

Texas Jewish Historical Society

Preserving Jewish Heritage in Texas

Established 1980

TEXAS JEWISH
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

November, 2002 - Feb. 2003

Rabbi Jimmy Kessler



Rabbi Kessler's story begins on page 4.



From the Prez

The Winter quarterly Board meeting was held in

Tyler the weekend of January 24-27, 2003, with over 60 attending. Below are some pictures from that event. The Host committee responsible for making the arrangements were members Phil Hurwitz, Evelyn Muntz, Sylvan Mellinger, and Cris Selman. Sam Roosth led the team, along with his Secretary, Glenda Kennemer. A& and Mrs Seymour Van Os took care of the registration table. We were all surprised with a "goody bag" upon registering that contained among other things a beautiful Tyler Rose Bush. Friday evening the Society attended services at Temple Beth El, where yours truly was invited to the Bimah for an Aliyah.

Saturday morning we heard an interesting discussion on early day businesses in Tyler. Sam Roosth led

the discussion with Barry Green, Phil Hurwitz, Florence Leonard, Evelyn Muntz, and Mrs. Sol Roosth participating. After lunch the group had a bus tour of The University of Texas at Tyler College, and then went to Kilgore, where we toured the East Texas Oil Museum. Mr. Joe White Museum Director, and Mr. Terry Stembridge, a local author, discussed the oil boom of the 1930s. Saturday night we enjoyed a Havdala service and a very good meal at the hotel, followed by our guest speaker, Mr. Randy Gilbert, a local Attorney/Historian. He told us the story of Camp Fannin, the Confederate Prisoner of War camp that was located in Tyler. One POW was a Jewish prisoner, who after being released went to Chicago, where he opened a business that became "Spiegel Catalog" sales.

The quarterly Board meeting was held Sunday morning. Fay Brachman reported that we have over 860 family memberships. Reports were given by the standing committees The remaining Historical Synagogue note cards will be given to Judaica shops and will not be sold in the future by the

Society. Gladys Leff, gave a brief report on the upcoming Annual Gathering to be held in Dallas, TX, April 25-27, 2003. At this time we are looking at having the Summer board meeting in San Antonio. Any suggestions on locations for future Board meetings and the 2004 Annual Gathering would be appreciated.

Don't forget that we have two traveling exhibits that are available for display. Contact Jack Gerrick for details.

For the past few years, we have been fortunate to have Buddy Freed as our Newsletter Editor. The Society owes him a debt of thanks in doing a wonderful job of making the Newsletter into something that all members look forward to reading. It has been said that the Newsletter is 'the glue that holds the Society together'. Thanks Buddy for the great job you have done. Our new editor is Louis Sokol from Houston. He has many new ideas and we look forward to Louis becoming Editor.

Hope to see many of you in Dallas at the Annual Gathering. Lets make this Gathering the best ever.



Noel Graubart is greeted by Milton and Dorothy Harelak



Florence Leonard talks about the "good old days."

Shirley Rich and Miriam Rubin haven't seen each other since high school in Houston.





Letter From the Editor

or Freedman Slips

This will be my last issue as Editor of the

Texas Jewish Historical Society's newsletter.

Since I began this job with the June 2000 issue, I have enjoyed the many hours that it takes to publish each issue. Many things have been accomplished. Some things have not!

What has been done has been to get each issue to our members as soon as possible after each board meeting. I want to thank Alexa Kirk for her total cooperation in preparing and publishing so this could be accomplished. Without her great assistance, these editions would not have been as prompt as they have become.

I also appreciate the time that my wife, Sandra has spent helping me. She not only has been one of the dedicated proofreaders, she has had to listen to my ideas and rantings. Sandra has tried to guide me in more moderate paths. Other proofreaders have been invaluable and their names have been listed in each issue. Thanks to them, corrections have been made before going to press.

Paula Johnson must be mentioned here for doing a great job of getting the mail from our Austin mail box, sorting it, recording the checks and forwarding each piece of mail to the

proper TJHS member, giving them the opportunity to act timely on it. Thanks to her doing this job so enthusiastically, we don't have a frustrating lag time getting the mail to where it belongs.

Others who have made this job less of a chore have been Jack Gerrick and Hollace Weiner and the Brachmans, Fay and Leon. They have been great resources and inspirations. They, along with Sandra, are icons of volunteer dedication. They not only helped me, they are dedicated servants to the Jewish way of life.

We have available at this time some 56 issues of the Newsletter on CD ROM, thanks to Jay Hoffman. Jay is the person who scanned all of the old issues, formatted them and made our master CD so that each additional issue could be added. These CDs should be most useful to anyone wanting to do research on the Texas Jewish Experience.

Now, what hasn't been done? In my opinion, the members of the Texas Jewish Historical Society have supported this effort with their membership dues and some are regulars at the meetings. But few, very few, have taken the time and effort to submit their histories for inclusion in this great endeavor. So what is the purpose of editing 24 pages of a boilerplate publication? After these two and a half years of soliciting your family history, I realize that either I have failed or you don't care. Either way, I wish my successor great achievement. A final thought: perhaps a name change would be appropriate—The Texas Jewish Society. Our history is our history. If we do not write it, who will?

Shalom.

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The Texas Jewish Historical Society

By Rabbi Jimmy Kessler

Part I

Clearly the preservation of the Texas Jewish experience goes back much further than my efforts. Rabbi Henry Cohen helped produce a wonderful booklet on the Jews in Texas for the Centennial of the State in 1936. Since Dr. Cohen came to Galveston in 1888, he was lucky enough to have visited with direct descendants of founding Jews in the State. Decades later, our fabulous past president Frances Kallison continued that tradition with her writings and her efforts. The Society is privileged to be blessed with her presence and her leadership.

My interest in preserving the Texas Jewish experience goes back to Pershing Junior High School in Houston and seventh grade. Like every seventh grader, I was required to take a course in Texas history. Also during those years, there was no provision for students missing school for a religious festival.

And so it was that on Yom Kippur, a test was given in Texas History and obviously the Jewish students were absent. The teacher gave every Jewish kid an "F" on the exam. A couple of days after the results hit home, one of the parents came to the class, during my class period, to ask the teacher for an explanation. Among many of the comments, I distinctly remember her telling my classmate's mother that, "we Jews had to remember that were weren't here in Texas – early on – and had nothing to do with Texas history." I'm sure the Texas history teacher's comments didn't settle well with the parent, and I can assure you that they have remained with me for more than 40 years.

Time passed and in the summer of 1967 I found myself a first year stu-

dent at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio. One of the first buildings pointed out to us new comers was the American Jewish Archives. This modest, but most intriguing facility was established by Rabbi Jacob Rader Marcus, PhD, Professor of American Jewish History in 1948. As a matter of fact, Dr. Marcus was the father of American Jewish History as an academic subject.

The students were told to visit the Archives and check out the three walls of card catalogues that registered the holdings of the institution. They represented a collection of original materials given by folk from all over the world and reflecting some aspect of the American Jewish experience.

So after a few days, I found myself standing in front of the box containing "Ke" cards and looked for "Kessler". The only one I found was a Yiddish theatre actor from the early 1900's. The next search was in the "Te" box for cards on "Texas". There I found only two cards. One, a newspaper article on Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston and the other a card typed in red noting sealed records on the split of Temple Beth Israel of Houston in 1944 over the Basic Principles. And that was it.

It didn't bother me too much that there were no cards on Kessler, but I must admit that as a chauvinistic Texan, it did bother me that there were only two cards from my state. When I look under New York, there were several boxes!

In my third year of Rabbinical school, I took the required course in American Jewish History taught by Dr. Marcus. During one of his lectures, Dr. Marcus commented that nothing of importance happened in

American Jewish history before 1900 east of the Mississippi River; and, I laughed! He stopped and commented, "Mr. Kessler, you may disagree now, but *if* you pass my course, you learn that I am correct." My *chutzpah* lead me to respond, "No, Dr. Marcus, I hope to prove you wrong one day." And, I did; but, that will come in a later article.

During this course, Dr. Marcus permitted me to write a restricted paper on the restricted records in the American Jewish Archives on the split of Temple Beth Israel. That work is not longer restricted, but it was at that time. The experience taught me that the history of the Texas Jewish experience needed to be preserved.

Following my ordination in 1972, I became the Hillel Director at UT Austin, and remained there until the summer of 1975. During that time, I attempted to gather the original records of the Austin foundation that was established in 1926; one of the earliest in the United States. To my chagrin, I discovered that most of the records had not been preserved and as many of the early founders had died, not much information was available. Another experience of disappointment in an effort to record the Texas Jewish experience.

In 1975, I put my desires for the recording of Texas Jewish history on a back burner thinking it would never come to fruition.

Part II

In 1976, Temple B'nai Israel of Galveston selected me as their Rabbi. Perhaps a cute aside is appropriate here for it clearly relates to Texas Jewish history. In preparation for my interview I did some reading about Rabbi Henry Cohen, who served B'nai Israel for 64 years, from 1888 to

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