890 and 1900. Though Guthrie, Oklahoma had been named the Capitol of Oklahoma when Oklahoma was admitted to the Union in 1907, Oklahoma City has passed Guthrie as the population and economic center of the state. The Jewish community had likewise grown significantly in Oklahoma City. In 1901, the Jewish community formed the Jewish Cemetery Association of Oklahoma City. A Reform Jewish Congregation was formed, Temple B’Nai Israel, in 1903. The Temple was incorporated and built their first permanent house of worship, the first permanent Jewish house of worship in Oklahoma, in 1908.

Tensions between Guthrie and Oklahoma City continued to grow. A State wide referendum voted to move the State Capital from Guthrie to Oklahoma City in 1910... It was a bitter vote. The Guthrie Daily Leader ran an extra-large, bold headline for the reconsideration vote in 1912 – ***SHYLOCKS OF OKLAHOMA CITY HAVE STATE BY THE THROAT.***

Jewish historian Stuart Rockoff wrote of the shocking experience:

“The article claimed that prominent Jewish businessmen in Oklahoma City had conspired to steal the capital away from Guthrie. The long accompanying article used parodied Yiddish accents to illustrate its claims that the capital move was the result of a conspiracy of Jewish businessmen who wished to profit from increased real estate values in Oklahoma City.

Rabbi Joseph Blatt of Temple B’nai Israel in Oklahoma City publicly attacked these claims as slander, claiming they were “a disgrace to the civilization of our state.” He then called on Oklahomans to band together to combat religious prejudice.

Rabbi Blatt’s bold response helped to quash the paper’s claims as the Leader’s attempt to reclaim Guthrie’s status as the state capital failed and its efforts to blame the Jews were soon forgotten.”¹

Jews have had a split life experience in Oklahoma. It is not that Oklahoma is unique but rather it is more typical of Jewish life in communities and even States where they are distinct minorities.

During the 1920’s the KKK was a Nativist movement throughout the United States with membership in the Millions. Oklahoma was no exception. Jake Katz had settled in Stillwater, Oklahoma in 1887. He was a highly respected merchant and town promoter. “Rabbi and Oklahoma State University Professor, Perry Gethner, notes that according to local legend, “during the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, members marched through Stillwater with anti-Jewish signs, along with one that read, ‘But not you Mr. Katz.’”²

¹ <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/southern-and-jewish/the-guthrie-incident-an-episode-of-anti-semitism-in-oklahoma/>

² <http://www.isjl.org/oklahoma-encyclopedia.html>

The Klan collapsed across the country in the 1930's because of criminal activity and moral and economic corruption. Small vestiges of the KKK or Klan like groups remain today. April 19, 1995, Anti-Government White Supremacists bombed the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City. 168 people, including 19 children were killed. Elitist antisemitism did not begin fading until after WWII. Since the election of Presidents Bush and Barack Obama there has been a sharp increase of anti-Semitism nationally. College Campuses have become seedbeds and in some cases hotbeds of anti-Semitism disguised as anti-Israelism.

Though accused of anti-Semitism by a partisan media, the impact of newly elected President Trump is unknown. On one hand, he has a daughter who converted and became an Orthodox Jew. She and her husband went to the grave of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in New York to pray before the election. A recent article in the Jerusalem Post told of a Jewish Oklahoma City high school student who felt intimidated because she supported Hillary Clinton in an environment that voted 61% for Trump. On the other hand, Conservative Jewish supporters of Trump in liberal States like Maryland, 61% for Clinton, felt intimidated to speak openly as well.

The Jewish communities of Oklahoma before World War II had split opinions on Zionism. In Oklahoma City in particular this was true. Jewish identity and American identity clashed in way that U.S. Supreme Justice Louis Brandeis would have cringed at when he strongly affirmed, to be a Good American is to be a Good Zionist. He wrote stressing there was nothing inconsistent with an Irish American being pro-Irish then why should there be conflicts for Jews being pro-Zionist.

Temple B'Nai Israel in Oklahoma City, before WWII, reflected the contradictions of American Jews. Part of the membership supported Zionism while others opposed it as un-American and a rejection of Jews identifying as Americans.

After WWII, when the full impact of the Holocaust was understood, the anti-Zionists retreated. Today, Temple B'Nai Israel has a powerful and deeply meaningful Holocaust memorial and learning environment. Many Synagogues, from Orthodox to Reform in the major Jewish centers of the East and the West, disgracefully have no Holocaust memorials at all.

A number of Jewish Oklahomans became very wealthy. Many devoted much of their wealth and efforts to the Jewish and non-Jewish communities building bridges between differing American communities while affirming their identities as Jews and Americans. Philanthropic names such as Fenster, Schusterman, Zarrow, Kaiser, Simpson, Neustadt and others are respected and honored by Jews and non-Jews alike, locally and nationally.

A few weeks ago, Temple B'Nai Israel in Oklahoma City proudly placed a historic interpretive marker outside of their building. The marker recognized Temple B'nai Israel as the first permanent Jewish house of Worship in Oklahoma.

The text, as recorded in the Oklahoma Historical Society, reads:



Temple B'Nai Israel
(Children of Israel)
First Permanent Jewish House of Worship in Oklahoma

Jews have lived in Oklahoma since the mid-19th century. In 1903, Jews organized Temple B'Nai Israel. During its first few years, the congregation met at several local churches. The synagogue, located at 50 Broadway Circle, was dedicated January 17, 1908. Temple B'Nai Israel remained in this building until 1955, when they moved to a new synagogue on North Pennsylvania Street. Temple B'Nai Israel affirmed the American principles of freedom of religion and assembly in Oklahoma.

Institute of Southern Jewish Life,
Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation,
Temple B'Nai Israel

Two little anecdotes about Jews in Oklahoma:



The largest and most productive Oil Field in the United States, 1948-1953, was named the *Shalom Aleichem* Field. It was not Jewish owned. The Christian owners named the field, *Sholem Aleichem*, because popular local Ardmore businessman William Kohn used to greet new visitors with the welcoming phrase and then buy them a soda. The owners of the Oil Field liked Kohn and his message of Peace and Greetings.



Sylvan Goldman was a nice Jewish boy born in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Sylvan owned the Humpty Dumpty supermarket in Oklahoma City. In 1937, having realized that shoppers could not carry many items and shop at the same time, he invented the most ubiquitous, important Supermarket utensil in American and eventually world food marketing business – the *Shopping Cart*. He advertised his invention as the “No Basket Carrying Plan.”

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