

# THE ACCIDENTAL CONGREGATION

Temple Montefiore, Las Vegas, N.M. and JASHP

By Jerry Klinger



Temple Montefiore, Las Vegas, N.M.<sup>i</sup>

In almost every American synagogue, on High Holidays, the vast majority of Jews seem to come from out of the woodwork. All year long, never a scrap of their shoe leather crosses the threshold of a synagogue's doorstep. They come before a benevolent God closes the Book of Life on them for another year. They fear his judgment.

This time it was different. It was not the High Holidays. It was not even a Holiday. They came dressed in everyday clothing, some in jeans, cowboy boots and bolos around their shirt collars. Some wore kippoth, most did not. Some came with only a faint knowledge that they might have been Jews at one time, perhaps Conversos, hidden Jews from the time of the Spanish Conquistadors. Some of them came for the placement of the simple historic marker, conceived by the soon to be nascent Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation. The marker recognized the site of the first permanent Jewish House of Worship in the Territory of New Mexico, Temple Montefiore, 1884. The dedication struck a deep personal need in their souls.

We stood together outside the Catholic Newman Center, upon whose front wall the marker was to be affixed, in a historic dedication ceremony that linked them, Jew to Jew as part of New Mexico's Jewish past, their present and their own future. The deceased Las Vegas, New Mexico, Temple Montefiore Congregation was being reborn.

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Columbia, California

We, that is my wife Judy and I, walked along the darkened board-walked streets of Columbia, California, high up in the Sierra Nevada gold mining country. A fork in life's path appeared and I did not know it when we took the path that the light from a single store's window directed me. It led to the only store open that evening in the entire town.

The entire city of Columbia, California, is now a designated a State Historic District. Actually, it is a stretch to call it a city anymore since the Gold pretty much played out over 140 years ago and the population shrank. For us, Columbia was an exciting weekend excursion to a historic Gold mining boom town, the kind that Mark Twain wrote about in his "Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" story. Angels Camp, California, where the story took place, is just up the road a bit from Columbia. Columbia is a great place to go and stay at the famed Fallon Hotel bed and breakfast to experience the restored feel of the 1850's period, complete with communal bathroom and shower down the hall.<sup>ii</sup>

"Within weeks of the discovery of gold in the vicinity of Columbia, thousands of miners arrived and the population climbed to 5,000. By 1852, there were 8 hotels, 4 banks, 17 general stores, 2 firehouses, 2 bookstores, 1 newspaper, 3 churches, and over 40 drinking/gambling establishments. In 1854, Columbia's first fire destroyed 6 city blocks. The town was rebuilt using brick and iron materials. In 1857, another fire burned down nearly everything else, except the brick buildings.

In 1851, the local community brass band, a popular institution, greeted the arrival of the first white woman in town.<sup>[1]</sup>

The Columbia school house was built in 1860, renovated in 1872, and finally closed in 1937. In 1947, it was purchased by the state of California for \$1 and incorporated into the state-historic park.

By 1860, the gold mined in Columbia was diminishing rapidly. The only land left to mine was in the city itself. Miners dug under buildings and tore down houses to get at the gold beneath the city. The nearby town of Copperopolis had discovered copper and was experiencing a boom.

The bricks from the destroyed buildings of Columbia were sold to Copperopolis for construction purposes.

Between 1850 and the early 1900s, \$150 million in gold was removed from the surrounding hills.

Columbia never became a ghost town. In 1945, California created Columbia State Historic Park from the remains of the historical buildings of the city.<sup>iii</sup>

Few people knew that Columbia was at one time being considered for the Capital of California, narrowly being beaten out by Sacramento. As my wife and I strolled the historic streets, we watched re-enactors in period costume. We enjoyed the town. At the time, I never knew that Jews had been part of Columbia's story or that anti-Semitism had played an ugly episode in its life. We were typical oblivious tourists. We even tried our hand at gold pan mining at a small stream near town.

After a lovely meal, dining on fresh brook trout served by young people interning for a California culinary school, we went out into the darkening evening. It did get dark real fast and with only a few gas lights to mark the way it seemed there was not much to do. Television and radio had not been invented in the 1850's and the hotel did not provide those sorts of distractions, so we went out. Every store was dark. The street was getting darker when I excitedly said, "look, there is a light in a store. Somebody is open, let's go in". We wandered into the Columbia Booksellers & Stationers<sup>iv</sup> to browse.

Having grown up in the Yeshiva world where I was one of their poorer products, I was educated with the importance of Torah, Talmud and being on time for services. American history was peripherally taught, only as mandated by law. I knew that Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492. I knew that great, great Aunt Tilly sold pickles from a barrel in the Lower East Side of New York to save up money to put great Uncle Melvin through medical school. Uncle Melvin moved to California and started the movie industry and that was American Jewish history. My Yeshiva knowledge of broader Jewish history was equally modest; there was no Jewish history between the destruction of the second temple and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

Wandering through the book store, perusing this and that, I was drawn to a recently received display that grabbed my eyes. It was a large buff colored soft covered table sized book with a cover of a man with a large shot gun, a pistol and belt of bullets around his hips and his young son by his side looking back at me. The book was the newly released: "*Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West*", by Fred Rochlin (Author), Harriet Rochlin (Author)

"Pioneer Jews?" I asked myself. What the hell is a Pioneer Jew?" I had never heard of such a thing. I purchased the book and was immersed in the untold story of Jews and the American frontier. American Jewish history was much more than the large blanks I had been left with from my Yeshiva education. Jews had been part of the American story from the beginning. We were never very large in numbers but Jews were explorers, frontiersman, pioneers, trappers,

miners, farmers, ranchers, soldiers, Indian fighters and even Indian Chiefs. I was mesmerized by the book.

It was not until a year later that Judy and I were doing the Bed and Breakfast routine, only now in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that I broached the idea to her. We were tourists once again, but I knew a bit more about Jewish history and Santa Fe. I wanted to see the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi<sup>v</sup> built between 1869 and 1886 by Bishop Lamy<sup>vi</sup>. Bishop Lamy ran into serious financial difficulty building his church. His situation was so bad, he believed he would not be able to continue. The Jews of Santa Fe stepped forward and helped provide the funding needed to continue. Over the arched lintel to the entrance to the naïve, the name of God, in Hebrew, was carved in appreciation by the Bishop.



“Judy, the site of the first permanent Jewish house of worship in the territory of New Mexico, is located just sixty miles north east of here in Las Vegas; do you want to go see it?” I asked eagerly. “Yes, there really is such a place”, I eagerly said, “and it is not in Nevada but just over there” pointing a finger towards the mountains. Fortunately, being married to a tolerant, understanding, long enduring wife who simply rolled her eyes at another of my stuyyot – sillinesses – she said “o.k.”

With the Rochlin book in hand, we drove to Las Vegas in search of Ninth and Douglas Street. Temple Montefiore, established 1884, was first sited at Ninth and Douglas. The synagogue was later moved to Eighth and Columbia, in 1922.

Las Vegas is one of those places you see in a Western movie. Old Western silent movies were in fact filmed there. Of a more contemporary period, movies such as Easy Rider (1969) and Red Dawn (1984) were also filmed there. It has a central plaza area surrounded by low, mixed brick and adobe buildings. Some of the walkways are covered by extended Ramadas to protect from

the sun of the summer and heavy snows of the winter. In the distant past, when Las Vegas was a much rougher place than the quiet Hispanic town of today, many a bad man “was launched to God” from the gallows that were prominent in the center of the plaza. Hoodo Brown, a gunfighter as notorious as Billy the Kid, barely managed to escape the night before he was to be sent to God in the plaza. Hoodo was from Western Missouri. His real name was Hyman G. Neal. Was he Jewish? I never found out for sure. The great American explorer, Colonel John C. Fremont, nicknamed the “Pathfinder”<sup>vii</sup>, had tied his mules and horses up from one of his expeditions to rest in Las Vegas. Fremont crossed the plaza along with his Jewish cartographer from South Carolina, Solomon Nunes Carvalho.

Courtesy of mapquest, we passed through the town, clearly recognizing the curious mix of architectural styles and a large number of out of place Victorian brick mansions. The magnificent mansions, many in excellent care, bespoke of an era when Las Vegas was more than simply a rest stop along the Santa Fe Trail.

Las Vegas was first settled by the Spanish in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Santa Fe trail made Las Vegas a key stopping point for re-provisioning by 1821. It was the first civilization that American pioneers crossing the Great Plains in their Conestoga wagon trains came to after hundreds of arduous, dangerous miles. When the Santa Fe Railroad arrived in 1879, Las Vegas became a real boom town. Jews were, like many other brave adventurous people, attracted to Las Vegas’s economic opportunities. By 1880, the Jewish population of Las Vegas rivaled that of Albuquerque. The Jews brought a mercantile direction to Las Vegas that significantly added to the town’s development and prosperity.

“Its (Las Vegas’s) most prominent Jewish pioneer was Charles Ifeld, who came to America to avoid the draft in his native Prussia. In 1865, he arrived in Taos, N.M., at the age of 18 with \$5 in his pocket. Ifeld went to work with another Jewish merchant, Adolph Letcher. Hearing that trade in Las Vegas was better; they loaded their goods onto 75 mules and moved.

Ifeld's three-story department store, The Great Emporium, was labeled "the largest and finest department house in all the Southwest" by the Las Vegas Daily Optic, a newspaper still in operation today. His business, The Charles Ifeld Co., eventually branched out into 20 communities and continued to operate into the 1950s. His building stands at 224 Plaza St., next door to the imposing 1882 Plaza Hotel. On one exterior wall, in faded letters, you can still read: "Charles Ifeld Co. Wholesalers of Everything."

Las Vegas' synagogue was established in 1884, after Charles Ifeld purchased the lot for \$640; many non-Jewish locals contributed to the construction fund. The building was later moved to Eighth and Columbia streets and modified.”<sup>viii</sup>

At Ninth and Douglas, the original site, a large red brick building, now part of the Las Vegas educational system, graced the corner. We went on to Eighth and Columbia. Parking the car outside of a lovely ochre colored building, I walked up to the Catholic Newman Center of

Highland University. Standing on the corner and pirouetting like an overweight ballerina, I looked around confused. Certainly the church building did not look like a synagogue. Across the street and on another corner is modest clapboard housing. A third corner is graced with a large University educational building. The Newman Center was in back of me. Confused, I turned around in place a few more times. Perhaps, I made a mistake. Perhaps the Rochlin's made a mistake. Perhaps.... we bundled back into the car and headed for the town plaza and the tourist information office.

Inside the office, I asked "Jews?"

The answer came back equally confused – "Jews?"

I explained I was looking for the site of the first permanent Jewish house of Worship in New Mexico territory – Congregation Montefiore. No one knew anything about it. Dejected at not being able to find it, we returned to Santa Fe, back to the East Coast and home. A few days later, I decided to poke into this mystery a little further. Rochlin was very specific about the locations. I called the Las Vegas tourist bureau again and reached Ray Valdez. I explained my concern. Ray is a member of the Las Vegas Citizens' Committee for Historic Preservation.<sup>ix</sup>

I asked about the Jewish history of Las Vegas and the street addresses I had stood at. Ray told me I had been standing in front of the synagogue. The Catholic Newman Center had been the synagogue until 1950 when it was sold to the church. The Jewish community had declined and the building could no longer be maintained.

For whatever reason, I thought, "how many other cultural tourists come to this place, pirouetting like idiots and not knowing what is what or where they are. Maybe if I could historically mark this site I could help others." Over time, I found myself actually saying, "God, I may not have done much in life so far but if I can mark the location of one of your houses of worship I will have been of some service here."

"Ray", I asked, "if I pay for a historic marker, would you be willing to work with me to historically identify the site?" "Yes" was the unequivocal answer. I had no idea what was involved but I soon learned.

Ray did all the key work. It had not even occurred to me that I needed special permission to put a plaque up on the side of the Newman Center. Ray first consulted with the local priest who consented but he needed to check with the Archbishop of Santa Fe first. Could it have been the memory of the Jewish aid to Bishop Lamy's great cathedral in Santa Fe, I never knew, the Archbishop gave his permission.

Locating a foundry, it turned out to be a Jewish foundry in Pennsylvania to produce the marker; we incorporated an image of the original building and a Star of David in the simple design. Searching for what I believed was a non-existent Jewish community in Las Vegas was difficult. Using the internet, for the great tool that is was becoming, I came across the New Mexico

Jewish Historical Society and contacted its then president David Scholders. I told David about my idea and he too responded positively.

On the morning of the dedication, Judy and I stood outside the Newman center and waited. Ray showed up. We did not know if we would be standing there entirely by ourselves as Ray drilled and screwed the marker into place on the wall. A bus pulled up, people got out, other cars began arriving and suddenly from out of the woodwork people began congregating. We learned later that day that people had come from all over Northern New Mexico; a couple had made the trip from Paris, France because their family originated in Las Vegas. The New Mexico Historical Society did its part. They brought a group of people including the State Historian of New Mexico, Dr. Stanley Hordes, who spoke about New Mexico and the Conversos – the hidden Jews who came with the Conquistadors secretly searching for a place they could worship God openly as Jews, not afraid of the inquisition.

The majority of people present were the modern hidden Jews of Northern New Mexico. Through the eternal link that seems to bind Jews together, word of mouth spread about the dedication of the marker. The people came, some overtly aware of their Jewish identity, some only vaguely aware that they had been Jewish at one time, but they came.

The greatest surprise was when it was announced, after more than 50 years of the Jewish community having been extinct, the local priest, with the blessing of the Archbishop of Santa Fe, had given permission for the Jews to once again have Shabbat services in the old synagogue building. A small torah had been obtained and we all went inside the Newman Center to look around. The Ten Commandments, carved in wood so many years ago, still stood over the back wall and seemed to look down on us. The Jewish Community of Las Vegas was reborn.

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The rebirth of the Las Vegas community and the Jewish story of Northern New Mexico were tied into a larger exhibit that was held at the Palace of the Governor's in Santa Fe, *the Jews of New Mexico*.

From an accidental beginning, standing like a fool, pirouetting on a street corner next to the Catholic Newman Center, I wondered later, could this be done again? Could I, maybe, find other places of American Jewish historical significance and mark the sites for others to know that the American Jew did not get off the boat yesterday? Jews have been part of the American story from the beginning.

The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, [www.JASHP.org](http://www.JASHP.org), was created.

Since its accidental beginning, JASHP has completed projects in twenty states as well as three major international projects, numerous articles and speaking events.

Jerry Klinger is the President and founder of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation.  
[www.JASHP.org](http://www.JASHP.org).

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.jewish-american-society-for-historic-preservation.org/completedprgms1/lasvegasnm.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.cityhotel.com>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbia, California](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbia,_California)

<sup>iv</sup> [Columbia Booksellers & Stationers](#)

<sup>v</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathedral Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathedral_Basilica_of_Saint_Francis_of_Assisi)

<sup>vi</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean\\_Baptiste\\_Lamy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Baptiste_Lamy)

<sup>vii</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_C.\\_Freemont](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_C._Freemont)

<sup>viii</sup>

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/travel/article/if\\_it\\_wasnt\\_for\\_jews\\_las\\_vegas\\_wouldnt\\_be\\_the\\_town\\_it\\_is\\_today\\_20060915/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/travel/article/if_it_wasnt_for_jews_las_vegas_wouldnt_be_the_town_it_is_today_20060915/)

<sup>ix</sup> <http://lasvegasnmcchp.com/>