A better life
Jewish pioneers add to state's cultural richness

By Sharon Niederman

The story of New Mexico's 19th- and early 20th-century Jewish pioneers has all the drama of an epic novel—a rags-to-riches saga peopled with larger-than-life characters, set in a vast, challenging landscape.

The earliest pioneers were young, single German men, often teen-agers fleeing prejudice and hoping for opportunity, whereas most Eastern European immigrants came west later, closer to the turn of the last century. They made their way with what little education they had, the loyalty and assistance of tight-knit extended families and their remarkable ability to adapt to new situations, languages and cultures.

These pioneers made important and lasting contributions to New Mexico's economy and cultural institutions, and many of their names—Vorenberg, Wertheim, Zeckendorf, Floersheim, Moise, Seligman, Herzstein, Nordhaus—continue to be heard today in law, medicine, commerce, politics and the arts. Other pioneer names, such as Ilfeld, Staab, Bibo and Spiegelberg endure in New Mexico history, architecture and place names.

While Jewish people might have arrived much earlier, perhaps as early as the 16th-century Coronado and Oñate expeditions, they did not publicly practice their faith. They might have been Spanish or Sephardic Jews escaping the Inquisition. Forced to choose between conversion to Roman Catholicism and death at the stake, they practiced their Judaism in secret and concealed their true identity behind new-found Catholicism. They left neither physical evidence of their presence nor any record of interaction with the 19th-century wave of German-Jewish immigrants.

The First Pioneer
Solomon Jacob Spiegelberg was the first known German-Jewish pioneer to arrive in the territory, in 1844. Other Jewish pioneers might have passed through New Mexico following the opening of the Santa Fe Trail in 1821, but no documentation of such individuals exists. As Solomon Jacob established himself, first as a sutler or supplier of provisions to Col. Doniphan's troops and then as a merchant in Santa Fe, he sent for his brothers. One by one, the five Spiegelberg brothers arrived and diversified their retail mercantile into wholesaling, banking and military contracts. They also provided business training and backing for countrymen who made the long and difficult journey from Germany to New Mexico.

The Spiegelbergs represent a pattern repeated often by the pioneer families, many of whom were related before they immigrated, of extending a lifeline to their European kin. Once established, many of these men sought wives in Europe or back east, often distant cousins or family friends. Frequently, several brothers of one family married several sisters of another. They created a complex web of kinship that strengthened their business ties. Thus, they were able to place trusted family members in the store, branch out and expand in new locations, as well as buy goods on the East Coast and in Europe. While continuing to compete, they extended credit to one another and kept each other afloat during hard times. By relying on each other, the Staabs, Iffelds, Zeckendorfs and Spiegelbergs created mercantile houses that extended around New Mexico territory and into Colorado, Arizona, Texas and Mexico, often expanding into agriculture and ranching.

The Civil War
Jewish pioneers served the Union as soldiers and sutlers when the Civil War came to New Mexico. Jewish soldiers

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Opposite top—The Tetragrammaton at Santa Fe’s St. Francis Cathedral. It is believed that Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Lamé placed the Jewish symbol on the cathedral to honor Santa Fe’s Jewish community, which made contributions toward the cathedral’s construction.

Top—Jake Gold’s Old Curio Shop, one of several businesses in Santa Fe established by Jewish pioneers. It was located at San Francisco and Burro Alley, near the Plaza.

Above—The Spiegelberg brothers (left to right) Willi, Emanuel, S.J., Levi and Leiman, circa 1870.
Top—Milton Taichert, who died in 1989 at age 97, moved to Las Vegas as a teen-ager from Latvia with his brothers at the turn of the last century. One of the oldest surviving Jewish pioneers, he is fondly remembered for his many contributions to Las Vegas. Above—Marvin Taichert outside his family store in Las Vegas, started by his father Milton and several uncles. The store is now closed.

Special events will celebrate the opening of museum exhibit

Jewish Pioneers of New Mexico, an exhibit that tells the story of the first Jews who came to New Mexico in the 19th and early 20th centuries, opens Oct.15, 2000, at the Palace of the Governors Museum in Santa Fe. Through photographs, documents and artifacts, the exhibit follows these early immigrants as they settled in the region and made New Mexico their home, showing how their personal stories became interwoven with the history of the state. Included are the first to arrive on the Santa Fe Trail, settle in Santa Fe, then, with the coming of the railroad, move to Las Vegas, Albuquerque and Las Cruces, where they established mercantile businesses, some of which grew into empires. The Jewish pioneers were ranchers, mining entrepreneurs, politicians and bankers who lived in small towns throughout the state as well as the population centers.

Several events are planned in conjunction with the Oct. 15 opening, including:


Plaque Ceremony, old Congregation Montefiore, site of New Mexico's first synagogue, Las Vegas, Oct. 14, 2000, noon. Followed by reception at the Plaza Hotel, 12:30-2 p.m. Sponsored by New Mexico Jewish Historical Society.

Pioneer Promenade Opening Festivities, Palace of the Governors courtyard, Oct. 14, 2000, 6:30 p.m. cocktails, 7:30 p.m. buffet, $100 per person. Traditional klezmer music and dancing, deli buffet, sneak preview of exhibition. Call (505) 982-6366, ext. 102 for more information.

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fought in both New Mexico battles at Glorieta and Valverde. Three Jewish soldiers died at the Battle of Valverde. Capt. Simon Rothschild and Corp. Jacob Levy are buried in Santa Fe's National Cemetery, while Pvt. Emil Kahn's grave is unmarked.

New Mexico's best-known Jewish Union soldier, Capt. Louis Felsenthal, recruited a company of volunteers and led his men into battle at Valverde. Felsenthal had arrived in New Mexico in 1858 and the following year became a founding member of the Historical Society of New Mexico. Other Jewish pioneers who served the Union include the Spiegelberg brothers, who were butchers; Solomon Spiegelberg (not a brother), who enlisted and earned the rank of captain; and Bernard Seligman, William Zuckendorf and Marcus Brunswick. Henry Lesinsky of Las Cruces also served as a sutler.

The Tetragrammaton

Visitors to Santa Fe often remark on the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew letters spelling the name of God inscribed in a triangle above the entrance to St. Francis Cathedral. While some maintain the Tetragrammaton is actually a Christian symbol dating to medieval times, others hold that Archbishop Jean-Baptiste Lamy had it placed on the cathedral to honor the generous contributions made by the Jewish community toward its construction.

Regardless of the real reason behind the Hebrew inscription, the persistent legends surrounding it attest to one authentic truth: By and large, New Mexico's Jewish pioneers lived in close harmony with their neighbors. In addition to finding the economic opportunity they sought, they experienced a freedom from bigotry and its associated terrors that was unheard of in their homeland.

As early as the first generation, they achieved respect and acceptance while assuming positions of responsibility within their communities. Willi Spiegelberg was mayor of Santa Fe in the 1880s; Tucumcari founder Alex Goldenberg was the first county commissioner of Quay County; rancher-merchant Sydney Gottlieb became the first Republican state senator from Valencia County; and Lithuanian immigrant Louis Ravel, whose enterprise, Sam Ravel Brothers, was attacked during Pancho Villa's 1916 raid, was elected mayor of Columbus. Perhaps the most unusual pioneer officeholder was trader Solomon Bibo, who served as governor of Acoma Pueblo after marrying an Acoma woman, Juana Valle.

Today, visitors may trace the steps of the Jewish pioneers at sites such as the Spiegelberg house at Palace Avenue and Paseo de Peralta, now Peyton-Wright Gallery. The home was designed by Flora Spiegelberg, wife of Willi, and built by Italian masons who worked on St. Francis Cathedral. Flora also began Santa Fe's first nonsectarian school. The Staab House, now attached to the hotel La Posada de Santa Fe, was the grand Victorian residence of merchant Abraham Staab where in its heyday generals and presidents were entertained. Staab's wife, Julia, celebrated as one of Santa Fe's best-known ghosts, is said to haunt the staircase and bar. Some pioneers are buried in Santa Fe's Fairview Cemetery, while others rest in the Montefiore Cemetery in Las Vegas, which is maintained by the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society.

Legacies

Jewish pioneers created legacies that yet endure. Widowed with four children, pioneer Yetta Goldsmith Kohn continued to operate the family's Las Vegas store, dealing in wool and hides after the death of her husband, Samuel. With her children, in 1902 she homesteaded in Montoya, acquiring land and cattle and building the V-4 Ranch, predecessor to the T-4 Cattle Co., today owned by her namesake granddaughter Yetta Bidegain with her husband, Phillip. The unsinkable Yetta Kohn also operated a ferryboat across the Canadian River, all the while maintaining her position as beloved Red River social hostess.

Charles Ilfeld of Hamburg, Germany, built New Mexico's largest mercantile empire. His warehouses, bearing the slogan Wholesalers of Everything still stand beside railroad tracks in Magdalena and Raton. His network, originating in Las Vegas, branched out to Gallup, Mountainair and Farmington. His Moon Ranch occupied 70,000 acres between Santa Rosa and Vaughn.

Besides supplying the territory with dry goods, hardware and firearms, he created wider markets in the East for New Mexico's agricultural products of wool, beans and piñon nuts. Wool buyers came from Boston to purchase fleece, and one year he shipped four million pounds of piñon nuts to be sold in New York subways. In addition, Ilfeld financed small farmers, ranchers and merchants of northern New Mexico from season to season, effectively acting as banker where there were no banks. His contemporary, merchant-rancher Sel Flosheimer, also extended credit throughout northern New Mexico. Flosheimer, who had started out in a matzoh factory in New York City at $5 a week, went to work for Ilfeld as a collector and eventually operated large stores of his own in Roy and Springer, as well as the 63,000-acre Jaritas Ranch on the Canadian River.

Ilfeld, active during his lifetime as a Mason, as were many of the Jewish pioneers, and as a regent of the Normal
School (New Mexico Highlands University), he might lift an eyebrow in surprise at one of his most visible legacies—the Sandia Peak Aerial Tramway, the world’s longest. The brainchild of Ilfeld’s nephew, Albuquerque attorney Robert Nordhaus, and his business partner, Ben Abuzzo, the tram was far enough ahead of its time that financing was difficult to come by. Utilizing an old Ilfeld Company line of credit, Nordhaus began construction in 1964 and completed the tram in 1966. A passionate ski pioneer, Nordhaus served in the 10th Mountain Division ski troops of World War II, then with Abuzzo developed Sandia Ski Area, Sandia Heights and built the first rope tows at Hyde Park in Santa Fe.

REligious Observance
Most of the pioneers brought with them a belief in the Reform Judaism that they had known in Germany; consequently, the area’s three earliest synagogues were also Reform. Temple Montefiore, New Mexico’s first synagogue, was dedicated in Las Vegas on Sept. 26, 1886, 40 years after the first pioneers arrived in the territory. Significantly, the building was constructed with assistance from non-Jewish members of the community, and the dedication was celebrated with music by the Presbyterian choir. This building, which now houses the Newman Center of New Mexico Highlands University, has recently begun serving once again as home for a fledgling Jewish congregation that gathers for occasional Friday night services.

Constructed in 1889, Temple Aaron across the border in Trinidad, Colo., was designed by eminent architect Isaac Hamilton Rapp, one of the creators of Santa Fe Style. It originally served, and continues to attract, a wide community of Jewish people scattered throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Each year a circuit-riding rabbi officiates at High Holy Days services, and the ecumenical interfaith celebration, held annually on the Sunday between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, draws hundreds of community members of all beliefs.

Albuquerque’s Congregation Albert was established in 1897, named for merchant Albert Grunsfeld. Several of Congregation Albert’s early leaders were also among Albuquerque’s first elected officials. Henry N. Jaffa, the congregation’s first president, became Albuquerque’s first mayor in 1885. And Albuquerque’s second mayor, Mike Mandell, elected in 1890, was also an active member of the young congregation.

Religious observance was a different matter in rural New Mexico. In an unpublished memoir, Emma Vorenberg Wertheim recalls growing up in Cleveland, a tiny town outside Mora where her father was postmaster and ran a general store, around 1899.

“At that time there were only two white families in Cleveland: the Cassidys, who were Catholic, and the Vorenbergs. Most of the people in that sparsely settled community were settlers of Mexican-American descent. . . . My mother was a true ‘mother of Israel.’ She baked Shabbos bread each Friday, and every Friday night we had a real Shabbos dinner, with prayer at the table and the blessings over the candles, the wine and the bread. We always practiced Judaism in our home, and it is remarkable that we remained Jewish in this isolated little community where we were the only family of our faith.”

Perhaps the words of pioneer daughter Beatrice Ilfeld Meyer of Albuquerque best sum up the spirit of pioneer times: “Friendships were based on character and understanding. The common bond of the people of the West was pioneering, a new country, as in Las Vegas when the local merchants helped to build a temple, and in Santa Fe where the cathedral finances were aided by a prominent Jewish merchant. One did favors for friends—for friendship alone.”

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