

The Ashley, N.D. Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery

National Register of Historic Places



By Jerry Klinger

Ashley, N.D., May 21, 2017, was a sunny day. Strong, chilling winds whipped across the treeless Great Plains farming land. Nearly a hundred people gathered, some from the local community, some having traveled thousands of miles. They all came to honor, to remember, to respect, to preserve the past for the future at the Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery. The U.S. Department of Interior designated the site important for America's heritage, listing it on the National Register of Historic Places.

The funerary stones stand silent, honored, cared for by non-Jewish locals. The Beth Itzhok Jewish cemetery is remote, isolated, near Ashley, N.D., a good 125 miles S.E. from Bismark. It is largely forgotten by most of the Jewish World. The sleep of eternity, until the coming of the Messiah, embraces at least 28 Jews who came to the far reaches of the Northern American plains to farm.

Keva Bender, one of the Russian Jewish Homesteaders buried there, defiantly said in 1905, "We can prove to the world that the Jew can be a farmer." He did as did the Jews of Ashley.

Today, it is an odd statement to many American ears, considering the rebirth of Israel after 2,000 years of wandering. Agriculture and massive land rejuvenation were key elements of early Zionist settlement. The Jews who went to Palestine, like the Russian and Romanian Jews who came to North Dakota from the 1880's on, were at best raw, desperate, fearful and hopeful. Agriculturally, they were worse than inexperienced; they were a danger to themselves.

As bad as things had been in the darkest anti-Semitic parts of the Jewish Pale of Settlement that the Czar permitted the Jew to live in, they endured. By the 1880's they endured until they could not endure any longer. Millions of Jews came to America seeking a home that would want them.

America was long on land but short on people, especially between the coasts that cynics today label as “fly over country.” To help settle those great underpopulated spaces, the U.S. Government created the Homestead Act of 1862. To anyone willing to take the extreme risk, go to the frontier, settle on and develop the land for five years, 125 acres would be theirs free and clear.

By the early 20th century, North Dakota was home to over 250 Jewish Homesteads. North Dakota had the fourth largest Jewish farm population in the United States. Only New York, New Jersey and Connecticut had more Jewish farms. New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut were not on the frontier. The Jewish farmer there was not isolated from the Jewish world. They were not Homestead communities living in dug out sod homes contending with wolves, even Indians. The North Dakota Jewish farmer was and did.

Rebecca Bender is a descendant of Keva Bender. She is a driving force in the preservation effort of the Ashley Jewish Homestead Cemetery. She wrote the application to the U.S. Department of the Interior seeking listing of the Cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places.

She wrote;

“With the many kindnesses shown to the Russian Jews in North Dakota, the few anti-Semitic instances that did take place were truly a footnote. Homesteader Joe Bender told of working to make ends meet on the Soo Line Railroad out of Ashley, shoveling coal in the engine room. A fellow railroad employee asked him “what kind of name is Bender?” Mr. Bender responded, “I’m a Russian Jew.” The other employee said, “I’ve never seen a Jew shovel coal before.” Joe Bender replied, “Well now you have.”

When the train reached Minneapolis, the other employee lunged at Joe, while yelling a slur. Having grown up in Odessa, Joe knew how to fight when he had to. He did a head butt to the midsection, so the much larger man was down on the ground, and Joe was not at a disadvantage. When Joe said to him, “have you had enough? The other man agreed, saying “I’ve never seen a Jew fight like that.” Joe Bender responded matter-of-factly, “Well, now you have.”

Ashley was neither the first nor the last of the Jewish back to the land efforts.

Agrarianism has deep American roots.

Agriculture is the most healthful, most useful and most noble employment of man,”

-George Washington.

"Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people..."

- Thomas Jefferson

"There seem to be but three ways for a nation to acquire wealth. The first is by war, as the Romans did, in plundering their neighbors. This is robbery. The second by commerce, which is generally cheating. The third is by agriculture, the only honest way, wherein man receives a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground, in a kind of continual miracle, wrought by the hand of God in his favor, as reward for his innocent life and his virtuous industry. “– Benjamin Franklin

M. Thomas Inge philosophically explained agrarianism in his 1969 book, *Agrarianism in American Literature*.

"Cultivation of the soil provides direct contact with nature; through the contact with nature the agrarian is blessed with a closer relationship to God. Farming has within it a positive spiritual good; the farmer acquires the virtues of "honor, manliness, self-reliance, courage, moral integrity, and hospitality" and follows the example of God when creating order out of chaos.

The farmer "has a sense of identity, a sense of historical and religious tradition, a feeling of belonging to a concrete family, place, and region, which are psychologically and culturally beneficial." The harmony of this life checks the encroachments of a fragmented, alienated modern society which has grown to inhuman scale.

In contrast, farming offers total independence and self-sufficiency. It has a solid, stable position in the world order. But urban life, capitalism, and technology destroy our independence and dignity while fostering vice and weakness within us. The agricultural community can provide checks and balances against the imbalances of modern society by its fellowship of labor and cooperation with other agrarians, while obeying the rhythms of nature. The agrarian community is the model society for mankind."

The first American Jewish agricultural colony in the United States was founded at Wawarsing, New York, in 1837. Located approximately 30 miles west of modern Poughkeepsie, N.Y., the farming colony was founded by thirteen idealistic Jewish families—led by Moses Cohen. It was named Shalom. They left New York City to make their living on the land as farmers. They struggled for five hard years.

Eventually, they were forced to supplement their incomes with light manufacturing and commerce. Shalom failed in 1842 and was abandoned.

A year later, (1843), Julius Stern of Philadelphia advanced an even bolder idea. Writing in the nascent American Jewish journal, *The Occident*, Stern proposed that a Jewish agricultural colony be established in the Northwest of the United States. Stern's hope was that a colony would grow into a successful haven for all persecuted Jews. Ultimately, he dreamed it would eventually become a part of the American union of States. The call to action was not responded to.

Simeon Berman founded a Jewish Agricultural Society in Cracow, Poland in 1852. Due largely to ingrained anti-Semitism, it failed. Immigrating to the U.S., he unsuccessfully tried persuading Jews in New York, Cincinnati and St. Louis to become farmers. His faith in Jewish agrarianism unshaken, Berman published a pamphlet in 1865, "Constitution and Plan for the Founding of a Jewish Agricultural Society". Berman envisioned Jewish independence by returning to the land. He saw new cities created by Jewish farmers. He envisioned Jewish communities with Jewish schools led by English, German and Hebrew teachers.

Berman's ideas and ideals were rejected by American Jewry. Frustrated, he left America and moved to Palestine where he founded the Holy Land Settlement Society in 1870. His ideas failed in America, in the Diaspora. Jewish agriculturalism did not fail in Israel.

At first it was a trickle. Soon it became a flood as Czarist Russia, eager to get rid of its Jews, made life beyond intolerable. It was not until there was a crisis of Russian Jewish refugees washing up in tidal waves, principally to New York, did American Jewry seriously begin to consider Jewish American agriculture.

On one hand American Jewish humanitarianism was pure Tzeddakah, charity. On the other hand, the Jewish established elites feared upsetting Christian toleration and the acceptance of themselves. At the core, the elites feared igniting in America, European styled anti-Semitism. They feared the Russian Jews' "medieval" "religious Orthodoxy, poor educational levels and Oriental culture. They called for the humanitarian relocation of Jewish refugees away from overcrowded urban centers to America's frontier interior – to become agriculturalists, farmers. It was good for "them" and it was good for "them".

Numerous Jewish immigrant aid societies were created between the 1880's and the 1920's. One of the first was the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, 1881. Two years later, it branched into the Montefiore Agricultural Society.

The early American Jewish farming resettlements were directed to group, communal efforts. They were undercapitalized, poorly conceived and poorly organized. Preplanning, even land selection was bad.

Desperate Jewish immigrants, convinced by hired street hawkers to relocate, were generally inexperienced as farmers. Many, thrown together in the communal efforts, were ill suited by political and religious orientation to succeed. Some immigrants were preyed upon by unscrupulous Jews who sought cheap Jewish labor, as in the case of the failed Jewish agricultural colony of Cotopaxi, Colorado, 1882-1884. The Jews of Cotopaxi had been brought to the high Rockies, allocated land, some as high as 8,000 feet and told to farm under impossible conditions. To survive, the immigrants found work in the nearby colony's Jewish sponsor's mine.

A number of Cotopaxi settlers and children died. Today, their forgotten graves are taken care of by a Christian Cotopaxi resident. In 2011, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation erected fencing and placed an interpretive marker at their resting place.

The communal American Jewish agricultural resettlement model was recognized as a failure by the early 20th century. A different approach was needed.

The Jewish Agricultural (And Industrial) Aid Society was organized in New York, 1900. It was a subsidiary of the Baron de Hirsch Fund who emphasized self-supporting Jewish agricultural efforts and light rural industry to supplement meager farm incomes. The Society offered advice, training, generous loans, even helped to stimulate Jewish cultural life. The Society created a Yiddish-English language monthly, The Jewish Farmer, to extend agricultural knowledge and respond to the needs of the Jewish farmer.

The Jewish Agricultural Aid Society became a principal supporter of the Ashley Jewish farm effort when Kiva Bender moved to North Dakota to homestead. The Society aided the Jewish Homesteaders but it was the absolute determination of the homesteaders to make it, to survive as individual farmers, yet part of a Jewish community on the frontier that made the difference.

Rebecca Bender continued in her application to the Department of the Interior;

"Joe [Bender] had never ridden a horse before and he knew nothing about farming. When he first arrived in Ashley, he hired himself out as a farm hand at the home of a German farmer so he could learn. He learned how to rotate crops on the farm, how to handle a single blade plow with a team of horses, how to tame bronco horses. Soon Joe was even a consultant for other farmers new to the area."

The frontier has a way of leveling all people in the commonality of oneness. Christians respected the willingness of the Jews to work and learn. Jews respected their neighbors as fellow Americans and supported Christians in need. It was a symbiotic relationship that characterized the American frontier.

A person was measured not on who they were or what religion they had but what they could do for all.

Bender shared a particularly poignant story;

“In addition to socializing within the Jewish farming community, there was also communication and friendship between the Jewish farmers and their German farming neighbors, and those living in town. There was a sense that they were “all in this together.”

In the spring of 1912, Joe Bender was riding his horse from his land nine miles northwest of Ashley, into town. Mattias Kopp, a German farmer owned 80 acres near Ashley. Joe noticed that Mr. Kopp had not seeded his land yet and it was getting late to plant wheat. Joe stopped at the Kopp's house and asked Mr. Kopp if anything was wrong. Mr. Kopp, with tears in his eyes, said his horses were sick, and this would be the first year that he wasn't able to plant.

My Dad went home and said to my Grandfather, “We've got to help him.” My Grandfather Kiva told Joe, “you know all the homesteaders. See if you can all help the Kopp's together.”

Joe went from farm to farm that evening on horseback, explaining the situation to the neighbors. He told them of his plan – that they would all meet at the Kopp farm at dawn, the next day.

When Joseph arrived at the Kopp farm before dawn, with his team of horses, plow and seed, he was the only one there. Then he heard horses' hooves, and more horses' hooves, as the sun started to rise. Thirty Jewish homesteaders with thirty teams of horses and thirty plows had come to help their neighbor.

In one day they plowed and seeded the Kopp's 80 acres. Mr. Kopp came out and looked with disbelief. Joe told him, “What we did for you, you would have done for any of us.”

The Jewish community of Ashley and McIntosh County grew to 85 homesteads. They purchased a building for a synagogue in town, the old Baptist Church. The building, with its two Torahs, was never locked and never vandalized. The community served as their own lay religious leaders even sending one of their own to learn to be a Shochet, a ritual slaughterer. Jewish education was at home and at times guided by a resident trained Rabbi. Rabbi Julius Hess was one of those Rabbis. He organized the creation of the Ashley Jewish Cemetery.

Anecdotally, Rabbi Hess was recognized visiting a 1915 Chautauqua performance in Bismarck. Asked why he was there, the Rabbi answered. He was there to see his brother's son perform. Rabbi Hess' nephew was the beloved American singer and later movie star, Al Jolson.

By the late 1930's most of the Jews had moved, some to better farming land elsewhere, some to urban settings. The last Jew to live in Ashley, the town dentist, Dr. Leo Cohen died in 1983.

Descendants of the Jewish community of Ashley blended into and enriched the broader American landscape.

Rebecca Bender wrote -

“Descendants of those buried here include World War II decorated heroes -- Larry Schlesinger (KIA, US Army Infantry Intelligence Normandy), Kenneth Bender (US Army Infantry Rifle Company Commander, D-Day invasion, 2nd Division), Kenneth Schlesinger (US Air Force , bombardier European theater and Africa), Lionel Greenberg (US Army Air Corps, Germany, POW) , a Pulitzer Prize winner, an American Bible Contest Champion, a New York Times Bestselling Author, a medaling World Synchronized Skater, a Rabbi, a dentist, a playwright, composers, civil rights activists, businessmen and businesswomen, an airshow pilot, a broadcaster, a maker of stained glass windows, general store owners, a mayor, alderman and school board member, and acclaimed lawyers, doctors, judges, authors, journalists, accountants, psychologists, teachers, homebuilders, social workers, advertising executives, actors, and musicians.”

Other than the mute funeral stones on the prairie, little remained to tell the story of the Ashley Jewish community until the dedication of the historical interpretive markers May 21. Though remote, the virtual world of the internet will keep and spread the story of the Ashley Jews.



Left Historical Marker Text:

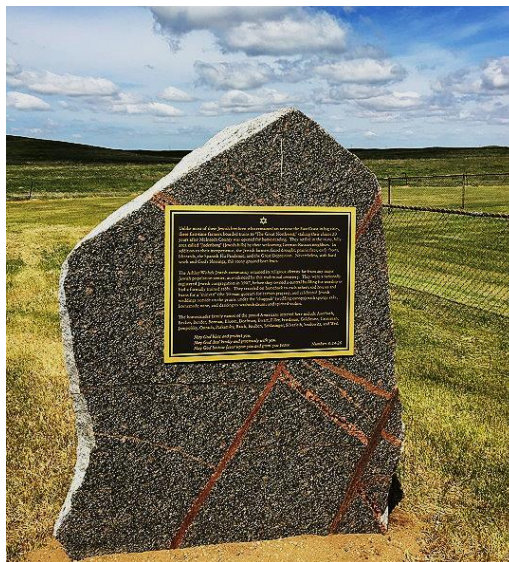
“On November 17, 2015, the United States Department of the Interior officially named this site to the National Register of Historic Places. From the 1880s through the 1930s, 1200 Jewish farmers lived on over 250 homesteads in North Dakota - the fourth largest number of Jewish homesteaders in any state. Here, among the swaying Dakota prairie grasses and under the infinite sky, the largest Jewish agricultural settlement in North or South Dakota thrived. The Beth Itzchock (House of Isaac) Cemetery, the final resting place for at least 28 Jewish immigrants, is the only permanent physical reminder of this community.

Over 400 Russian and Romanian Jewish homesteaders escaped persecution due to their faith (including the prohibition against Jews owning land for farming) and pogroms (organized mass killings of Jews

endorsed by the Czarist regime) and settled on around 85 farms in McIntosh County beginning in 1905. After clearing rocks and boulders, growing wheat and flax, raising cattle and chickens, and selling cream from their sod houses, most were successful enough to own their land after the requisite five years under the Homestead Act or to purchase it sooner.

With appreciation for the generous contributions and guidance of:

The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation
 the descendants of the Jewish homesteaders
 the citizens of Ashley, North Dakota
 those who have cared for and restored this cemetery, and the State Historical Society of North Dakota”



Right Historical Marker Text:

“Unlike most of their Jewish brethren who remained on or near the East Coast in big cities, these first-time farmers boarded trains to "The Great Northwest," staking their claims 20 years after McIntosh County was opened for homesteading. They settled in the stony, hilly area called "Judenberg"(Jewish hills) by their welcoming German-Russian neighbors. In addition to their inexperience, the Jewish farmers faced drought, prairie fires, early frosts, blizzards, the Spanish flu Pandemic, and the Great Depression. Nevertheless, with hard work, and God's blessings, this stony ground bore fruit.

The Ashley Wishek Jewish community retained its religious identity far from any major Jewish population center, as evidenced by this traditional cemetery. They were a nationally registered Jewish congregation in 1907, before they owned a central building for worship or had a formally trained rabbi. They traveled on horseback to each other's sod houses and barns for a "minyan" (the 10-man quorum for certain prayers), and celebrated Jewish weddings outside on the prairie under the "chuppah" (wedding canopy) with sponge cake, homemade wine, and dancing to washtub drums and spirited violins.

The homesteader family names of the proud American interred here include Auerbach, Becker, Bender, Berman, Bloom, Dorfman, Ewart, Filler, Friedman, Goldstone, Grossman, Jampolsky, Ourach, Parkansky, Raich, Reuben, Schlasinger, Silverlieb, Smilowitz, and Weil.

May God bless and protect you,
May God deal kindly and graciously with you
May God bestow favor upon you and grant you peace.

Numbers 6:24-26”

Governor Doug Borgum issued a proclamation for May 21, 2017, declaring it North Dakota Jewish Homesteaders Day.

In part it read:

“Whereas, it is important to recognize the contributions that this important group (Jewish North Dakotans) made to North Dakota's rich history; as hardworking farmers, business owners, and proud active citizens of the State of North Dakota.”

The Ashley story is not just about a small Jewish farming experience on the frontier, it is about the American experience of all of us.

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