



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

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Arkansas Reunion

Our meeting at the Jewish Community Center, Thursday, October 24th might well have been called an "Arkansas Reunion" as well over 70 former Arkansas residents joined us to hear Carolyn Gray LeMaster preview her book about the Jewish experience in Arkansas.

Mrs. LeMaster brought back many memories to the former Arkansas residents as she talked about the small Jewish communities scattered across the state. When she spoke of the Jews of eastern Arkansas, she had many comments from the audience, many of whom grew up in Forest City, Marked Tree, Wynne, Blytheville, Jonesboro and Parkin. As Mrs. LeMaster described the Jewish life in the small towns, she talked of her many interviews with early Arkansas residents, how they maintained their Jewish relationships and how most of the families had excellent relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors.

The Jews of eastern Arkansas grew up together, gathering mostly at B'nai B'rith meetings and remained close to each other. *continued on page 6*

MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR OUR SPECIAL PROGRAM

The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South proudly presents

"CONTRIBUTIONS OF JEWISH MEMPHIANS TO THE LEGAL PROFESSION"

with guest speakers

Mr. Herschel Feibelman
Judge Irving Strauch

Monday - January 13 - 7:30 P.M.
Jewish Community Center

Abe Plough ...

"Mr. Anonymous" - "Mr. Memphis"

by Dr. Selma Lewis

This is the fourth in a series of biographical sketches of Jewish community leaders included in our forthcoming book, "Chronicles of the Jewish Community of Memphis."



Abe Plough

Every city needs an "angel" to give charity to its needy; to provide housing and comfort for its elderly; to support the arts; to build a successful business to give employment to many; to be available with money and advice when a crisis occurs in the community; and to inspire others to do the same. Few cities, however, have been as fortunate as Memphis, whose "angel" for most of his ninety-two years was Abe Plough. Although he wished to be known as "Mr. Anonymous" in his philanthropic endeavors, William Thomas, writing about him at his death in 1984 said: "He came close to being 'Mr. Memphis.'"

Plough was one of eight children born to Julia and Moses Plough in Tupelo, Mississippi, in 1892. Within a year the family moved to Memphis where his father ran a clothing and furnishings store. He attended the Market Street

School in the Pinch, where he remembered a teacher, Lorena Banks, who taught him to calculate figures without pencil or paper. He called it "mental arithmetic." This ability was to serve him well in his business career; in a speech dedicating a plaque at his old school at Third and Market, he said: "I happened to acquire thirty companies for over one billion dollars for Schering-Plough Corporation, and at no time did I ever use a pencil. I figured it in my head."

Plough received his only other formal education at St. Paul Street Grammar School, from which he graduated. After school and on weekends he worked at George V. Francis' drug store at Vance and East. He worked as soda-jerk, clerk, and delivery boy, all without pay, because he liked the drug business, and wanted to learn it. Between times, he helped out in his father's store, where he sold furniture and clothes. He was determined, however, that his future would be in the drug business. Thus, in March, 1908, Plough Chemical Company began.

Although Abe Plough was only sixteen years old, he was owner, manager, and the only employee of the new business. It was located in one small room above his father's store, with some dishpans for mixing the chemical. His first formula was for Plough's Antiseptic Healing Oil, "a sure cure for any ill of man or beast." It had a trademark label pasted on the bottles, containing a picture of a boy with a plow. On the days when he was not bottling his heating oil, he set out in his father's horse-drawn

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JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986
163 BEALE STREET, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38103

President's Message



Gloria Felsenthal

"But that's another story..." How many times have we heard this line? Sometimes we were glad that we didn't have to listen to any more stories. Sometimes we were sad that we didn't have more time. Other times we were the speaker, holding back the story for fear of wearing out our welcome with our listener. This bulletin can be a forum for such stories—long or short.

We would love to print vignettes, favorite expressions handed down through the generations ("my grandmother always used to say..."), superstitions, family prayers spoken on special occasions. Please jot down your remembrances and share them with others.

The storyteller, Peninnah Schram, in the introduction to her book, Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another, says that "the oral tradition is central to the reinforcement and transmission of Jewish values." If you are more comfortable telling your story than writing it, we have eager scribes ready to put the tale in writing. There are many ways to preserve the history of a people. We are happy to receive your photos, biographies, legal documents, letters,...and your stories.

Welcome To Our New Members

Mrs. S.N. Fried
Dr. Charles Friedman
Mrs. Susan Levit Plough
Mrs. William Hamburger
Rabbi and Mrs. Micah Greenstein

Mrs. Lewis Kramer
Ms. Julia B. Glassman
Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Cohen
Dr. & Mrs. Alan Guenberg
Mr. and Mrs. Edward M. Kaplan

Plough *continued from page 1*

buggy to sell his product to drug stores and country merchants.

Success came almost immediately for the new business. After two years, it had outgrown the little one-room chemical plant, and moved to two upstairs rooms at 93 Hernando, then to South Third, just off Union. Three employees were hired. Plough borrowed money again in 1915 from his father, this time \$1,000 on his life insurance policies, to enter the patent drug business. He bought the inventory of a bankrupt drug company. When another move was needed in 1917 to accommodate growth, the business moved to 132 South Second, where it occupied an entire building. But within only one year these quarters proved to be too small, so in 1918 the company moved to a building four times as large, at Second and Gayoso.

In a short time Plough branched out into the cosmetics business. He added aspirin to his line of products in 1920, buying the St. Joseph company. This was "his first step on the road to the big time."

Plough was known by 1929 as "the multimillionaire drug



Abe Plough - early 20's

store clerk" because he continued to work in the store on Saturday nights at his three Memphis drug stores. After the devastating stock market crash of 1929 the American Savings Bank of Memphis closed and left 6,000 Christmas savings customers facing a bleak holiday. Plough "came on like Santa Claus." He personally advanced \$175,000 and raised \$60,000 more among his friends to put up \$235,000 to make it possible for the bank's customers to cash their Christmas savings checks.

Even as the depression spread throughout the world, Plough was able to raise the salaries of his employees, and hire an additional 100 persons at his drug stores and plants. He drew no salary for himself, however, saying that the company needed it "more than he did." That was undoubtedly true to finance the company's rapid expansion. Plough bought two radio stations in 1944, WMPS in Memphis and WJJD, a Marshall Field station in Chicago.

Plough, Inc. moved in 1951 to 3022 Jackson, to a \$2,000,000 plant, encompassing 250,000 square feet, built on six acres of land. Jack Benny, the prominent star of radio, screen, and television, came to open the plant. Asked how much it cost to have Benny come, Plough replied only that "he didn't do it for nothing." The company could obviously afford the cost. The corporation was reporting net sales of \$24,500,000 by 1954, a figure that doubled by 1962.

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Jewish Historical Society of Memphis & The Mid-South

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Our Thanks To

Southern Jewish Historical Society

for a grant to help fund

pictures for our forthcoming book

A Step Back in Time

by Linda Romline



Abram Schwab

Our thanks to the Memphis business journal for permission to reprint this article from their November 12-16, 1990 issue. Pictures by Allen Howell

If a trip into A. Schwab's is like a step back in time, a conversation with the man himself is anything but that.

The old-fashioned general store's 67-year-old proprietor, Abram Schwab, seems a kind merchant from a bygone era. Dressed in long shirt sleeves with a green apron tied around his neck and waist, the rosy-cheeked grandfather greets guests at his store with a firm handshake, a warm smile and a twinkle in his eye.

Clearly, he revels in chatting with customers or merely the curious, who look to him for quaint anecdotes or impromptu history lessons. Yet this A. Schwab seems as nostalgic about the past as he is opinionated about the present.

When posed with the question as to the longevity of A. Schwab, the store his grandfather Abraham founded on Beale Street in 1876, he grins and forewarns that he is about to answer with a time-honored Jewish expression:

"We've schlepped along," he says.

While the Schwab's store of today still carries much of the same merchandise it did more than a century ago, the two story shop also mirrors Memphis' progress. Now, along with corn cob

pipes, saddle soap and bone-tooth corsets, the store stocks B.B. King's blues records and Elvis Presley souvenirs of every shape and size.

Despite the fact that 8-by-10 glossies of The King figure prominently into Schwab's uniquely haphazard decor, Schwab will level with anyone who asks.

"No, I never met Elvis. I'm sure he was probably here at one time or another, but I don't recall ever meeting him."

Heartened by that honest response, a traveler once responded to the merchant:...

"You're the first person from Memphis I've met who wasn't his close personal friend..."

Schwab, who manages the popular tourist destination with Eleanor Schwab Braslow, is equally candid when asked about Memphis' next big attraction, the Great American Pyramid.

"It's in the wrong place," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "Where are you going to park 10,000 cars?"

"They're hepped up on the Pyramid," he says of the city's planners. "We (on Beale Street) are like the poor stepchild."

The man who spends his free time volunteering as a ticket taker at the Orpheum has worked at his grandfather's store since age 10. Nearly six decades later, he remains proud of the family business that is said to be the oldest of its kind in the Mid-South. A special source of satisfaction to him is the way the store has managed to retain its identity with all things old-fashioned or outdated.

"The shoe area hasn't changed since the 1940s," he says, standing atop the staircase surveying a kingdom bursting with bins of loose socks, boxed knick-knacks and trinkets dangling from wobbly poles.

"Women's feet have gotten bigger though," he adds.

With a sweep of his hand, Schwab proudly presents the crowded contents of his Beale Street Museum, located on the store's mezzanine.

This is cross-section of Memphis," Schwab says, fingering dusty old pop bottles, antiquated kitchen equipment and a gas-powered iron.

"It's a history of the people on the street," he says. "This is a museum, and it's not a museum. It's not fancy,

but it's what the people had."

He lifts a pair of ice tongs, cranks the handle of a mechanized hat stretcher and demonstrates a wooden sauerkraut maker by tossing an imaginary head of cabbage inside the device's metal shredding blades.

"Everybody had these," he says.

Like any longstanding business, Beale Street and its tenants were susceptible to hard times. Schwab remembers the Great Depression in the 1930s as being the most difficult economic period ever weathered by the venerable store.

Through two world wars, cultural drought in the 1960s and 1970s and recent, renewed interest in restoring Beale Street to its authentic heyday, Schwab says the business has maintained one basic philosophy in trying to attract customers.

"Every day, a new scheme," he says, with a light-hearted laugh.

Today, most of the people patronizing the Schwab store fall into two categories. The first are comprised of older Memphians, those who live downtown and survive on fixed incomes. These customer still rely on the store's clothing items that more modern businesses no longer carry, at least at prices they can afford, he says. Women's plain cotton stockings are one such necessity as the winter months draw near, he says. Rubber boots are another.

Sales clerk Shirley Rayford has worked at Schwab's or 12 years.

"We sell a lot of flannel night gowns and long johns," she says, as she prices Christmas coloring books to stuff onto the store's already bulging toy shelves upstairs.

Jesse Tillotson, 10, represents second category of buyer, according to A. Schwab's demographic theory: Tillotson is a tourist.

The fourth grader at Brownsville Road School, on a field trip with his class one afternoon last week, contemplated spending a few coins on a bottle of gardenia perfume.

"I wonder if my mom would like this," he said, before veering off in the direction of the store's renowned voodoo paraphernalia section.

Meanwhile, as his classmates scour the store in search of bargains, their teacher has cornered the perpetually moving Schwab himself. For her, and

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BEAUTIFUL TEMPLE B'NAI ISRAEL OF NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI... SURVIVING IN SPITE OF THE ODDS

The familiar melody of *Sholom Aleichem* played on an organ welcomed delegates of the last SJHS conference as they entered Temple B'nai Israel in Natchez, Mississippi. Then the organist, long-time member Martin Nathanson, greeted us and presented a history of B'nai Israel, which proudly stands among the beautiful Southern mansions for which Natchez is famous.

Nathanson pointed out the details of the synagogue's architecture, its massive carved wooden pews and lovely pastel-colored stained glass windows embellished with Judaic symbols. The altar is centered with an ark of white Italian marble that holds four torahs. A perpetual light hangs above the ark opening, and a seven-branched menorah, sabbath candles, and wine cup decorate the *bimah*.

Nathanson said that the organ is one of America's most historic, registered with the National Historic Organ Society. Organists come from all over the world to play it.

He then looked back to the formation of the Natchez Jewish community and Temple B'nai Israel, the first congregation in Mississippi and one of the South's oldest. Several Jewish names appear in court records of the late 1700s and early 1800s even though Jews were expelled from the Fort of Natchez, or Rosalie as it was originally called, in 1814 by the French who tolerated no other religion besides Catholicism.

Land for the first Jewish cemetery in Natchez was bought in 1840; the earliest tombstone bears the date of August 10, 1844.

Early newspaper articles reveal Jewish religious services were held in Natchez in 1833; the Union of American Hebrew Congregations accepted the date of 1845 as the establishment of the Natchez Jewish congregation, first named *Hevrah Kadisha* (the name used for a burial society).

Jewish families began settling in Natchez by 1840, and they held religious services and Hebrew school



Sid Silver

*Historic Temple B'nai Israel in Natchez, Mississippi,
visited by SJHS delegates on first tour.*

classes in homes or rented quarters. Most came from Germany or Alsace-Lorraine and had to learn the customs and language. Some went into the countryside as peddlers. Many later achieved success in wholesale groceries, dry goods, and other businesses.

The Civil War interrupted commerce and several Natchez Jews joined the Confederate forces. The only war casualty in Natchez was a Jewish child, the daughter of Aaron Beekman, killed by a shell from Federal gunboats attacking Natchez.

Plans for a house of worship began in October 1864. A cantor who was also a teacher and ritual slaughterer was hired. In July 1867, the congregation bought a house and lot on Clifton Avenue where many Jews lived for \$2500 cash. The cornerstone was laid January 30, 1870, with Dr. Isaac Mayer Wise officiating. A torah from Germany was soon acquired. After much debate among members, the *Minhag American* (Anglicized ritual) was adopted and an organ installed. This synagogue was dedicated March 8, 1872. Dr. Max Lillienthal of Cincinnati delivered the dedication address. A special act of the Mississippi legislature granted the charter to the newly named Congregation B'nai Israel.

B'nai Israel sent two delegates to a convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873

where it was decided to form the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; B'nai Israel thus became a charter member of the reform body.

Tragically Temple B'nai Israel was destroyed by fire in 1904. Within two days a fund was created to rebuild, and Natchez Christian churches offered the congregation the use of their churches. A handsome new sanctuary was completed on the same site on March 24, 1905, at a cost of \$27,100.

There were 141 families in B'nai Israel Congregation in 1906 which, as fate would have it, turned out to be its largest membership. Two years later, Natchez suffered a flood, the boll weevil, and other disasters that caused cotton prices to plummet. Many Jewish families had to move away; many

family-owned stores closed. Today Natchez has very few Jews.

Beth Israel's last full-time Rabbi was Arthur Liebowitz who served from 1958-1976. Laymen now conduct services with student rabbis coming once a month and on High Holidays. Nathanson said that some weekends only three persons worship and "at best there are no more than 20 on the High Holidays. Our Sisterhood has only 10 members now."

Nathanson added, "B'nai Israel is able to survive through the generosity of our past members who moved away, one of whom left a small trust fund which has grown enough to keep us going."

Afterwards delegates toured the social hall and classrooms downstairs, and saw many pictures of B'nai Israel members actively involved in group activities. Many expressed the hope that ways can be found to revitalize B'nai Israel. Some members of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience with the SJHS group suggested funds might be raised to create a museum in the synagogue's downstairs rooms (some remodeling required). Many agreed that this might be a feasible plan to keep this lovely and historic synagogue functioning and preserve the heritage of the Natchez Jewish community.

Helen Silver

Reprinted with permission of "Southern Jewish Historical Society"

Plough, Inc. merged in 1971 with the Schering Corporation of Bloomfield, New Jersey, primarily a manufacturer of prescription pharmaceutical. Plough was Chairman of the boards of both Plough, Inc. and Schering-Plough. He retired in 1976 to devote his talents and energies to philanthropy, his other chief interest.

The business ability of Plough prompted *Forbes Magazine* to call him "as shrewd a horse trader as Tennessee ever turned out," but Plough himself liked to credit luck for his success. He pointed out, for example, that an exceptionally hot summer had helped him to sell such Plough products as Coppertone, Solarcaine, and Mexsana. His worldwide business associates would probably attribute his unusual achievements to more than good fortune, however.

The honors and award given to Plough are too numerous to write about comprehensively in such a brief biography. Some of them, however, must be mentioned. The Memphis Newspaper Guild gave him their Citizenship Award in 1960. The National Conference of Christians and Jews presented him with their annual Human Relations Award in 1964. Memphis State University recognized him as their first Master of Free Enter-

prise. The University of South Carolina presented him with an honorary doctor of science degree, and the University of Tennessee College of Pharmacy gave him the Dean's Award for "extraordinary contributions to the profession of pharmacy." He received the first award ever given to an individual by the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1983 for his pioneering efforts to assure safety for products for children. The Tennessee House of Representatives recognized him in both 1976 and 1979 for his outstanding contributions to the state.

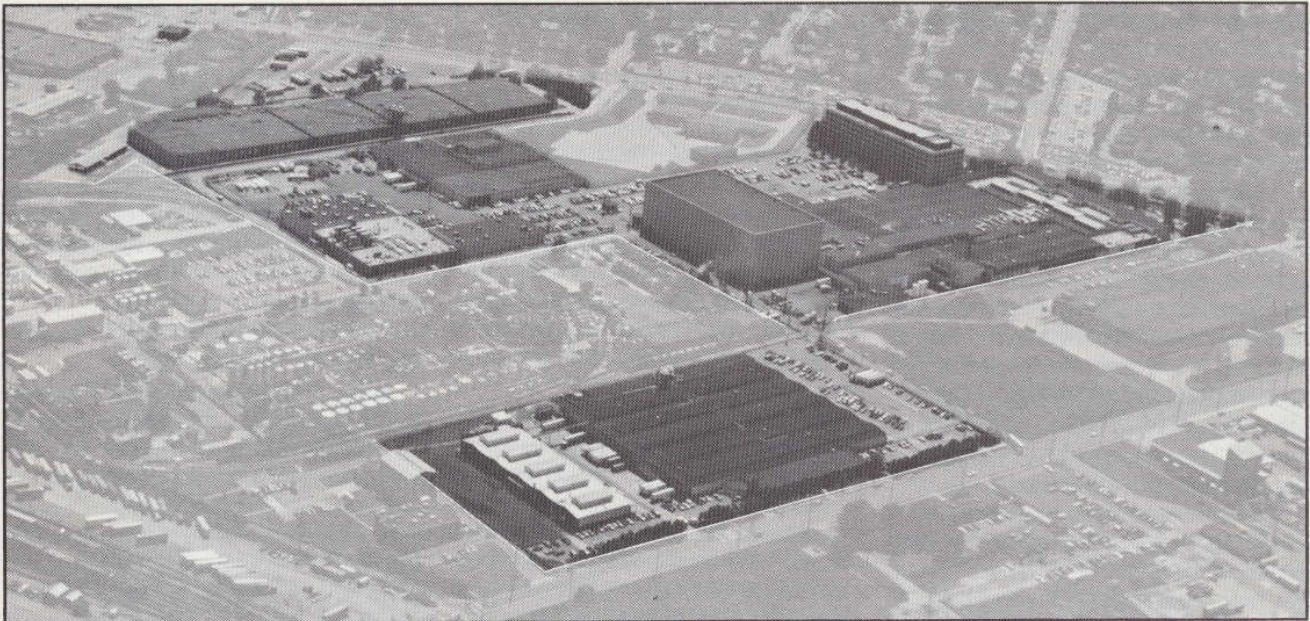
The name of Abe Plough has been immortalized in recognition of his extraordinary philanthropy and public service. A residential complex for the elderly is called Plough Towers; an expressway leading to the airport is named for him; there is a Plough Library at Christian Brothers College. He was named to the Hall of Fame of Junior Achievement organization in 1983.

Plough's gift of \$1,000,000 in 1973 to the Memphis Community Foundation prompted its directors to change its name to Memphis Plough Community Fund. They changed the name back to its original form after his death, however, in order to avoid confusion with a fund which bears his name, created by money he left to be used for similar purposes, to advance the public good.

The most significant contribution Abe Plough gave to the city of Memphis was not his largest gift monetarily. Memphis was the site of the assassination in April, 1968, of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who had come to lead the sanitation workers in their strike against the city. Settlement of the strike, which had been stalled for months, proceeded rapidly after King's death. The last remaining obstacle was a pay raise. Negotiators recommended a raise of ten cents an hour effective on May 1, 1968, with an additional five cent raise on September 1, 1968. Estimates were the raises would total around \$558,000 for the coming fiscal year, which could be a part of the new budget. The problem was that the city had no money in the budget to provide for raises before that time. Things were at an impasse; Plough offered his assistance. He proposed to contribute to the city the money to pay the raises before the beginning of the new fiscal year on July 1, 1968, on the condition that his name not be made public. Although the men most intimately involved with the final deal respected his wish for anonymity, before long his identity became public knowledge, both inside and outside City Hall.

"It (the pay raise) could have presented an almost unsurmountable problem had he not come forth with it," said

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Aerial View of Schering-Plough Corporation Memphis, Tennessee

Schwab *continued from page 3*

for countless others that afternoon, he graciously reminisces about life as a merchant on Beale Street.

Most Memphians familiar with the store know that A. Schwab's operates with a motto: "If you can't find it at Schwab's, your better off without it."

Beyond that, Schwab himself professes no profound marketing insights and brilliant economic strategies for weathering the highs and lows on Beale Street all these years. Nor does he mind sharing the only business formula he has ever known.

"Good guessing," he says, smiling, "Good guessing." ■



Schwab Dusting - This Is a Museum, And It's Not a Museum.

Plough *continued from page 5*

Frank Miles, negotiator for the city. James Reynolds, negotiator for the United States, commented: "I had never heard of such a thing. I think it was one of the most remarkable and noble gestures that I have ever heard of."

Plough was known best for his un-failing generosity to the many and diverse causes that interested him. These often took the form of challenge grants. In this way he was able to enhance the amount of his own substantial giving by prompting others to join him. Among the organizations that benefited from his contributions were The Goodfellows, The United Way, the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce, Memphis Boys Town, The Salvation Army, St. Jude Children's Research Center, the Memphis Arts Council, Memphis Zoo, Memphis Memorial Stadium, and several colleges and universities.

He was a member of the Board of Trustees of Boys Town, the William R. Moore School of Technology, the Crippled Children's Hospital, and the Memphis Street Railway Company, the Peabody Hotel Company, and the Toledo Museum of Art; honorary Chairman of the Board of Life of United Way of Greater Memphis; a Shriner, and a 33rd Degree Mason. He was a member and honorary president of Temple Israel.

Plough's philosophy of giving was to always try to help the greatest number of people, because, he believed, "when you help the greatest number of people, you do the most good." He said: "I have no interest in having my name carved out in brick and mortar and stone

WE'RE BRANCHING OUT !

"Southern Jewish Heritage," newsletter of The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South, is traveling outside the mid-South area. At the request of Mr. Robert Singerman of The University of Florida Libraries in Gainesville, Florida, all issues of our newsletter, from its inception in September, 1987, are now included in the holdings of Price Library of Judaica, the largest collection of Judaica and Hebraica in the southeastern United States. Our multi-branched family tree has stretched its limbs; there should be cross-fertilization and mutual benefit from this association.

on buildings. I'd like to touch the hearts and minds of people to help them make a life." Responding to an honor the Memphis Area Chamber of Commerce gave him in 1975, he said: "I hope when they throw the dirt over me, they'll say, 'Poor Abe. We thought he had a lot of money, but he's broke. He gave it all away.'"

On the occasion of his 90th birthday, The Commercial Appeal published an editorial about Plough, paying tribute to him as "a man whose generosity and vision have enriched this city and its citizens." His legacy lives on not only in his own deeds of generosity and leadership, but through the continuing contributions of the Plough Foundation, that is administered in his name by his heirs. ■

Reunion *continued from page 1*

Freda Brode grew up in Forest City, 45 miles from Memphis. Her mother's parents lived in Marked Tree. She recalled attending Baron Hirsch Sunday School where there was a regular Arkansas contingent in attendance. She fondly recalled her involvement during her teenage years with Abe Nichol BBYO which attracted youth from Forest City, Wynne, Jonesboro, Marked Tree and Blytheville.

Benard Lipsey, owner of City Roofing and president of the Memphis Jewish Housing Development Corporation (Plough Towers), said growing up Jewish in the small town of Lepanto, Arkansas was not without its price.

Missing was a feeling of community, he continued, recalling that while he attended Baron Hirsch Synagogue as a youth, it was always as an outsider because living in Arkansas meant not being able to socialize with the other Memphis Jewish youths who went out together, played sports at the Memphis Jewish Community Center and attended other functions.

The close ties many made in youth are missing, he explained.

Several of the former Arkansas residents gave Mrs. LeMaster some additional information about their families and she took a number of pictures to complete her family history files. It was truly a great evening for everyone and we hope we will have the opportunity to have Mrs. LeMaster join us for another "Arkansas Reunion" in the future. ■



Kaplan, Louisiana, was named for Abrom Kaplan, a Jewish immigrant who settled in the area in 1850.

"Distinct among Jews because we are Southerners and distinct among Southerners because we are Jews."

ensure the safekeeping of their Judaic treasures — Torahs, *yads* (pointers), breastplates, pulpit furniture, arks and even synagogues and cemeteries. Often these Southern Jews turned to the Henry S. Jacobs Camp, located near Jackson, Mississippi. The camp is an important educational institution and cultural force in the lives of Southern Jews throughout Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee.

Macy B. Hart, the director of the Henry S. Jacobs Camp, and a native of Winona, Mississippi, promised that these artifacts of the Southern Jewish experience would be cared for and cherished. When the artifacts became too numerous to use or to store at the camp, Macy and other Southern Jews realized the need for a museum to preserve the objects and tell the story of the "Southern Jewish experience." The



Joe Martin Erber (left) and Meyer Gelman, members of Orthodox Congregation Ahavath Rayim in Greenwood, Mississippi.

Plough Foundation of Memphis, Tennessee, gave a generous grant to establish and build the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. The museum was dedicated on October 15, 1989.

As project director of the museum, I was faced with the challenge of creating the first temporary exhibition to complement our permanent collection, which includes such Mississippi artifacts as an ark from Vicksburg, menorahs from Greenwood, hand-carved pulpit chairs from Port Gibson, chandeliers from Jackson, and Torah scrolls, *yads*, breastplates and *ner tamids* (eternal lights) from numerous other Southern towns. Because many of the signs of the Southern Jewish experience are quickly disappearing, I decided that the first exhibit needed to preserve these images through the art of photography.

By the time photographer Bill Aron and I set out on our first photographic journey in the spring of 1989, we realized that we were looking for images which could visually portray what is both Southern and Jewish. The people we met and photographed throughout our trips were excited to be part of the exhibit, and they readily shared their images and personal stories.

Many of these pictures could have been photographed in other regions of the country where Jews have settled. What distinguishes them, however, is that they were taken in the South, where Jews have lived, worked and died since the earliest days of this country and where we remain today — distinct among Jews because we are Southerners and distinct among Southerners because we are Jews. □

FADING JEWISH IMAGES FROM THE HEART OF DIXIE

By Vicki Reikes Fox

Photos by Bill Aron

Reprinted by permission from Jewish Monthly, June/July 1990

On childhood trips throughout my home state of Mississippi and into neighboring Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee, I was always struck by the frequency with which Jewish names appeared on stores, buildings, and city streets. Now I have begun to appreciate how these names reflect the experiences of Southern Jews who earned livelihoods, raised families, participated in civic affairs and established Jewish communities throughout the deep South.

Because many of the Jewish stores, buildings, synagogues and communities throughout the South are quickly disappearing, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience was established in 1986 to collect and exhibit the art, artifacts and memorabilia which attest to the uniqueness and vibrancy of the Southern Jewish

Vicki Reikes Fox is project director of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. Bill Aron is a freelance photographer in Los Angeles.



Cliff and Wilma Abrams pose on the front porch of their Brookhaven, Mississippi home, the house in which Cliff was born 85 years ago.

community, to record the people, places and experiences of Southern Jewish life, and to preserve the customs and culture of the Jewish South.

Jews have resided in the American South since the 1700s, although the largest influx came in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Jewish communities grew up in large cities and small towns such as Port Gibson, Mississippi, Helena, Arkansas and New Orleans, Louisiana. By and large, Jews came to the South for the economic opportunities it presented. They stayed because they prospered.

After World War II, the economy of the nation shifted from rural to urban centers. The Jews, like so many others, began to leave the small towns for larger cities. This demographic change has been devastating to many Southern Jewish communities. As Jewish communities shrink, and their members move away or die, the last members have looked for a responsible person or organization to

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SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

163 Beale Street • Memphis, TN 38103

Address Correction Requested