



SOUTHERN JEWISH HERITAGE

VOL. 18, NO. 2

SPRING 2005

Clarksdale: A Mississippi Delta Jewish Legacy

By Margie Kerstine

The Mississippi Delta has been portrayed as “the most southern place on earth” in literature and box office successes such as Tennessee Williams’

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. In the early 1840s, it may have seemed an unlikely destination for Jewish immigrants from the villages and shtetls of Germany and Russia; nevertheless, those who adopted the Delta as their new home soon learned that they could maintain a strong Jewish identity grounded in the same southern values as those held by their non-Jewish neighbors—values symbolized by cotton, religion, and family.

Cotton signified living in an agricultural economy surrounded by a lush landscape of fertile soil amid majestic forests of white oak, cottonwood, walnut, pecan, catalpa,

and cypress trees. Religion, in the heart of the “Bible Belt,” glued spiritual meaning and structure to both good times and hard times. Family included aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and others in the community who shared a common heritage and history.

The Mississippi Jewish communities started with a few young, single men or families who had escaped the oppression of Russian Czars, Count Bismarck, and German noblemen. Little is known about the earliest Jews who settled in Mississippi; however, the Delta gained the reputation

of being the “pot of gold at the end of the rainbow” after the Civil War, when plantation owners began to advertise for workers in European and American newspapers.

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*The children of Molly and Adolph Kerstine, circa 1900:
Left to Right, Max, Caesar, Rosa, Lillie, Isidor.*

JEWISH IDENTITY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LIFELONG LEARNING

A panel discussion featuring Memphis’ own Melton Scholars

RABBI SHAI FINKELSTEIN • CANTOR DAVID JULIAN • LYNNIE MIRVIS

Moderator: MIMI GROSSMAN

Sunday, May 15, 2005, at 2:00pm
Jewish Community Center

A brief installation ceremony for new officers and directors of the MJHS will precede the program.

Co-sponsored by Bornblum Judaic Studies, University of Memphis

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

President's Message



May Lynn Mansbach

Spring is here. The land has awakened once again, bringing us longer, warmer days, soft green leaves, beauty all around, and lifted spirits. It's the season of sandals, children playing outside, and no mosquitoes. I could go on and on about my favorite time of year. But what does this have to do with the Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South? One answer to that question is that it's all connected to roots.

Much of the beauty of Spring happens because plants are connected to the earth. It is through their roots that they draw the nourishment that enables them to flourish. Without roots, the plants of Spring could not grow.

The same idea applies to people. Our connection to our roots can supply nourishment to our lives. The stronger the connection, the more we can flourish. If our roots are severed, we wither.

On April 3, 2005, at the JCC, twenty-two "budding" young genealogists from Memphis and environs, joined a number of adult genealogy buffs in creating displays of family history at the first Jewish Historical Society Genealogy Fair. All who attended the fair were impressed and delighted by the quality and scope of the projects to which both young and older scholars had brought great detail, originality, and humor. As I stopped by each display to speak with its creator, I was struck, first, by the very obvious pride that each exhibitor took in his or her family. It was fascinating and moving to hear an account of the achievements and escapades, the coincidences and experiences that each researcher had "unearthed" in the process of "digging." In more than one instance, the information found was a complete revelation: the researcher previously had not a clue that a particular connection existed. I was struck as well by the sheer wealth of knowledge that each had "gleaned" in the process of putting together a genealogy or a map or a family tree. The cultivation of the family garden, the quest for family roots, had yielded a bounteous harvest.

The Jewish Historical Society will help you search for and cultivate your roots so that you, too, can grow—not necessarily in size or beauty, although you may achieve those as well—but rather in the understanding, strength, and dignity that can accompany a well—"grounded" life.

As Shakespeare knew in *Henry VIII*, whose roots are nipped, he falls. Let the Jewish Historical Society help you stand tall as together we preserve and draw sustenance from our connections to our history.

May Lynn

P.S. And while we're on the subject of growth, I'm delighted to report that our membership has grown to our largest number ever! Your enthusiastic reception all during the year for our programs and projects suggests that we can look forward to continued "burgeoning" in 2005-2006. Thanks to you all for your generous and dedicated support.

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**Of Blessed Memory*

Selma Lewis Scholars Participate In First JHS Genealogy Fair

Twenty-two Selma Lewis Scholars researched their families' histories and made presentations at the first Jewish Historical Society Genealogy Fair held on April 3, 2005, at the Jewish Community Center. Chairperson of the Fair was Barbara Newman.

The Scholars program was created as a tribute in memory of Selma Lewis, who was president-elect of the JHS at the time of her death. Student participants who received certificates of recognition for their projects were:

From Margolin Hebrew Academy: Joel Bowman, Aya Gare, Charlie LaVene, Raquel Kampf, Tziporah Stengel, Molly Pocrass, Elaina Kaufman, and Eliana Graber.

From Bornblum Solomon Schechter School: Kallie Brown, Max Alpert, Max Fargotstein, Jacob Karmel, Ryan Karmel, Garrett Dome, Eve Sorin, Ian Susser, Jonah Roberts, Sophie Ostrow, and Yael Uziel.

From Beth Sholom Religious School: Katie Lothstein, Alex Lothstein, and Rachael Shorr.

Welcome to Our New Members

Sandy Armus Alan & Sherry Samuels
Jim & Laura Linder Ron & Diana Padawer
Dr. Judy Soberman & Dr. Len Lothstein

Young Jewish men between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five who came to America at that time discovered that the agrarian lifestyle in the Delta paralleled that of the villages and families they had left behind.

In 1869 John Clark used his 360-acre plantation to create plats that became his town, Clarksdale. Around the same time, the nucleus of Clarksdale's Jewish community was beginning to form, comprised of families living in hamlets and towns scattered throughout Coahoma county. In addition, Jewish families from other counties within a radius of fifty miles—Bolivar, LeFlore, Panola, Quitman, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, and Tunica—gravitated toward the Clarksdale community. Hometowns included Alligator, Coahoma, Duncan, Dublin, Marks, Minter City, Sumner, Sunflower, Tutwiler, and Webb. From the birth of this community until its golden age, which culminated in the 1980s, Jewish families in these surrounding towns commuted to Clarksdale for education and business during the week and religious and social activities on the weekends. In addition to Clarksdale, congregations in Cleveland, Greenwood, Greenville, Lexington, and Vicksburg became religious, educational, and social centers for those who started their business investments in Mississippi Delta settlements.

Some of the earliest Jewish names on record in Coahoma county were Isidor, Julius, and Adolph Kerstine; Charles, Abe, and Harris Brenner; Jacob and Leopold Marks; George and Jacob Richberger. These men were true pioneers living in a primitive, undeveloped area then known as "The Bottoms" or "The Mississippi Swamps." Most of the settlers carried guns at all times. Adolph Kerstine told his son Isidor that he would take \$200 cash and a gun with him when he rode his horse from Jonestown to the wharf in Friars Point. He would then catch the packet boat to Memphis to buy merchandise at William R. Moore for his general store

and saloon and to do his banking. Adolph Kerstine also told about the two carpetbaggers who came into his Jonestown saloon. By their actions he believed that they planned to rob him. He warned one not to take another step. When the man did, Adolph shot him. There was no record of any trial.

Despite difficult living conditions, the new immigrants liked the lifestyle as well as the economic opportunities they found in Coahoma county; soon women arrived to become the brides of the male Jewish settlers. Some of

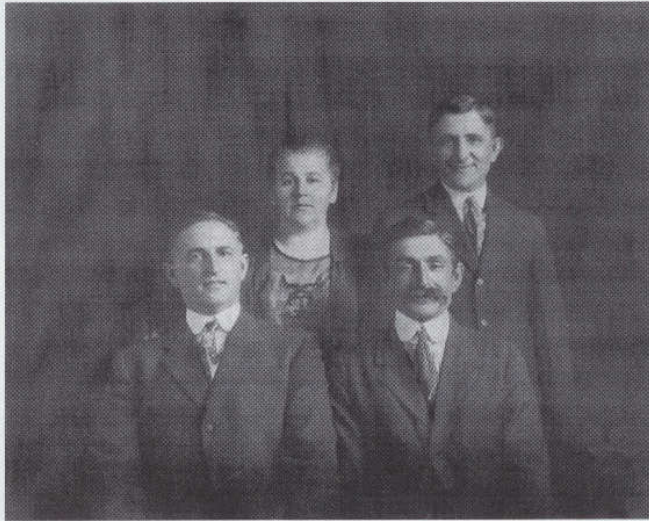
their wedding ceremonies were performed by Rabbi Max Samfield of Temple Israel in Memphis, whose marriage registry shows that he married Leopold and Pauline Marks in 1875 at the Peabody Hotel. Rabbi Samfield's records also show that he married George Richberger and Mary Pollewada in 1883.

Meanwhile, Clarksdale was being transformed from a logging site on the Sunflower River to a small hamlet. In 1884, Clarksdale became a whistle stop for the

Louisville, New Orleans and Texas railway, and Jewish settlers began to come by train to be with family and friends who had sent for them.

When Ora Baker, and his son, Frank arrived in New York in approximately 1888, their relatives referred them to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which had been organized in 1881 to offer food, shelter, and other aid to countless new arrivals. Because New York was overcrowded with immigrants, HIAS members often recommended going to areas such as the Mississippi Delta, because they knew other settlers from the same European and Russian towns had already settled in these places. They provided Ora and Frank with backpacks to sell small items as they traveled across the country, first to Memphis, then to Clarksdale, where their distant relative, Max Friedman, lived. The two men moved to Dublin, Mississippi, and eventually settled in Clarksdale, where they sold mules, horses, and cattle.

The Jewish population increased in the Delta as a



The Bakers: L. to R., front: Harry, Frank; back: Fannie, Morris. Frank and his father Ora Baker came to the Delta about 1888.

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new, American-born generation of babies began to arrive. In 1885, Adolph and Molly Kerstine took the boat to Helena, Arkansas, to have their first daughter, Rosa, in Molly's parents' home, but then in January, 1887, she gave birth to a son, Max, the first Jewish boy born in Coahoma county. In 1892 Yetta Brenner Jacobson gave birth to a daughter, Ella, the first Jewish girl born in the county. Most couples had from five to ten children; unfortunately many of their offspring did not survive beyond early childhood.

At least fifteen Jewish families—forty-three adults and thirty-three children—were identified in the 1900 U.S. census as living in the area. Throughout the decades, as new families moved in, some families left. Still others left and then came back. For example, as early as 1893, Adolph and Molly Kerstine moved to Chicago, Illinois, with their four children because Adolph wanted to be there for the World's Fair. Then they returned to Greenwood in 1897 where their fifth child was born. In 1897, Rachel Leah Friedman, Max Friedman's sister, married Victor Binder, but lived with her family until after the birth of her oldest daughter, Belle, because Victor had returned to Germany to serve the Kaiser. After seven years Victor rejoined his family and his two brothers, William and Joseph, soon followed.

On April 6, 1889, disaster struck when fire destroyed the entire business section of Clarksdale. Of the nine businesses destroyed, at least two were owned by Jewish merchants, Adolph Kerstine and Greenbaum & Kahn. Within a year, however, Clarksdale's approximately 800 residents had rebuilt their downtown, and eighteen brick and iron business structures had risen from the ashes of the previous wooden buildings. The town moved forward again in 1897, when a telephone exchange was installed; 193 customers immediately signed up for service.

As the Clarksdale community continued to expand and grow, so did the economic opportunities. The building industry demanded timber, and swamps were cleared and drained for agricultural use. Although the early Jewish settlers had earned their living by peddling and later by opening stores, some chose not to remain in retailing. The Bak-

ers operated stables, both Reuben Dinner and Ike Shapiro were in the restaurant business, the Friedmans collected and sold scrap, and others became cotton factors and invested in farms and plantations.

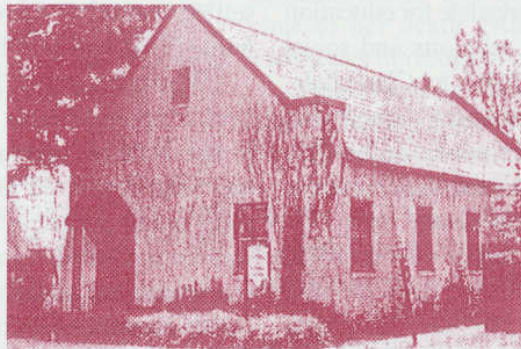
Although they gradually were becoming more integrated into the community as a whole, the

Clarksdale Jews remained devoted to their religion. About 1894, six Jewish families—Max Kaufman, Harry Kantrovitz (Kantor), Bert Levinson, Moishe Levinson, William and Joseph Binder—began meeting in various homes for Orthodox worship; Max became the first president of the fledgling congregation. Initially the congregation was chartered as Koheles Jacob in 1896, but later it was renamed "Beth Israel." The congregation moved to the Knights of Pythias Hall, a lodge on Sunflower Avenue. Families who did not wish to worship by Orthodox traditions probably traveled to other surrounding religious communities, such as Memphis, Helena, and Greenwood, or worshipped in private.

Jews also were actively involved in the civic life of the community, and in 1901, Al Nachman was elected mayor of Clarksdale. Jewish organizations started in 1904, when Max Kaufman, Max Friedman, Berthold Landau, and Aaron Sack chartered the Delta Lodge 660, a subordinate lodge of District Seven of the International Order of B'nai B'rith. In 1910, the ladies organized the Ladies Aid Society, which was known for its rummage sales, helping the needy, and an annual New Year's Ball. By 1914, the



Al Nachman, mayor of Clarksdale in 1901



Beth Israel Synagogue: first building, 69 Delta Avenue

Jewish girls' club, Semper Fidelis, was founded. Even though some Jewish families might have been better off financially had they stayed in smaller towns in the Delta, they chose to move to Clarksdale so that they and their children could participate in the religious life there.

In 1909 a campaign was begun to raise funds to build a permanent house of worship. Each family donated as much as they could, but they did not have enough among themselves to build a sanctuary. Max Friedman went door to door to seek donations from non-Jews, who donated as much as Jewish families. Max Friedman and Louis Goldstein agreed to underwrite the mortgage. Thanks to Louis Goldstein's political affiliations, Borman Lumber Co. donated part of the materials required for the foundation of the building. The sheriff's office gave free prison labor for many weeks, and private citizens who had ambitions for running for public office made cash contributions. In 1910, about twenty families dedicated their new sanctuary at 69 Delta Avenue. Reverend A.H. Freyman took over in 1912, not only as the leader, but as the cantor, choir director, religious school educator, and shochet so that the families could keep kosher.

Later, in about 1913, Louis Goldstein decided to order a Torah for the newly built synagogue. When it arrived by train, Louis planned an elaborate welcome for the Holy Scroll. He hired a band of music, organized a parade from the railroad to the new synagogue, and invited all the dignitaries in town to participate in the parade. They all came: city officials, sheriff's office members, lawyers, doctors, and others. Anyone who donated a nominal amount could carry the Scroll a distance of ten paces. This continued until they reached the synagogue and Goldstein took the Scroll inside to the Ark. A few years later, the congregation purchased their cemetery. The earliest tombstone is dated 1916. Also in 1916, Max

Friedman started a Sunday School with four teachers and fifty-one students.

Meanwhile, Clarksdale was home to a vibrant black community that called itself the "New World." W. C. Handy, conductor of the black Knights of Pythias Band, was creating the haunting refrains of the early blues singers; when the sharecroppers and cotton field hands gathered for socializing and entertainment on Saturday nights, it was said that "you couldn't stir them with a stick." Issaquena Avenue, "on the other side of the tracks," became notorious for its bawdiness. A number of Jewish merchants opened retail establishments on Issaquena, which gained a reputation for having the best music and the cheapest merchandise. Jewish names—

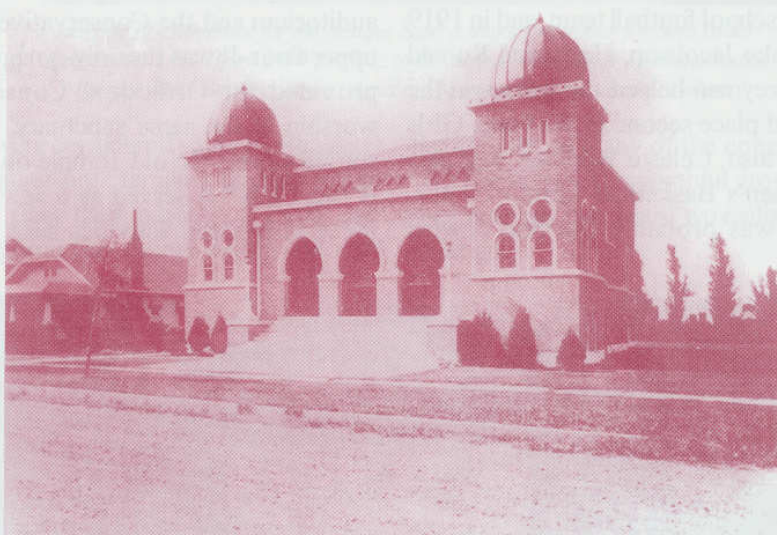
Aronson, Bacharach, Binder, Califf, Frank, Grober, Israel, Jacobson, Labens, Lurie, Magdovitz, May, Shankerman—predominated on the two block section between the railroad depot and Fourth Street. Other Jewish businesses were located elsewhere in town. Louis and Herman Damsker owned a grocery, and Herman later operated a seed store.

Prior to the depression of 1921, The Wall Street

Journal reported Clarksdale as "the richest agricultural city of the United States in proportion to its population (7,552)." Jake Fink, Myer Kline, and Aaron Sack were counted among the thirty-two millionaires in Clarksdale, although Aaron Sack eventually lost his six plantations when cotton plummeted from a dollar to fifteen cents per bale.

As the Mississippi Delta Jews became financially successful, they had more time for entertainment and leisure activities. The *Clarksdale Press Register* described a "Womanless Wedding" held at the local Majestic Theatre in 1917, which featured, among others, Berthold Landau, Isaac Weiss, Charlie Silverblatt, and Mark

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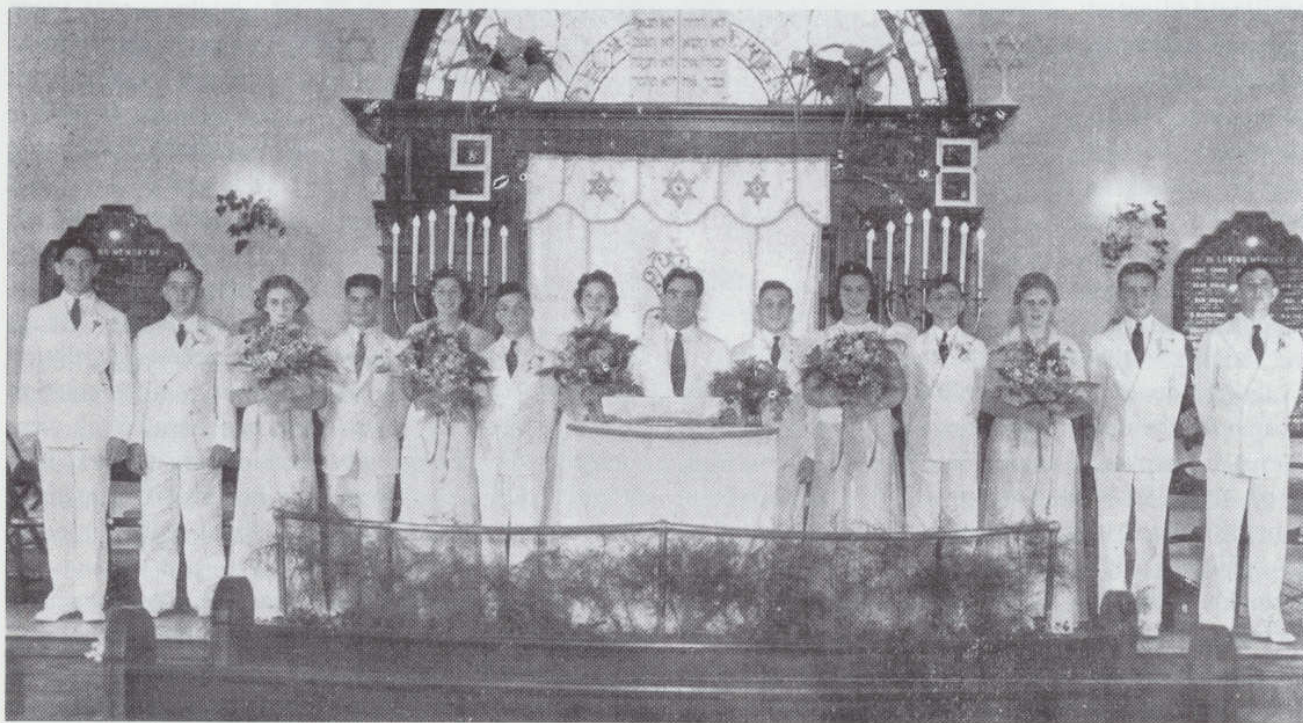
Beth Israel Synagogue: new building at 401 Catalpa Street, dedicated in 1929

Hynman as participants. As part of a campaign to sell World War I bonds and stamps, there were rides on a submarine and a light cruiser up the river to Friars Point. In 1924, Charles Lindbergh stopped in Friars Point when he ran out of gas. At that time, he was in the business of "barnstorming," selling airplane rides to people in small towns or in areas where he would land his plane. That same year Hardwig Peres of Memphis gave a lecture as part of a concert program in which Misha Feibish, Mollie Loscowitz, Harry Koh, and A. Kipper performed.

Sports also became important in the Jewish community. Harvey Heidelberg, the Clarksdale superintendent of schools, encouraged students to participate in sports as an integral part of education. Dave Baker, Hyman Cohen, Caesar Kerstine, and Julian Binder played on the 1916 high school football team, and in 1919 and 1920, Ike Baker, Jake Jacobson, Harry and Ronald Levinson, and Meyer Freyman helped the team win the Delta Championship and place second in the State. Girls participated in athletics also. Celeste Woolbert was part of the Champion Women's Basketball Team of 1917. Flora Okun Hirsberg was probably the first Jewish

cheerleader in the Delta in 1925, and many followed in her footsteps.

By now many young Jewish adults had acquired an education, and they began to demand more English, as well as other changes, in the worship service. At one time the leaders of the congregation had hired a Reform rabbi from Chicago who came for the high holidays. He brought English prayer books and objected to men wearing hats in Shul. This created a rift in the Jewish community, and many members left and formed a Minyan in a home with Rev. Freyman officiating. Still, the small synagogue could handle only the seating for week-day services and Saturdays; some had to stand in the rear for the high holy days. A fund-raising campaign was again launched to build a new synagogue; in 1929 this new house of worship, located at 401 Catalpa Street, was dedicated. The Orthodox members used the lower auditorium and the Conservatives and Reform used the upper floor. It was the only synagogue in Mississippi that provided for Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform worship in the same sanctuary. The congregation had started calling the old Temple on Delta Avenue a "B'nai B'rith Club." It served as a Jewish Community Center for Jewish social activities such as poker and pinochle



Beth Israel Confirmation Class of 1938: L. to R., Charles Marcus Charles Friedman, Selma Shankerman, Harry Lipson, Jr., Ruth Yaffe, Alvin Martin Labens, Helen Rae Segal, Rabbi Tolochko, Gerald Plitman, Helen Baskind, Jerome Block, Marian Califf, Stanley Baskind, Loe Marks, Jr.

games on Sunday afternoons. However, the Elks Club remained the popular place for big events such as the Cotton Ball and the New Year's Eve party catered by the Jewish women.

Even before the stock market crashed in October, 1929, Mississippi banks had been in decline for several months. Many families lost everything in the Depression and yet learned how to survive with very little. If a family was successful in keeping food on the table, they were considered well off. Realizing the difficulties of sustaining large families, couples began having fewer children than their parents, a trend that became the norm throughout the country during and after the Depression.

Gradually the economy recovered. The newest group of entrepreneurs in Clarksdale were women: Martha and Lenora Sack had a catering business, Freda Fink started the Marion Shoppe, Adele Cohen Kline became an active partner in the Madeira Shoppe, and Kate and Morris Sebulsky owned the Style Shoppe. The 1940s brought renewed prosperity that continued for several decades. As early as the 1950s, however, many parents began encouraging their sons and daughters to study for professional degrees at prestigious colleges such as Vanderbilt, Tulane, and Sophie Newcomb, and for the first time in over nine decades, when the young adults left home, they did not come back. The economic, social, and religious factors that previously had prevailed no longer offered viable incentives to suit the lifestyle of this new generation. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a general decline in population of the entire community due to mechanization in the cotton industry and the resulting unemployment.

The Clarksdale Jewish community produced a rich legacy that was planted in the 1870s and 1880s; grew from the 1890s through 1929; underwent a metamorphosis as its first American-born generation



Meeting of Committee for the Antique Sale, a major fundraiser for Beth Israel Congregation, held from 1970-1987. L. to R., seated: Leila Kline, Hermine Bassit, Bernice May, Bernice Bloom; standing: Marlene Resnick, Bonnie Cohen.

came of age in the 1930s and 1940s; then blossomed fully from the 1950s through the 1970s. During the 1980s the community entered its golden years, and in the last two decades it has gradually withered.

In 2002 the Cat-alpa Street Temple was put up for sale. Jennifer Tisdale, a student rabbi at Hebrew Union College, officiated at the final service. She prepared many prayers, one of which summarized

the feelings of many of the congregants:

"We began with youthful growing, getting established, then reaching our goals; we realize that the time has come to let go.

If only we could have slowed the wheel of time and protected ourselves from the heartaches accompanied with change.

We cannot avoid change though, nor can we protect ourselves from it. We can only accept that things will change.

We embrace now the joy of the new rather than the sadness of what once was; the opportunities of the future are made beautiful by the memories of the past...

We speak as the pioneers who built this community, nurtured this congregation and embody its legacy." ☆

Every effort has been made to verify information contained in this article. It has been possible to mention only a small number of the many individuals whose history is interwoven with that of the Clarksdale community. For more information about the history of the Jewish community in Coahoma county go to this website:

www.freewebs.com/deltahistory

Transcribers Needed!

The Jewish Historical Society needs volunteers to transcribe our oral history tapes. If you are interested or can suggest someone who might be, please call Sumner Levine, 682-5935.

Proposed Slate of Officers and Directors 2005-2006 Jewish Historical Society of Memphis and the Mid-South

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