

Tribute to Dorothy Amsden

by Noel Pugach

In 2004, the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society received a precious gift in the person of Dorothy Corner Amsden. Lance Bell and Stan Hordes recognized that she had much to offer the Society after she gave a genealogy workshop at the fall Conference, and they urged her to become a member of the board. Over the next 10 years, Dorothy served as genealogy chair, editor of our newsletter, *Legacy*, vice-president of the Society, and president for three years. In 2014, she decided to leave the board, but agreed to serve as interim editor of *Legacy* until Dianne Layden could assume the important duties.

Dorothy's path to her many achievements began in the Bronx, New York, where she was born in 1942. She was a civil servant "brat"; her father worked for the Federal government as an architect and the small nuclear family (Dorothy was an only child) moved every two years — from Sacramento to Kodiak, Alaska, to Little Rock, to Buffalo, and finally to Albuquerque, where her parents settled in 1956. Dorothy received her B.A. (University of New Mexico) and M.A. (Middlebury College) in French and became fluent in the language, especially after living in France as a student in 1964-65. Changing fields from the humanities to computer science, she worked for IBM for six years in Los Angeles and Maryland. By then, Dorothy had been exposed to many life experiences and many different communities; she had acquired a high degree of sophistication and insight. But more was to follow.



Dorothy Corner-Amsden

Up to now, Dorothy had been raised as a totally assimilated, secular "Jewess"; she had never been involved in Jewish life, culture, or religion. Both parents had encountered anti-Jewish discrimination. In 1973, in order to connect with her Jewish roots, she decided to live in Israel, where she worked as a copy editor for the Weizmann Science Press. Unwittingly, she chose an auspicious time, as the Yom Kippur War broke out a few months after she arrived. Dorothy's vivid account of Israeli anxieties, tensions, and feelings, and her experiences in Israel, appeared in the *The New Mexico Jewish Link* to mark the 40th anniversary of the shattering event. Over her 16 months in Israel, Dorothy learned some Hebrew, was introduced to Jewish history, practices, and religion, and acquired an appreciation of Israeli life and culture. Shortly after returning to New Mexico, she was hired as a technical writer and editor for Los Alamos National Laboratory. She retired in 1997. Meanwhile she met and

married Anthony "Tony" Amsden.

In all the positions she occupied with NMJHS, Dorothy showed herself to be a dedicated, tireless, hard-driving, knowledgeable, intelligent, organized leader, and a perfectionist. And she had so many achievements. She made Jewish genealogy an important aspect of our agenda and used it to bring new people into the Society. As president, she tightened up the organization, oversaw the rewriting of the bylaws, supervised three highly successful fall conferences, broadened the membership of the board of directors, maintained our excellent reputation and credibility with the New Mexico Jewish Federation, and continued to partner with other organizations.

Dorothy sometimes revealed a hard edge, but she got things done.

In the remainder of this article, I want to focus on Dorothy Amsden as

editor of *Legacy*, where she made a great contribution, raising the quality and the stature of the newsletter. Dorothy and I had an extended conversation on how she viewed her role and how she looks on its future.

Dorothy, who wrote a column named, "Genealogy Corner," a play on her maiden name Corner, stepped in as editor when Bobbi Jackson, our former administrator fell ill and could no longer produce it. She served as editor from March 2007-March 2010, when Naomi Sandweiss agreed to take over so Dorothy could assume the role of president. One of the first things Dorothy did after she joined the board was to push for a new name for the newsletter over considerable opposition; it was simply known as the NMJHS Newsletter, too long and clumsy. The Society held a contest and *Legacy* won. The first issue with the new name *Legacy* appeared in December 2006. Then, rather than reproduce material from other Jewish historical newsletters, Dorothy insisted that *Legacy* publish original articles on the New Mexico Jewish experience, from the Spanish Era to the present day.



Noel Pugach

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