

Doctors, Lawyers, Indian Chiefs, Dance Hall Girls, Gunfighters

By Jerry Klinger

"If you have no family or friends to aid you...turn your face to the Great West and there build your home and fortune"

-Horace Greeley, New York 1841.

"On to America. No relief has been brought to us.... Because servile hordes and sordid minded people have not understood and do not understand the spirit of liberty, we have to suffer... Let us go to America!"

-Leopold Kompert, Jewish Author, Vienna, 1848

"I lived among trappers and Indians, but always as a Jew. Did I need grander temples to worship in? In the murmurs of the pines I hear the psalms of David: the fragrance of the incense is as of old, the winds speak to me in 'His Voice.'"

-From The Sounding of the Shofar – sermon, Rachel Frank 1892.

The New World was to the West. Instinctively from the time of Columbus the minds of men and women were drawn to the possibilities that existed in the West. It was from the West that new concepts of freedom, opportunity, equality, acceptance and toleration evolved as responses to the frontier. It was to the West, from the time of Columbus, that the Jew was drawn seeking, finding and securing a level of freedom and acceptance unknown to them in Europe even through the present day.

Jewish American history began unpleasantly with attempts to instill and institutionalize European bigotry and anti-Semitism. Ultimately the efforts failed. Peter Stuyvesant, the Governor of New Amsterdam attempted to expel the first permanent North American Jewish immigrants - 23 forlorn Jewish survivors from Recife, Brazil, who were cast upon the shores of New Amsterdam (New York) in September, 1654. The Jews were permitted to stay just so long as they did not become a burden; as long as they were self reliant in the New World. They became self reliant.

In time, the Jews demanded and won the right to risk fate and fortune, their very lives, to immerse themselves with their new identities as Americans. America was different. The Jew could become an American and be identified as such. Bigoted European ideas, imposing limits on how Jews could participate in America, were quickly abandoned; the demands of the frontier would not permit that. Everyone was needed to build America not just the "right people."

The American Jewish mind was different from the European Jewish mind. American Jews no longer thought in terms of defined limitations but rather as Americans whose minds and opportunities knew no boundaries and could expand with the West. A new Jew was being formed. When presented with the opportunity, the American Jew, even if a recent immigrant, reached for the Golden ring and went through the "*Golden Door*."

Albert Moses Levy was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, about 1800. His family moved to Richmond, Virginia in 1818. Like many a good Jewish boy he went to medical school graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in 1832. With the death of his wife three years later, Levy moved to booming, raucous New Orleans, Louisiana at the edge of the American frontier. Revolution was in the air. Texas, the seemingly natural extension of the United States, was reaching to free itself from the colonial control of Mexico; Texas independence first, union perhaps later.

Levy enlisted with the New Orleans Grays, a volunteer regiment that was formed to join the Texas revolt. The regiment soon joined the siege of the Mexican fortress of San Antonio de Bexar, December, 1835. The Army of Texas was poorly armed, clothed and fed. Morale at Bexar was low. The men were ill prepared for a long siege and many were at the point of abandoning the effort to capture the fort.

Levy wrote to his sister after the battle,

"Finally affairs became so bad that the army broke up in confusion, and desperate would have been the consequences for we would all have been cut by the enemy when I, insignificant I, and another individual beat up for volunteers who would join us two in storming the town and fort that very night. Our company, called the Grays, immediately and to a man signed their names, and mounting one of the baggage wagons (for we, as I have observed, were just ready for a hasty retreat) I harangued them for a few minutes and this succeeded in getting three hundred men.

We laid our plans, appointed our leaders, and about daylight marched up to the enemy's halls, got into some strong houses in town and after a regular storm of five days and nights duration, during the whole of which the enemy kept up an incessant firing, we forced them to surrender, thus achieving a victory perfectly unparalleled in history, a victory obtained by 225 disorganized and undisciplined men armed with muskets and bayonets in a well fortified fort with 30 pieces of cannon of different sizes."

Albert Moses Levy, the fighting Jewish medical officer of the Grays was crucial in turning the tide from disaster to victory at Bexar. Bexar, or as it is better known today, the "Alamo", fell to the army of Texas.

Sunday, March 6, 1836, the Alamo weakly defended by 183 Americans from 23 states and from five different countries under Col. William Travis and frontiersmen Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett, fell to the huge army of Mexican general Santa Anna. The surrendering defenders were brutally massacred. Among the dead were Avram Wolfe and his two young sons ages 11 and 12. They were Jews who joined the fight for Texas freedom. It was not a freedom in name but a freedom in reality. Under Mexican law Jews were not permitted freedom of religion; under Texas law they were free to worship and live openly as Jews. They fought for a freedom that was unknown to Jews in Europe. They fought and died not as Jews but as Americans. An estimated 200 Jews fought for Texas freedom – a number disproportionately high considering the small American Jewish population.

As the American frontier pushed West, Jews were part of it. One of the greatest Western explorers was John C. Fremont, a man nicknamed the "Pathfinder." On a number of his missions of exploration he was joined by F.W. Von Eggelstein his Jewish cartographer and Solomon Carvallo, the great Jewish American painter from South Carolina, who captured the West for posterity on canvas. Whether it was by wagon train or horseback, the frontier was pushed toward its manifest destiny of America bounded only by the waters of the Atlantic in the East and the Pacific in the West. Jews were frontier explorers and even wagon train masters. Dr. Samuel Snow led a wagon train, in 1850, from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to settle in Placerville, California. In Placerville, he became a founding member of the Hebrew Benevolent Society.

Theodore D. Judah, one of whose American antecedents had been a Jew, dreamed a dream as expansive as the country itself. He dreamed of a transcontinental railroad – a highway that would open and unite the country from coast to coast. Judah died at 38 in 1863 before the dream that he started would be completed. Six years later (1869), in a special ceremony, the Presidents of the Central Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads drove in the last rail spikes, two of gold, two of silver, uniting the country in fact at Promontory Point, Utah.

The movement West was neither a simple or orderly process. It was an uncontrolled surging tide of humanity from all walks of life searching for opportunity and flowing wherever it could. Immigration came from Europe, Asia and Latin America; People of many different colors, religions and with many different ideas. They all came for similar reasons, the search for opportunity and a better life. Jews came for much the same reasons. Jews had a catalyst that promoted Jewish emigration from Europe; virulent anti-Semitism, the failed revolutions of 1840's and the collapsed European ideals for a better life. They came because they realized that they could find a better, safer place in America.

The amazing thing for the European Jew in America was that the Jew was permitted to be part of it. The Jew was not excluded. Compared to Europe, the American Jew, as a Jew, was mostly ignored. In the West being a Jew was not reason enough to exclude or deny opportunity. The demands to open the frontier, to develop it, to defend it, to expand it were not accepted reasons for denying the Jew a part in it. Prejudice did exist, but all men and women were needed.

John Sutter, high up in the remote Sierra Nevada Mountains of far off California, put his hand into the fast flowing, clear, cold mountain waters of the American River (1846). He planned to put up a saw mill, instead he changed the world. Sutter found gold. From all over America, from all over Europe, from all over the world the word gold rang out. It was not simply gold. It was opportunity, possibility for all who were brave enough to reach for it. It was dangerous it was scary and it would be deadly for some. White men, black men, Oriental men, Christian, Buddhist and Jew went to California to follow the golden opportunity. Some Jews were miners, but most were small businessmen and merchants. Some were doctors, some were lawyers. By 1870, 1/6 of San Francisco was estimated to be Jewish. By 1880 there were more Jews living in more small towns in California than in New York State.

Permanent Jewish houses of worship are visible physical facts of the Jews presence and participation in a community. If there was a *minyan*, a quorum of ten men, synagogues grew. Newspapers of the West were filled, especially around the Jewish high holidays, with

advertisements for synagogue services. The hunger to maintain a Jewish link and worship God, whether in San Francisco or the dangerous silver mining community of Virginia city, Nevada, were a part of the Jew of the West.

It was not uncommon in American experience that when establishing communities of faith and Houses of God that members of different religious beliefs assisted each other. Benjamin Franklin contributed to the building of Mikveh Israel congregation in Philadelphia. Judah Touro financially supported small destitute Christian communities in New Orleans. When Bishop Lamy was building his cathedral in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Jews contributed financially. Lamy ordered that the capstone for the Cathedral's main doorway, completed in 1884, be carved with the Hebrew name of God in appreciation of the Jew's support. The first synagogue in California was Congregation B'Nai Israel, formed in 1852 in Sacramento. B'Nai Israel moved into a building used previously as the Methodist Episcopal Church. The land to build Temple Emanuel in Spokane, Washington, 1892, was contributed by a Christian to encourage Jewish religious life.

Synagogue communities formed in Sacramento, California – 1852, Houston, Texas, 1854, Portland, Oregon 1858, Tombstone, Arizona 1861, Tombstone, Denver, Colorado 1875, Las Vegas, New Mexico 1884, Spokane, Washington, 1892, Eureka, Nevada, 1880, Helena, Montana, 1890, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1891, Boise, Idaho, 1895.

How did the Jews get there? Some rode "*prairie schooners*" the great Conestoga wagon trains across the "Great American desert" chancing Indian attack, thirst, fierce weather and worse. Some, elected to go West around the dangerous Cape Horn or across the disease laden Isthmus of Panama and up to California as had Levi Strauss in 1848. Strauss was to make his fortune not in mining but selling to the miners a pragmatic clothing solution that he and his Christian partner developed. Today their creation is known the world over as the durable Levi Jeans. Some Jews started West but returned to the quieter East.

Sigmund Schlesinger came to Philadelphia in 1865, a 17 years old émigré from Czechoslovakia, alone, no money but with dreams and hopes. Schlesinger initially found work in Philadelphia but with the Civil over, returning veterans quickly replaced the new immigrants' jobs. The only thing for Sigmund to do was to go west. He found work on the railroad as a common hand. The work ended in Western Kansas not because the railroad was completed but because the Sioux Indians had taken to the warpath to stop the railroad. Laid off again, he volunteered for the only job available. He volunteered, with more *chutzpah* than brains, as a frontier scout with the U.S. army. Sigmund did not know how to ride a horse or even shoot a gun. He quickly made friends with another scout on the same mission, a tough frontiersman, a young man his age, Jack Peate. Jack taught his quick study friend the art of being a frontier scout. Together they rode history. They rode into the most ferocious Indian battle in frontier history against Chief Roman Nose, the battle of Beecher's Island, Colorado. Years later, Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston, Texas inquired about Schelsinger's role. The General in charge wrote back:

My dear Rabbi Cohen:

In answer to your inquiry of December, regarding Mr. Sigmund Schlesinger, who served in my command on the Western frontier in 1867-1868, and who was with me in my fight with the

Sioux Indians in the Arickaree Fork, I have a high admiration of the courage and splendid pluck and endurance of young Schlesinger on the occasion mentioned....

He had never been in action prior to our fight with the Indians and throughout the whole engagement which was one of the hardest, if not the very hardest, ever fought on the Western plains, he behaved with great courage, cool persistence and a dogged determination that won my unstinted admiration as well as that of his comrades, many of whom had seen service throughout the War of Rebellion on one side or the other.

I can accord him no higher praise than that he was the equal in many courage, steady and persistent devotion to duty and unswerving and tenacious pluck of any man in my command.

It is a real pleasure to state this fact. I especially mention the pluck and endurance of this young man of Israel and speak of him as a worthy descendant of King David.

I am, sir, with sincere respect,

Very truly yours,

George A. Forsyth
General, U.S. Army

Sigmund had enough of the frontier and Indians. He moved to Cleveland, Ohio, opened a small store, married and quietly raised a family while becoming a pillar of his synagogue and the Jewish community. When Schlesinger was laid to his rest an old grizzled man came from Kansas to stand by his grave. The old man was a friend and fellow Indian fighter from long ago, Jack Peate.

Jew helped Jew on the frontier. A Jewish merchant network developed, evolving from itinerate backpacking peddlers to store front merchants, eventually reaching from the frontier to New York to Europe. Solomon Jacob Spiegelberg, a Prussian Jew, settled in New Mexico in 1847. He set up shop as a merchant in the frontier community of Santa Fe where Spanish was more important than English. Rabbi Floyd S. Fierman wrote,

"Success was facilitated by tandem effort and, in many cases, by joint capital. Cousins, brothers-in-law and, above all younger brothers were welcomed into the founder's enterprise... Later, as a business prospered, it was of great help for one member of the partnership to work as a resident buyer in New York, while the others remained in the selling market out west: The New York buyer could quickly find government advertisements for goods destined for western garrisons, or notice of Indian Bureau requests for bids to supply their wards with provisions. This was sound business practice, for who could be more trustworthy in such an important role, either in the home store or in the eastern marketplace, than a family member?"

A *landsman*, a fellow countryman, was a trusted member of the Jewish frontier network and many would make their way from Europe to the frontier merchant Jewish networks. They would arrive, learn the business and branch out on their own.

Solomon Bibo arrived in the 1860's, joining his brothers and went to work for the Spiegelbergs in Santa Fe. He soon moved to Acoma, New Mexico, an Indian reservation south of Albuquerque. Bibo established a trading center that was respected for honesty and fair dealings by the Indians. Marriageable Jewish women were rare on the frontier. Most of the immigrants were single, young Jewish men. If a man wanted a wife he would have to try and send for a match to the East or even Europe. For many Jewish men this was not realistic. For Solomon Bibo that was the case – he married a woman from the Acoma Indian tribe. Her name was Juanna. Unlike some tribes, the Acoma Indians elected their tribal chiefs to represent their interests against the encroachments of the outside world. They chose whom they felt would do the best for them. The Acoma Indians elected Solomon Bibo to be their Governor, to be their Chief in 1885. It was an extraordinary choice – a man who spoke Yiddish, Spanish and Queres – their language. A man who had studied Talmud and Torah stood on the Acoma Pueblo Mesa and looked out over the Indian lands of the Acoma people had become an American Indian Chief.

Conflict soon arose between greedy, white land speculators and Bibo. Bibo was forced out of his position as Chief. He and his wife moved to San Francisco where he set up a small tobacco shop. Juanna converted to Judaism. Their son, Leroy, was Bar-Mitzvahed at the traditional Ohabai Shalome Synagogue and then sent to Acoma for the Indian ritual of manhood. When Bibo and his wife Juanna died they were laid to rest in the Jewish cemetery in Colma, California.

The frontier network of Jewish Merchants was part of an open opportunity tradition in Jewish American life that would evolve into major American retailing corporations such as I. Magnin, and Nieman Marcus. The remarkable thing about America was not that anti-Semitism and nativism did not exist, they did, but in America the Jew could and was free to participate in every, and any, aspect of American economic life. If anti-Semitism barred the door, then the Jew had the freedom to start on their own. Many great American corporations and businesses trace their origins to Jewish roots in the West – Anthony Zellerbach, paper, Mayer Halff cattle ranching, Jesse Seligman, finance, Adolph Sutro and Meyer Guggenheim, mining.

Whenever the cry of gold appeared miners scrambled get to the opportunity and so did Jews. In the late 19th century when the great gold mines of Montana were discovered men had mining equipment and gold but yearned for home cooking. It was said that the state capital of Montana, Helena was named for the best cook in town – Helena Goldberg.

Jewish women were the cement of the community. They added independence and self-determination to their reality. Rachel Frank was born to Polish immigrant parents in San Francisco in 1861. The family followed opportunity and moved to the silver mining community of Eureka, Nevada – a small Jewish community already existed there. Returning to California, the exigencies of the West drew the gifted and sensitive young woman to Jewish education where she became renowned. Frank soon became the first Jewish woman in America to act as a quasi spiritual leader guiding Jewish communities through religious sermons and helping set up synagogues in the West as in Spokane, Washington in 1892. Frank was the first Jewish woman to start down the road that would lead to Jewish women being recognized today, in the American reform and conservative movements, as fully recognized Rabbis. The first Jewish woman to be a congresswoman came from the West - Florence Prag Kahn. Jewish women made their marks in literature, art and the theater - legitimate - and not totally legitimate.

Josephine Marcus was born in 1861 in New York. Her family moved to San Francisco where the young independent, headstrong girl grew up with a spirit of adventure. She ran off to perform on the stage and found herself working in a saloon in Tombstone, Arizona. Marcus was a vivacious dark haired and fiery eyed daughter of Israel working probably for the local sheriff. The sheriff ran the saloons, the whore houses and the girls. His name was Wyatt Earp. Earp fell for the young Jewess and she for him. Together their lives would be shaped by a gunfight that lasted only 30 seconds between the Earp Brothers, Doc. Holiday and the Clantons. The gunfight went down in American history and Western lore as the "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral." Earp and Marcus were joined, some say by marriage others by simply love, for the next fifty years. They are buried side by side in the Jewish Cemetery, Little Hills of Eternity, in Colma, California not far from Solomon and Juana Bibo.

The Galveston immigration plan of 1907-1914, was the brain child of an extraordinary American Jewish philanthropist – Jacob Schiff. The Galveston plan reflected Schiff's understanding that acceptance of the Jew as Americans depended upon becoming Americans and not clinging to the European version of who is a Jew. Schiff envisioned something new – the American Jew, only it wasn't new.

Conflicts between the old and the new existed even in the Jewish communities of America. Conflicts that can be traced back to the founding of Colonial Georgia when the tiny Jewish community of Savannah's Sephardic community would not worship with the tiny newly immigrated Ashkenazic community. When the first large movement of German Jews came to America in the early to mid 19th century they bumped heads with the older established Americanized Jews who looked disdainfully down upon the newest immigrants while helping them at the same time.

In the late 19th and early 20th century east European Jews, "*Oestjuden*", flooded to the shores of America seeking refuge from the brutality of European anti-Semitism. They generally settled in existing Jewish communities where they could find communal and religious support – especially New York. The extremes of the population movement led to horrendous overcrowding, poverty and problems with becoming Americans. In the late 19th century, especially in the East, anti-Semitism began eagerly raising its ugly head. To combat this reality Schiff proposed and many in the established Jewish American elite who thoroughly disliked the "medieval, uncultured" *Oestjuden*, supported the idea that Jewish immigrants should be sent not to New York but to the heartland – somewhere else, especially though, Galveston, Texas. On one hand internal Jewish bigotry against their brethren did not want any more East European Jews. On the other hand, the belief of Schiff and others was that the best opportunity for the new immigrants lay in the West.

But why Texas? Galveston was a major Southern port and entry point to the American West. But again why Galveston? In simple terms, because there was an established Jewish Community, an integrated Jewish network that could help the new immigrants move into America's heartland and become Americans. Jews had been part of Texas life for almost 75 years before the first immigrants arrived. It was said that Rabbi Henry Cohen of Galveston met every new Jewish immigrant ship personally to begin them on their journey as Americans. Between 1907- 1914 almost 10,000 Jewish immigrants landed in Galveston and began the successful journey to become Americans.

The American Jewish experience is extraordinary. For the Jew, the freedom that the movement West offered did not guarantee success. It offered opportunity, toleration and acceptance. Becoming American Jews did have a price. For some the price to be identified as Jewish Americans has been very high. The total integration into the American world has meant their loss of their Jewish identity and religion. Who is an American Jew? What does it mean to be an American Jew? How to remain Jewish when hatred no longer provided a definition was an identity issue. It was an issue that the West created for Jews.

The American Jewish identity question was put off until later because millions of "*Oestjuden*" began the great immigration to America between 1880 and 1920. The merger of their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren into America has brought the Jewish American dilemma of the West to their doorstep a hundred years later.

American Jews in the west became American pioneers, frontiersman, Indian fighters, Indians, merchants, miners, ranchers, gunfighters, doctors, lawyers even creators of the great American Wild West shows. Jews were Mayors and sheriffs from San Francisco to Deadwood, South Dakota where today their bones rest in cemeteries like "Hebrew Hill". Jews were elected State Governors in the West, in Idaho and Utah, before a Jew was ever elected as a Governor in the East.

The American frontier was declared officially closed by the government in 1890. Between 1880-1920, America would be greatly enriched by massive Jewish immigration. The frontier may have been closed but once again a New World opened for the Jew in the West. The New World would be all of America.