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History of Lichterman Nature Center Is Linked To History of Lichterman-Loewenberg Family

By Harriet Stern and Marcia Levy

The Lichterman Nature Center, its 65 acres secluded within busy East Memphis streets—Park, Ridgeway, Quince and Lynnfield, is one of the major Jewish philanthropic gifts to the City of Memphis. While its seclusion is part of its purpose, it also reflects the low-key nature of its initial and enduring donors, the Lichterman-Loewenberg family. The story of the Nature Center is not only a history of the center itself, but the history of this generous family as well.

William Loewenberg had been named Wilhelm Adolphus at birth, but changed his name to William in his teens. In adulthood, he was affectionately known to everyone as “Uncle Willie.” The Loewenberg and Lichterman families merged when William’s sister Lottie married Ira Lichterman and the two men became brothers-in-law.

William was the youngest of six children of Ferdinand and Johanna Selka Loewenberg. The Loewenberg family is said to be related to the Gaon Rabbi Yom Tob Lipman Heller, known as Tossefot Yom Tob (1569-1654). William’s father, Ferdinand Loewenberg, had emigrated in about 1868 from Belitz, in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Poland. Ferdinand was one of ten children and the only one of

his family who came to America. The rest remained in Austria, only to have many of their descendants perish in the Holocaust. Ferdinand stayed in New York City a short time, then went to Natchez, Mississippi, but was not satisfied with his opportunities there, so he came to Memphis, where he sold coal and kerosene by horse and wagon. He also had the contract for lighting the town’s gas street lights each evening.



The Loewenberg Visitor Center was opened in 2000

He met Johanna Selka at Goldsmith’s Department Store on Beale Street where she worked. They were married in 1885. Within a few years Ferdinand established a dry goods store at Mississippi and Calhoun,

where Ferdinand, Johanna, and their six children lived in the back until they moved to a home in the vicinity of what is now Forrest Park. Ferdinand was a founder of Southern Leather Company and a charter member and first secretary of Baron Hirsch Synagogue.

Johanna Selka’s family was from Neu Brandenburg, Germany, near Berlin. Her family emigrated to New York in about 1869, where they lived for several years before moving to Memphis when Johanna’s father Herman—fluent in seven languages—was hired as the first Hebrew teacher at Temple Israel.

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JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MEMPHIS AND THE MID-SOUTH - FOUNDED IN 1986
c/o MJCC 6650 POPLAR AVENUE, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38138

President's Message



Margie Kerstine

As the 2011-2012 year comes to an end and we look ahead to 2012-2013, I want to thank the Officers and Board Members for the outstanding job they did this past year and to welcome our new Board Members: Freda Brode, Cathy Kessler, Meryl Rosen, and Mary Shainberg. I look forward to our working together in the coming months.

In our past 26 years our members pursued goals to encourage historical research, to create educational and meaningful programs, to maintain the archives, and to communicate through on-going committee projects such as the newsletter, oral interviews, cemetery inventory, tours, and special exhibits.

Our website, www.jhsmem.org, should become a vital part of our communication with our members. I launched another website, Memphis Revisited, to communicate with you because I needed help identifying photos. To help you become familiar with our archival collection, I am adding data such as the oral interviews list. More is coming, such as the rare and limited editions of the Jewish Spectator edited by Rabbi Samfield, prior editions of the Southern Jewish Heritage, a list of available DVDs from past programs, and reports on other committee projects.

We all share a common interest in learning about our past and preserving it. Even though many of us did not grow up in Memphis, we all fondly remember our childhood homes and communities and want to make similar connections with the Memphis community. Please give me your ideas of the areas we could research and feature in our next year's programs and send your interests and suggestions to the website, memphisrevisited@gmail.com

We have strong committees for next year, and I look forward to working with you. I know that with your help and ideas the Jewish Historical Society will remain a vital part of our community.

Margie Kerstine

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Meet Margie Kerstine

Margery "Margie" Kerstine, a native of Clarksdale, Mississippi, is the newly elected president of the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South. Prior to donning her "presidential hat," Margie pursued a variety of careers, including her current position as archivist at Temple Israel.

Her educational background is diverse: a BS in Home Economics and Related Arts from the University of Alabama, an MBA from California Polytechnic University, and an Associate of Arts in Real Estate from Chaffey College in Alta Loma, California. In addition, she completed seven years of fine art courses at Washington University Fine Art College in St. Louis.

Her career began in Memphis as an assistant buyer and advertising copywriter for Bry's Department store. She moved to St. Louis and worked as an orthoptist (visual therapist) at Cardinal Glennon Hospital for Children and as a vocational counselor for the blind with the State of Missouri Rehabilitation Department. Moving west, she went to southern California, where she worked in Pomona for General Dynamics; however, in 1991 she decided to return to the South, where she held several different medical-related administrative jobs in Jackson, Mississippi.

According to Margie, she returned to Memphis to begin "enjoying my retirement years," but soon she was not content to sit and do nothing. In 2003 she joined the volunteers at the Temple Israel Archives, then under the direction of Linde Feibelman. Her career as an archivist is the result of training by Linde and learning through experience, as well as knowledge gained by attending workshops at an American Jewish Archives conference in Cincinnati.

Margie enjoys drawing and painting and is writing a history of Clarksdale Jewish families. She is well qualified to wear her new "hat" as president of JHS.

It was said that William was “always an entrepreneur.” At the age of eight he had a newspaper route—three cents a copy. He also was making and selling kites to a store and even had a business partner, a friend to whom he taught kite-making. Early on he was described by one of his teachers at Leath Elementary School as “always a cheerful, industrious little pupil.” He graduated from Central High School in 1919 at age 16, having participated in their winning debate team and having attained the rank of 1st Sergeant in ROTC. Too young for college, he went to work with his father at Southern Leather Company. In 1929 William married Ruth Friedman, one of ten children of Russian and German descent, born in Washington, D.C. When Ruth was visiting her sister Clara (Mrs. Arthur Brode) in Memphis, she met William Loewenberg, and she always said “it was love at first sight.”

Both Ruth and William were active in the Memphis Jewish community as well as in the community at large. The first organization Ruth joined was the Maternal Welfare League. She later identified the chief focus of her activities saying, “I’m really interested in...the health and welfare of our youth.” She was a founding member of the Riverview-Kansas Day Care Center, a board member of Runaway House, and one of the first Pink Ladies (volunteers) at St. Jude Hospital.

William was president of the Jewish Service Agency, president of Temple Israel (1951-54), chairman of the Jewish Welfare Fund, one of the founders of Runaway House, and a board Member of United Way and of St. Joseph (now St. Francis) Hospital, to which

he and his sister had donated land for the new building in East Memphis.

He later helped establish the Herbert Herff Trust for the University of Memphis, a million dollar trust for scholarships and enrichment, and endowed the Loewenberg School of Nursing. William also helped develop Metro Shopping Center on Crump Boulevard and was cited for this achievement in minority business assistance. In 1974, William Loewenberg was presented an award by the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

Representative Dan Kuykendall praised him for his accomplishments and his modesty, saying, “I know of no other man in this city who does more ‘invisible’ good work than Willie Loewenberg.”

Ira Lichterman was born in Rochester, New York. He left school in 4th or 5th grade to go to work. When traveling the South as a “drummer,” or salesman, for a shoe repair supply business, he met William’s sister, Lottie Loewenberg. They married and shortly thereafter, he and William became business partners in Southern Leather Company, which they purchased from William’s father Ferdinand. Their business thrived and Southern Leather Company became the world’s largest leather house. At later dates, Ira and William also shared ownership of Air Temp, a heating and air conditioning company, with Alfred Alperin and Harvey and Frank Pierce.

Ira further expanded his business interests, becoming chairman of the Mills Morris Company, vice-president of Perkins Oil Company, president of Penn Leather Company in Philadelphia, and president of the National

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The original 7000 square foot log home built on the property by Clarence Saunders: the home burned in 1994

Leather Association for five years. He became a public servant after being appointed to the Light, Gas and Water Commission in 1937 by Mayor Watkins Overton. "I am 100% for TVA. I am for bringing cheaper electricity to the City of Memphis," he declared early on. Lichterman served on the commission until his death in 1963, considering it "an opportunity to serve a city that has been good to me." A major pumping station at Hickory Hill and Winchester is named for him. Lottie Lichterman was an active member of the Memphis Garden Club and the Women's Exchange, as well as a dedicated member of her church, the Church of Christ Scientist.

In 1944, William Loewenberg and Ira Lichterman bought 300 acres of land, a portion of which today is known as the Lichterman Nature Center. The history of the Nature Center is as colorful as the native flora and fauna that are now its focus.

In earliest known times, the area was an Indian hunting ground. Later it became the 5,000 acre plantation of a Mosby family, who in 1870 sold a portion to one George H. Bennett, a breeder of racehorses. He built a racetrack on the property, and in 1909, his horse "Abe Frank" was a Derby winner. Somewhat later, a part of the property was sold to yet another owner, who in turn sold 300 acres in 1928 to Clarence Saunders, who had lost his "Pink Palace" and the Piggly Wiggly stores four years earlier.

Yet the band played on for Saunders, who undeterred, commissioned his architect, Hubert T. McGee, to design a 7000 square foot log home on the property as part of a country estate which, by 1930, included an 18-hole golf course—the largest in the country, two lighted tennis courts, a 14-acre lake with a sandy beach and a boathouse, a 1.4 acre spring-fed swimming pool with a waterfall, a visitors' lodge, servants' quarters, barns, and farm buildings. Hoping to make his property profitable, Saunders advertised it in 1934 as "Lake Forest," a summer resort and amusement park, which offered tennis, volleyball, croquet, badminton, indoor

basketball, bridge lessons, dancing, movies and airplane rides. But in 1938, due to debts, the Depression and competition from public pools, Saunders was forced to forfeit his "millionaire's playground."

Subsequently, the property was purchased by William H. Terry, of baseball fame. Nicknamed "Memphis Bill," Terry was an outstanding player and later manager of the New York Giants for their 1933 World Championship. In 1934, he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Terry removed the golf course and turned the land back into a working farm. He raised cattle and built a milking barn where Ridgeway High School now stands. In 1943, Terry chose to pursue other interests, later moving to Florida, and the property came on the market once more.

When this opportunity arose, William Loewenberg and Ira Lichterman decided to buy the 300 acre property, including the pool with waterfall and well system, a fishing dock and a bridge to a little island, the log house and a herd of dairy cows. The purchase price was \$100,000, and they renamed it

"Lakecrest." Lichterman had hesitated until he obtained assurance from his friend Mayor Edward Crump that the city seemed to be moving eastward. However, both men were troubled in buying the beautiful property for private use. They agreed that upon the death of one of them, the property would be given to the city for a "unique public park."

Ira and his wife Lottie took up residence in the log house and entertained friends and especially their families, who came out on the weekends. "The memories are so special," recalls Barry Lichterman, one of their sons. He recalls "carefree days" as a boy, camping on the island, floating in the glass-bottomed boat, and running through his mother's cherry orchard. It was then still a working farm, with pigs, horses and the dairy cows.

Freddi Loewenberg Felt remembers that the property was very open. Moonshiners had stills back in the woods, which then were without paths. Freddi and her sister Joanne each had a favorite horse and rode



William A. Loewenberg

through the pastures to bring the cows into the barn at night. Every weekend, Freddi also went out in the boat with her father, William Loewenberg, who loved to fish. "He fished, I paddled, and we talked." Lottie Lichterman loved the pool and was very fond of the cows. Ruth Loewenberg, a "go out and play" mom, loved to swim but was also a women's golf champion for Ridgeway Country Club.

The family not only generously shared the property with personal friends, but also invited Southern Leather Company employees to come for picnics and encouraged injured World War II veterans from Kennedy Hospital to come and fish in the lake. Over time, they did sell or donate portions of the land for business and residential development, the Ridgeway schools, and for St. Francis Hospital and the YMCA on Quince, but they always preserved an area intended for public park land.

In 1963, Ira Lichterman died, and Lottie, his widow, donated 12.4 acres of property in his memory to the Memphis Park Commission, including the home and the lake. In 1972, the property was dedicated as Lichterman Park, but the property lay idle for lack of funding from the city until 1976. Ira Lichterman's preference, which had been for a wooded park, was overruled by a decision to create a nature center with an emphasis on education, as suggested by Doug Nobles of the Pink Palace Museum. The Park Commission and volunteers developed the site.

In 1978, the Lichterman-Loewenberg Foundation donated additional acreage, funds came from the Memphis Museum system, and other land was purchased by the city with a Federal grant for further development as an environmental education center. The home became the office space and the interpretive center housing exhibits. Greenhouses, pier, boardwalk and a wildlife rehabilitation center were added. It was described as "a rustic retreat for weary humans and a sanctuary for injured and orphaned animals." It officially opened as Lichterman Nature Center in 1983 as part of the Memphis Museum system. In 1989, the home and the nature complex were placed on the National Register of Historic Places and also

became the first nature center to be accredited by the American Association of Museums.

Volunteers always played a role in the Center, and none more than a young man, Brian Waldron, who had been a member of the junior staff in 1987. An area of the property had been a water pumping station, and Waldron discovered an 8-foot octagonal fountain, stone steps, an arched bridge and the remains of a gazebo. He dedicated himself to restoring the gazebo and turning the area into a meditation garden planted with a large number of ferns and indigenous plants, some quite rare. It opened to the public in April, 1991.

Then, in 1994, disaster struck. The huge rustic house caught fire and burned to the ground, creating a \$1 million loss. Firefighters limited the damage by a rapid response, so that the main losses within the building were records and a stuffed pigeon on loan from the Smithsonian Museum. The fire sparked a rethinking of the Nature Center, a master plan for the 21st century. Suggestions were drawn from expert consultants in the field and also from focus groups of a cross-section

of Memphians. Fifty members of the Lichterman-Loewenberg family, now including members of the Jalenak family through Ira's sister's marriage, concurred in the plan and donated the initial \$350,000.

After a number of years in which the staff worked from trailers, Lichterman Nature Center arose from the ashes in 2000, with the opening of a new William A. Loewenberg Visitor Center, housing a permanent exhibit of taxidermied animals that detail local wildlife history over the past 250 years and serving as a reception center and meeting and entertainment space. "Uncle Willie" often came and greeted visitors "with wit, charm and his unforgettable smile." He said,

"That land was where our family got together for so many years. The greatest pleasure in my life is seeing all the other people, especially the young people, come to the park and enjoy it so."

Soon to be completed was a Backyard Wildlife Center, the "crown jewel" of the redeveloped center. It

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Ira J. Lichterman

A Rabbi and a Scholar:

Dr. Harry W. Ettelson Served Temple Israel

On April 3, 1925, Congregation Children of Israel (now Temple Israel) installed its fifth rabbi, the Rev. Dr. Harry W. Ettelson. Born in 1883 in Mobile, Alabama, and educated at the Barton Academy there, Ettelson was the first native Southerner to occupy the congregation's pulpit. A brilliant scholar with a mellifluous voice, he had impeccable academic credentials: Bachelor of Arts (Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year) from the University of Cincinnati, graduate work at the University of Chicago, and a PhD in languages from Yale. He was valedictorian of his class at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where he received his ordination. In 1941 he received an Honorary Doctor of Literature Degree from Rhodes College (formerly Southwestern College), and in 1954 he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree from Hebrew Union College.

Always addressed as "Doctor Ettelson," he was forty-one years old when he assumed the pulpit of Children of Israel as an experienced rabbi, who came to Memphis from the prestigious Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. He had been a Navy chaplain during World War I and also had served Reform congregations in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Hartford, Connecticut. Upon arriving in Memphis, he and his wife Nell received a warm welcome from his new congregation, which he would lead for the next twenty-nine years.

Shortly after his arrival, Ettelson invited an ecumenical group of clergymen to a meeting at the Peabody Hotel to organize the Cross-Cut Club. In issuing the invitation he was fulfilling a pledge made at his installation: "I shall try . . . to establish fraternal relations and the fullest neighborly contacts with the

ministers of all denominations . . . Let us hope that Protestant, Catholic, and Jew while each loyal to his convictions, shall in all movements for civic communal betterment constitute a real holy triple alliance." Ettelson served as the first president of the club, a position he held again twenty-five years later. The

work of the club, preceding by two years the founding of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (now the National Conference for Community and Justice), laid a foundation for the establishment of NCCJ's Memphis chapter in 1932. The club organized a non-sectarian civic Thanksgiving eve service between 1930 and 1935, promoting fellowship among faiths and including African-American clergymen.

During the 1920s the growth of anti-Semitism, both in America and abroad, led the Memphis Jewish community to support Zionism in growing numbers. Congregation Children of Israel struggled

to reconcile the generally non-Zionist outlook of Classical Reform with the urgent need and compelling demand for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Ettelson described himself as a non-Zionist, neither pro nor con, and, knowing that the membership was divided on the issue of Zionism, he was anxious to keep peace within the congregation. In 1945 when asked to arrange a meeting with a speaker on behalf of a pro-Zionist group, he said he could not sponsor the meeting officially; nevertheless, he facilitated the arrangements by referring the group to Hardwig Peres, "a warm friend . . . and an ardent Zionist," to help organize the meeting.

The Great Depression of 1929 caused synagogues to suffer as their members' reduced incomes forced them to trim their contributions or, in extreme cases, to



Dr. Harry W. Ettelson

resign. Children of Israel board meetings centered on finding the means to sustain the congregation during these difficult times. In 1931 Ettelson requested a reduction of \$1000 in his salary. Two years later, as the hard times persisted, he asked the Board to reduce his salary again, this time by ten percent.

In January, 1932, Ettelson participated in a debate entitled "Is Religion Necessary?" at the old Ellis Auditorium. He argued for the affirmative against Clarence Darrow, the celebrated attorney and noted agnostic who had been chief of defense in the historic Scopes trial of 1923, in which John Scopes, a school teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was convicted of teaching the theory of evolution in that community's public schools. Among his arguments on behalf of religion, Ettelson quoted Voltaire, who said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him." Ettelson further stated his position, saying, "Is religion necessary, ladies and gentlemen? Yes indeed! It is necessary because man needs lofty ideals and lofty principles, and religion holds out the loftiest ideals and noblest principles imaginable, both as to duties to self and duties to others; and not only does religion hold out these ideals and principles but it fires the enthusiasm and energizes the will to carry them out and challenges him to do and dare." The debate drew a large number of spectators, and a portion of the proceeds was donated to B'nai B'rith. While neither man was declared the winner, the Memphis audience clearly sided with Ettelson.

Numerous changes occurred in the congregation during Ettelson's tenure as rabbi. Women were included as members of the board in 1925. In 1926, services especially for children began, the Brotherhood was organized, the Sunday School was expanded, and the

congregation took on the responsibility of perpetual care of graves in the cemetery. Despite suffering economic setbacks during the Depression, the congregation managed in 1936 to make the final payment to retire the mortgage on the building. In 1951 a second Sunday School building was erected. Ettelson's personal influence in mediating these changes was incalculable.

His extensive literary background, personal scholarship, skill at mediation of conflicts, and genial personality all combined to provide him a city-wide reputation for benevolence and influence. As a member of The Egyptians, a primarily lay scholarly group, he reviewed books that promoted moral concepts through interpretation of literature. His membership in the Synagogue Council of Memphis helped to minimize the traditional conflict between Reform and Orthodox Judaism. Ministers, newspaper editors, politicians, financiers, and trade union leaders were part of his coterie, and all contributed to the development of his wide community respect.

In November, 1951, Ettelson notified the congregation of his intention to retire in 1954 "on the triple anniversary—the 50th of his rabbinate, the 70th of his birth, and the 100th of the congregation." At the time of his retirement he was named Rabbi Emeritus. He returned to Philadelphia to live, but made several visits to Memphis for commemorative occasions. After his death in 1975, his body was returned to Memphis for interment in the Temple Israel cemetery. ☆

This article was compiled from material in the Temple Israel archives and from the following sources: *Our Rabbis and Their Times*, a paper by Dr. Norman Shapiro; *Children of Israel – The Story of Temple Israel*, by Judy G. Ringel.

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opened in 2001 with a fully accessible pond habitat, meadow and boardwalk extending into the woods. Elsewhere an outdoor pavilion was added for classes, group picnics and social events.

Barry Lichterman, grandson of Ira, was most actively involved in the redevelopment. He was specifically concerned that the Center should reach "many underserved audiences: tourists, African-Americans, and seniors. He was instrumental in drawing the larger community into a major role in the redevelopment. Today's named buildings and tribute plaques at Lichterman demonstrate success. Individuals, families and corporate donors are visibly recognized. There are "The International Paper Discovery Center," the "Schering-Plough Woodland Trail," the Friends of the Pink Palace Nature Store," the Jim and Elida Fry Meadow Wildlife Garden" and a tribute sign for "Jeter & Longmere and their grandchildren," to name only a few.

The log home with its modest exhibits has impressive modern successors. The goal of the original purchase has been fulfilled in Talmudic words: "Work for the welfare of the community." An old concrete sign, once on Lynnfield, now stands at the entrance on Quince: "Nature Study Center, Ira J. Lichterman Park, Memphis Park Commission." ☆

Memphis Group Plans Trip to Philadelphia Featuring Tour of National Museum of American Jewish History

Originally created for Philadelphia's 1976 Bicentennial celebration, the Jewish museum has moved a half-block south to a location near the heart of Independence Mall. Overlooking the Liberty Bell and the President's House, with views of both Independence Hall and the National Constitution Center, the museum explores how Jews both experienced and helped shape America's progress toward its own ideals.

The Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South has planned a trip to Philadelphia June 6-8, featuring a private guided tour of the museum, which has received rave reviews for both its collections and its design. Another feature of the trip will be an opportunity to attend the opening of *Slaying the Dragon*, an exciting new opera with Jewish and Memphis roots. With original music by Michael Ching, former director of Opera Memphis, the fictional opera tells the amazing story of the encounter between former Memphis cantor Michael Weissner and the grand dragon of the Lincoln, Nebraska, Ku Klux Klan.

Included in the Memphis group who will make the trip are: Peggy and L.R. Jalenak, Margie Kerstine, Phyllis and Sumner Levine, Marcia and Bill Levy, Jo Potter, Harvey Reisman, and Flora and Harry Samuels. ☆



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