

Prominent Jewish Families in Harlingen

Norman Rozeff

Brownsville upon its founding in 1848 was soon to attract Jewish residents, indeed famed editor Simon Mussina served as one of the surveyors who laid out the town. Enough Jews lived and died in Brownsville that a consecrated Hebrew cemetery could be established. Harlingen, on the other hand, was slow to develop after its 1904 establishment. Until the Harlingen Canal was completed in late 1907, land sales languished. It was not until the early 1920s that the town began to grow in all aspects. It was then that Jewish merchants and businessmen were attracted to the town's potential and opportunities. Still the Jewish community in Harlingen was always modest in numbers, so much so that it could not support a place of worship. With the establishment of the Harlingen Army Air Field with its Harlingen Army Gunnery School in 1941 and the later continuation with the Harlingen Air Force Base the opportunities for retailing escalated. Numerous Jewish merchants took advantage of the situation. Jackson Street became the center for businesses, primarily clothing outlets. Jewish establishments were well represented. Among the Jewish surnames of retailers that would succeed or supplement the earlier Edelsteins, Epsteins, Levines, Adolphs, Sondocks, Feldmans, and Hertz were Leonard, Baum, Neddler, Davis, and Zinn among others. The closure of the HAFB in 1962, the natural transition of another generation to other occupations, and the opening of malls signaled the gradual decline of Jackson Street retailing.

Feldman

1929 Sam and Clara Feldman are on their way from Victoria to settle in Brownsville when their car breaks down in Harlingen. The fates have them settle here. Both Feldmans are immigrants from Pinsk, Poland. By 1930 Mr. Feldman has established the Harlingen Iron and Metal Company near their home at 313 North 7th Street. It deals primarily with scrap metal. With the end of prohibition in 1933, he and a partner begin wholesale liquor distribution but the partner has to sell out due to contracting tuberculosis. In an effort to dispose of excess inventory Feldman begins retailing some and then goes into it full scale. The oldest son, Harry (b. 1925), starts college only to join the army in WWII during which he is wounded in Europe following the second wave of the Normandy invasion. Upon his return he is graduated from UT. His sibling, Charles (b.1932), is graduated from UT after attending other schools. He too will see service in the military in Europe but in the cold war period. Sam dies of a heart attack in 1953 thereby leaving his business in the hands of his sons. By 1960 Feldman's Valley Wide liquor stores will have nine stores in outlets here, Brownsville, San Benito, McAllen and Donna. Harry in 1965 will be killed in an automobile accident leaving the business for Charles to manage. In September 2001 the chain of stores is sold to Dennis Bowman, a Harlingen contractor, and semi-retired Ken Hayden, who has been involved with computers.

Levine

The Levine family opens its retail outlet, The Man's Shop. Ben Levine was born in Poland-Russia in December 1904, but the following year his family immigrated to the US and soon Texas. He came to the Valley in 1926 to take employment in a music store operated by his sister and brother-in-law who were later to set him up in the Harlingen men's store and other relatives in Weslaco and McAllen. Marrying Fannie Gensberg of Seguin in 1928, they were to produce sons Leonard and Lewis who attended Harlingen schools. A star football player at UT Lewis was to return to Harlingen and join his father and brother Leonard in business in 1951. Ben was to die at age 88 in 1993. He was one of the founders of the Jewish temple in Mercedes and later in Harlingen. His wife who outfitted boy scouts in the store died in 1987 at age 79. After 56 years the store closed in Harlingen in 1990, but the store opened in Brownsville in 1984 continued.

Under construction for R.L. and Ola Hill as the Hurricane of 1933 strikes is a Spanish Colonial Revival home at 1102 Taylor. It has notable architectural elements including arched doorways, and windows and a hand-carved front door. The panels of the mesquite door show brush as the explorers found it here, ranch scenes, brush clearing and the introduction of water, and citrus and palm trees. Eleanor Roosevelt was entertained here as was Gov. W. Lee O'Daniel. The Hills had come to Texas in 1926 from Stroud, OK and Harlingen two years later. He was born in Lowell, Indiana, 8/13/90, and she was from Oklahoma. He ran the ice plant partnership with J.B. Morton of McAllen, and they have prosperous branches across the Valley. He is also to be a partner with H. E. Butt in constructing the huge food processing factory at F Street and West Jackson; later he is its president as well as a vice president of the First National Bank and active on the school board. He owned the Commerce Building as well as property on Jackson Street. Struck suddenly with appendicitis in December 1941, Robert Luther Hill is to die at age 50 leaving a wife and two daughters. A surviving daughter in 2005 is Mrs. Betty Nickell. The house's subsequent owners are Walter Archelaus Hext and his wife Lillie M. (1949 or 1950 to 1968). He was a cotton farmer here from the late 1930s and later owned the W.A. Hext and Sons Gin, Inc. in Combes. Leonard D. and Flora Levine next occupied the house from about 1972 until 1988 or 1989. He was a partner in The Man's Shop and managed Hartogs. Ervin Burton was in the house by 1990 and there until 1995-96. Dr. Aldo Rama and his wife Clarissa are to restore and beautifully decorate the premise by 2004 and then open Casa Rama, a bed and breakfast enterprise.

1923-26 A small ten room, u-shaped hospital painted white is the first to serve the community. It is situated on the east side of F Street between Harrison and Jackson and faces west. Owned by Mrs. Ida Gilbert, it is staffed by two nurses from Chicago. The first is Miss Mary (Maria) Yeager. She had arrived here to look at property she had purchased. She found it undeveloped and, while staying at Mrs. Gilbert's rooming house on E. Van Buren, suggested to Mrs. Gilbert that she invest in a hospital to serve the community. Mrs. Gilbert and her husband Louis bought the lot on F Street on 3/26/23 from W.W. and Rose Alaniz. She then purchased two identical army barracks located south of the Arroyo near Rangerville and joined the two with another building. Miss Julia Bassart, a dietician, joined her friend and was responsible for hospital housekeeping while Mary handled the floor duties. The seven patient rooms charge \$5 a day. The hospital is staffed by doctors, N.A. Davidson, Casper and Alfred M. Letzerich. One incident involving the hospital is when law officer Johnson and Atiliano Sanchez shot one another in a confrontation.

After being brought to the hospital and placed in opposite wings, Johnson survives his wounds, but Sanchez is to die 6/2/23. The women's hospital is made obsolete once the new Valley Baptist Hospital up the street comes into full use in 1925. In 1973 land owner Louis Levine donates the "little hospital" structure and, through the efforts of Betty Murray, the RGV Museum board agrees to accept it at the museum site. Mrs. Gilbert is well known in the community for she operates the popular Gilbert House on E. Van Buren. In addition to providing rooms it will become famous as an eatery when it commences serving the city during the Hurricane of 1933. The Gilberts first came to McAllen from Missouri due to her asthma then built the stucco hotel in 1920. The hotel was sold to Mrs. Bell Thaye in 1943, and she in turn sold it to the city in the 1950s to become a parking lot for city hall. The building itself was moved to a site on Airbase Road.

Sondock

Ned N. Sondock comes late in the year and resides at the Verser House while waiting for his wife Tillye (later anglicized to Tillie) in Houston to give birth to their son Gerald (Jerry) (b.3/27/27). They then both move to Harlingen. Ned will later found Delta Office Furniture Co. with Abe I. Axelrod, a cousin working for Edelsteins Furniture. In 1935 the partnership was terminated. It will evolve into Delta Office Supply. The first store is located at 115 North A before the Sondock building is erected around 1940 at 117 W. Jackson. Son Marvin is born at home 9/28/33 at 1021 E. Filmore where the family resides until 1945. They then purchase Marcella Gafney Long's uniquely designed homestead on Palm Blvd. Sondock will die 1/1/60 at age 57 leaving his wife and sons. This Mason was one of the founders of Temple Beth Israel and a scout leader. He was also a strong promoter of Harlingen as the retailing shopping center of the Valley. Upon Ned's death Jerry and Marvin inherit Delta Office Supply while their mother is to open Delta Gift Bazaar. Marvin will go on to manage Discount Office Furniture.

1932 This is a difficult time economically for the city as well as the country. To promote growth here the Harlingen Community League is formed "For the Advancement and Continued Progress of Harlingen and the Valley." The list of individuals on its letterhead speak for their prominence. W.L. Trammel is president; Charles F.C. Ladd, vp; Joe Penry, treasurer; John T. Floore, secretary-manager; Ray V. Gillispie, traffic manager; Bishop Clements, publicity director; and on the directorate are O.P. Storm, capitalist; J.J. Burk, Reese-Wil-Mond Hotel; V.V. Pernoud, Gulf Refinery Co.; Claude Fullick, Great National Life Insurance Co.; Ned Sondock, Delta Office Supply; D.B. Traxler, real estate; W.P. Briscoe, Straus-Frank Co.; Clayton Pritchard, real estate; Henry Converse, Crane & Co.; and P.W. Baker, South Texas Lumber.

5/19/50 The concept for an international bridge in the vicinity of Los Indios is laid out by its "founding fathers" who want to set up the San Benito Bridge Co. On 5/28/59 about 30 men and women meet in San Benito to form a corporation to build a bridge under the name San Benito International Bridge Co. Harlingen subscribers to the \$250,000 enterprise are O.F. Bakhaus, R.O. Bork, E.C. Breedlove, W.F. Devine, George W. Duncan, James F. Hefner, Ben Levine, and Mrs. Tillie Sondock.

6/10/71 The C of C establishes a Harlingen Historical Hall of Fame to recognize distinguished Harlingenites. Twenty individuals are honored at an affair where 450 attend. The honorees are:

Lon C. Hill	John B. Challes	Ned Sondock
Albert L. Benoist	J. Lewis Boggus	Elam Clay (E.C.) Breedlove
John W. McKelvey	Howard E. Butt	Eustacia Hill Caul
Hill Cocke	Frank E. Davis	Harry Day
D. B. "Bus" Dunkin	Fred L. Flynn	L.C. "Mose" Hill
McHenry Tichenor	Hugh Ramsey	R.L. Hill
Harvey L. Richards	Mrs. Gerald (Verna) McKenna	

Epstein

1926 There are 128 business establishments at this time.

Pushing sales this year were the La Turno Printing Company, Ben Epstein's Broadway Men's Shop with "Distinctive apparel for men and boys", J.W. Gardner with photographic studios both in Harlingen and Pharr, Abner L. Lewis and Co. specializing in municipal securities, and the Electric Service Station managed by S.S. Bobo.

In Combes this year there are three general merchandise outfits: J.D. Templeton, Madeley Mercantile Company, and E.W. Shaw. L. E. Hargrave is running a service station and John Milan is a real estate agent.

1/18/27 Harry Kapneck, an associate of Morris Epstein, electrical supplier of Washington, reveals the \$12,500 purchase of acreage from George Corres and Frank Svadlenak. at the east end of Harrison. Plans are to construct 45 modern homes. Initially 30 Spanish style homes will be put up at a projected total cost of \$250,000. This will be called Washington Park.

7/3/28 Ben Epstein's Broadway Men's Store which suffered a fire several weeks ago is set to reopen while its proprietor is on his honeymoon. Ben and his wife Delma with their first child would later reside at 301 E. Monroe.

1935 By this year the store at 204 W. Jackson had shuttered its doors.

Hertz

By 1930 E. Hertz had commenced his retailing operations in Harlingen. It would concentrate on ladies ready-to-wear items. Initially at 106 S. A Street, through the late 1930s it would be located at 119 E. Jackson. Mrs. Blanche Fulgham was one of its earlier managers.

1941 This year the store is at 200 E. Jackson. This is apparently the last year of its operation. The Hertz family included Wilhemena and son David, a student. Residing at 1004 E. Taylor, they would be gone from the Harlingen scene by 1942.

Lamm

Although they were residents of La Feria the Drs. Lamm played an integral role in Harlingen life. Both were practitioners at the old Valley Baptist Hospital on F Street and

beloved by their patients for their caring and thoughtful nature. The two female doctors on the staff were V. M. Amidor and Annie T. Lamm. The latter is an anesthetist and also delivers children.

One interesting story deals with husband and wife doctors, the Lamms. In addition to their hospital work they had a general practice for years in La Feria. Heinrich and Annie Lamm were German Jews, who as Hitler became increasingly oppressive, fled to the United States in the 1930s. After settling in New Jersey where their ship landed, they went to Kansas City in 1937 then later came to the Valley in 1939 and made their home in La Feria.

La Feria's Joe Tucker while visiting the Corning Glass Museum in New York chanced upon an item connected with Heinrich. Heinrich's son had contributed a newspaper article concerning a discovery his father had made as a medical student in Germany in 1930. Doctors were searching for a non-intrusive way to examine parts of the human body. Heinrich had put together a packet of thin flexible glass rods which could bend and go around sensitive organs. These could conduct light and images thereby providing the physician a view of body conditions heretofore inaccessible. He had, in effect, created one of the first fiber optic devices if not the first.

Wolf

Acetylene Oxygen Company History in Harlingen

Norman Rozeff, HHPS, March 2008

1937-38 In this year's Wilmot telephone directory is found the first documentation of the origins of the company. Welder's Equipment Company with J. S. Cohn as manager is listed. The business address is 608 W. Harrison Avenue. Julius and his wife together with two children under 18 years of age reside at 1022 South F Street.

1939 This year A.(lbert) Wolf is listed as a partner in the wholesale business. Wolf and his wife Pauline reside at 1210 E. Taylor Avenue with one child under 18.

1941 The situation remains the same except the Cohns have moved to 902 E. Fillmore Avenue.

1942-43, 1944, 1946 The situation remains the same with Wolf sometimes being listed as co-partner and then as co-owner. The 1948 directory lists Albert Wolf Jr. as a college student.

1950 The firm's name by this year has changed to the Acetylene Oxygen Company and its location is 320 South C Street. Albert Jr. has become a salesman for the firm. M. D. and Marilyn Cohn are students this year.

1952 The company has located a manufacturing plant at 2 Mile West Hwy. 83 with its sales and service outlet at 705 W. Jackson Avenue. Albert Jr., who continues as an employee of the company, has married and had one child by this year. He resides at 1118

South A. The directory will initiate multi-year variations of his wife's name. Over time it is set down as Marsielle, Marky, Markey, Marcille, and Marjorie.

1954 Albert Jr. has risen to the position of plant superintendent. Maurice D. Cohn is a medical student this year.

1956 Albert Wolf is noted as company president and Albert Jr., now having two children, as salesman.

1956-57 Cohn with the title of secretary-treasurer is handling the sales/service at 705 W. Jackson while Albert Wolf, president and manager, is in charge of the manufacturing plant.

1958 Julius Cohn becomes president of the firm upon the death of Albert Wolf who leaves Pauline a widow. Albert Jr. assumes the title of secretary-treasurer. Cohn is soon to retire and Albert Jr. becomes the sole owner of AOC. The Cohns by then have moved to 221 Grimes, Apt. 6.

1961 In this year Albert Jr. and Raymond B. Wolf are listed as partners. The latter apparently is in charge of the Brownsville branch at 1024 E. 14th Street. This opened in 1948. Raymond is residing at 1724 Carthage Ct. Brownsville while Albert and his family have moved from South A to 1813 Elmwood in the Laurel Park Subdivision.

1962-19656 Things remain materially the same.

1966 An outlet is now at 801 International Blvd., Brownsville. This year Marky is listed as vice-president and Albert Jr. as secretary-treasurer.

1969-1971 Albert and Raymond are noted to be partners.

1978 Bert Wolf, son of Albert Jr. becomes part of the firm.

1980 By this year Albert Wolf alone is listed as owner. He has also become a director of the Plaza National Bank.

1999 AOC sales and service are at 822 W. Jackson with the general office at 713 W. Jackson.

By January 2001 the firm has consolidated its sales/service operations at the former Trailways bus terminal at 512 S. Commerce Street. The structures were refurbished into a very attractive entity.

In December 2007 with Bert Wolf now AOC owner, a \$3 million administration building began to rise on a two-acre lot on East Tyler. This will become the headquarters for the more than 23 AOC distribution locations and more than 300 employees the firm now utilizes across the state of Texas. The 15,000 sq. ft. building will house about 60 offices

compared to the 40 now occupied at 711 W. Jackson. The location of the new office situates it closer to Port Harlingen which AOC uses as a distribution point and which will also eventually have a relocated AOC warehouse and paint body shop.

The company's two manufacturing plants are in Harlingen and north of Corpus Christi. It manufactures acetylene, propane, methane, propylene, ethylene, butane, water or producer gas, coal gas, methylacetylene propadiene MAPP gas, and LPS. It also packages chlorine, caustic soda, SO₂ and anhydrous ammonia from railcars to cylinders and distributes many to the water treatment industry. Lastly, it wholesales welding equipment and supplies, soldering machines, and soldering, welding, and brazing accessories.

Adolph and Davis

The New York Store and The Diana Shop, A Sweet Connection

Norman Rozeff, HHPS, November 2008

This article comes about because of an e-mail generated by items on the CCHC website. The correspondent wrote: My name is Shirley Hewitt, and I am the Granddaughter of Rose Adolph who owned and operated The New York Store. I believe the timeline was sometimes in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and she ran the business, I believe, until the 1950s. I hope you can share any details or pictures to which you have access.

I am also the daughter of Mildred Adolph Davis and Gerald Davis. My Uncle Charlie owed The Diana Shop. My parents first met while my mother was selecting an outfit for a date. My father always said, "It was love at first sight." My Father, Gerald Davis, who was a clerk in The Diana Shop offered to buy Mildred the outfit she chose if she would go out with him and cancel her prior engagement. Mildred Adolph agreed... and as they say...the rest is history!

I would love any information you have on any of the Adolphs (Rose, Mildred, Dorothy, Leo) and the Davis family, Gerald and Charlie. All these family members are now deceased. It would mean a great deal to me to have any information that can be found. Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.

The New York Store is first documented in 1930 in the Harlingen telephone directory of that year. This is the first city telephone directory currently on file. The store's location was 218 W. Jackson Avenue, the town's main street. It was on the northeast corner intersection with Commerce Street, another important commercial thoroughfare. When the store actually began to occupy the site is unknown. The store occupied one of Harlingen's first structures, that of the Letzerich Building which still exists. It was built in 1909 by the physician brothers Casper and Alfred. To make use of a vacant triangular plot of land between the two-story building and Commerce Street, a one-story addition had been added at some unknown time. (A 1928 post card appears to show part of the addition being there by that date and it definitely was by July 1929 in the Sanborn Insurance Map). The wall into brother Hugo Letzerich's former pharmacy store was removed thereby making a large sales space for The New York Store. The store specialized in "dry goods", a term seldom used today. Dry goods were textiles, ready-to-wear clothing, and notions as distinguished from hardware and groceries.

The proprietor of The New York Store was listed as Rose Adolphus. Her surname was misspelled in the directory and should be Adolph. Listed as the widow of Adolf Adolphus(sic), her residence was 605 E. Monroe Avenue. Residing with her were three children under 18 years of age. The modest one-story frame house that once stood at 605 is now gone and the lot is vacant.

The 1931-32 again misspells her name but this time as Adolphs.

In the 1935 directory not only is Rose listed but also Leo Adolph who is at least 19 now and clerking in the store that has moved into 110 E. Jackson. This was a 1920s two-story building with only about 50' frontage but with a depth of up to 140'. During Hurricane Dolly on July 23, 2008 water accumulated on its roof and caused the collapse of the whole internal structure.

By 1939 all the Adolph children, Leo, Dorothy, and Mildred are listed separately. This year finds the first listing for The Diana Shop at 115 E. Jackson. Charles J. Davis is its owner. It specializes in ladies ready-to-wear merchandise. Charles and his wife Florence live at 404 E. Madison Avenue. The original frame house no longer exists. 115 E. Jackson is now the D'Arte Center, a very attractive gallery owned and operated by the Harlingen Art Forum.

In the 1941 directory Dorothy Adolph is listed as a student, Mildred as a college student, and Leo the proprietor of the Co-Ed Shoe Store. This store is located at 109 S. 2nd Street. For whatever reason Rose's store is simply listed as Adolph's, and it has changed locations once again, this time to 104 E. Jackson. This corner location, formerly a western store, has recently been renovated and is currently a large Subway franchise. This same year Charles Davis has moved his residence to 214 W. Pierce Avenue. The small frame house that once occupied the lot has been replaced by a modest brick veneer structure.

With World War II having commenced in late 1941 for the US, we find that the 1942-43 directory lists Leo as being in the US Army while the status of his sisters remains the same. Rose's store, now again The New York Store, is back close to its original location, this time down the block to two-story 212 E. Jackson. This is also one of Harlingen's earliest commercial structures having been build about 1913 or earlier.

Charles has moved his residence again, this time to 717 E. Tyler Avenue, one of the city's main traffic routes. The house at 717 is a small frame one now being utilized as a women's salon.

In 1944 Dorothy and Mildred have become employees of the store. Leo has risen to the rate of staff sergeant in the Army Air Corps. He may be serving at the Harlingen Air Gunnery School at the Harlingen Army Air Field.

The Diana Shop continues to operate under Charles's direction. At his residence no wife Florence is listed. They may have separated, or she may have died.

By 1946 Rose has moved her residence to 918 E. Polk Avenue where Mildred lives with her. The site which likely once had a small frame house now has a small newer brick one. The New York Store is still in business this year.

Davis this year is living in the Madison Hotel on E. Polk. Built in 1928 this large hotel had suites for rent. It was demolished before 1951 to make room for a multi-storied bank building. There is no mention of his wife Florence.

We learn from the 1948 directory that Leo is married to Ann and is a merchant. The 1950 directory notes him to be a merchant in Weslaco. He and his wife reside at 918 E. Polk

together with Rose and Mildred. This year there is no listing whatsoever for the New York Store. The 212 E. Jackson site is now occupied by Levine's Department Store. The itinerant Charles has moved to 1620 S. 1st Street where Gerald (Jerry) Davis also resides. Gerald, Charles's brother, is noted to be an employee of The Diana Shop. 1620 is a modest sized cottage.

By 1950 Leo and Ann have moved into their own home at 1213 E. Polk. While Rose is still at 918 E. Polk, Mildred is not listed and may have married by that year.

In the 1952 directory Rose Adolph is not listed, but there is a listing for The New York Store at 212 W. Jackson.

The year is significant because Leo and Ann have had their first child by then. Gerald Davis, now the manager of The Diana Shop, has married Mildred Adolph and they are living at 918 E. Polk.

A change has also occurred in Charles's life. A wife, Carol, is noted at his residence together with a child under 18.

In 1954 Rose is to be found living at 817 E. Parkwood Drive together with Leo, Ann and a grandchild. Gerald, Mildred and their child also provide the same address. This brick veneer home was in an upscale location though modest in comparison to its neighbors. The New York Store notes Gerald Davis as its owner and while 212 W. Jackson is listed as its address it has no classified ad in the directory.

1956 Leo Adolph has opened Leo's Department Store at 202 E. Jackson. This store will operate into 1958, but in 1959 the site is occupied by the Cannon Shoe Store with Tony Munguia as manager. That site is currently Alexandre's Jewelry and the Java Cafe. He and his family now reside at 1213 E. Polk. The house is a small stucco cottage.

By the 1956-57 publication Rose is to be found at 1913 Bell Street together with Gerald and Mildred. The address 1913 no longer exists as a house but has become a medical office strip

1958 appears to be the last year that The New York Store is in business. In the following years the site is occupied by the Amigo Store, discount clothing.

Charles Davis appears to have lost or separated from his wife Carol by this year. The following year all Adolphs have apparently left Harlingen. The Gerald Davis family has also gone elsewhere.

Charles Davis will continue to own and operate The Diana Shop at least into 1974 when he may have died or retired. In 1975 Gerald is back in Harlingen, residing at his father's old abode at 1620 S. 1st Street, and operating the shop. His home entries are no longer there in the 1977 directories. He either has sold the store or taken residence outside of Harlingen. The Diana Shop continues into 1979 and 1980 but by the latter year has moved into the attractive new Mercado Mall at 712 77 Sunshine Strip. The Diana Shop had been sold to Carol Graham. In 1980 the former downtown store was vacant. By 1981 The Diana Store is nowhere to be found.

The modest residences that the Davis and Adolph families occupied in Harlingen over the decades indicates that they were not ostentatious.

All the Adolphs and Davis family members noted here were to move to California by 1958. In the 1950s Rose and the Adolph children, Leo, Mildred and Dorothy formed a company named Adolph Properties and leased their many storefront locations in Downtown Harlingen. These properties were eventually sold and the partnership dissolved in the 1980s.

Because Mildred died in 1965, her sister Dorothy was to raise her two daughters, Shirley and Tobie. Rose died in 1974, Leo in the 1970s and Dorothy in 2007. That The New York Store operated at least 29 years and The Diana Store 42 years is a testament to good management and high customer satisfaction.

Some History of Temple Beth Israel, Harlingen

Norman Rozeff
January 2009

By 1948 the number of Jews in Mercedes was shrinking as the town was being superseded commercially by McAllen and by Harlingen. McAllen and Harlingen members of Temple Beth El of the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Mercedes met separately in committee. The decision of both committees was to dissolve the Mercedes congregation. The Harlingen participants met 10/26/48 at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Messner where Ned Sondock chaired the meeting. They received a report from Nate Koppel of the joint meeting held in Mercedes on 10/17/48. Both sides had agreed to sell the real estate comprised by the temple structure and its lot, and to divide the personal property and assets of the congregation. It was officially dissolved. The structure was later sold to a church.

Temple Emanuel in McAllen was already under construction, so it purchased the original pews, the Torah, prayer books, all the chairs, tables and kitchen items for \$250.00. The Harlingen group retained those items marked "Temple Beth Israel.

Between late 1948 and June 24, 1951 (the Jewish calendar year 5711) when its newly constructed temple on E. Jackson Avenue at 17th Street was dedicated, the Harlingen congregation met in various places including Barracks #T50 at the former Harlingen Army Airfield. This building served as both sanctuary and Sunday school for the congregation. By 9/20/50 however the newly completed Temple Beth Israel in the 1700 block of E. Jackson would hold its first high holidays Yom Kippur service according to Larry Rosow, secretary-treasurer.

In December 1949 the architectural firm of Cocke, Bowman and York had been contracted for \$25,500 for plans and specifications. When the temple was dedicated it had 63 members in its congregation. On November 14, 1951 it was officially incorporated under Texas law.

From 1955 through 1966 the official paid membership ranged from 34 to 43 individuals. The number of attendees for services was significantly higher as Jewish military personnel at the reactivated and now renamed Harlingen Air Force Base were active participants. Their presence was considerable from April 1952 through June 1962 after which the base was permanently closed. This also meant the loss of Harlingen businesses including those of some Jewish merchants. This too diminished the numbers in the congregation.

The limited and fluctuating size of the congregation meant that there were few years when it could hire a fulltime rabbi. Often the services were conducted by student rabbis or visiting rabbis from McAllen and Brownsville.

A more complete history than the above was compiled by Lewis Levine for a presentation to the Texas Jewish Historical Society visiting Harlingen on February 11, 1995. It is part of this file.

Some time after mid-1961 a Sunday school addition with four classrooms and two restrooms were added as well as a recreation room attached to the temple. The kitchen was expanded and modernized. The total cost for these changes was \$26,935.

After more than 50 years the temple was showing normal wear, tear, and its middle age. After Hurricane Dolly damaged the building in July 2008, considerable repairs were necessary and their costs fortunately covered by insurance. In 2009 extensive renovations were made to its plumbing, electrical, and other areas requiring updating. The Koppel family donated two striking front doors fabricated from African wood and with unique metal door handles featuring Jewish stars. A new floor with 2' x 2' ceramic tile was laid. The kitchen saw completely new stone counters, stainless steel appliances, and a commercial size stove. Six narrow horizontal windows in one wall of the sanctuary were replaced by beautiful stain glass creations designed by the Hand of Man. The current sixty theater style seats will be replaced by newer models.

The Temple was scheduled for its re-dedication on December 11, 2009. This would coincide with the happy celebration of the Jewish holiday Chanukah. The congregation has risen in number to around 100 members. Strangely enough some recently joined members are converts with an unusual background. They are Mexican ethnics who believe that their ancestors were Jews who fled to the border regions of Mexico when the Spanish Inquisition increased its examinations and punishments starting in Mexico City. They became in many instances "Crypto" Jews rather than abandoning their beliefs altogether. Over time however they were integrated into the Christian community though some families practiced some traditional Jewish practices without knowing their origin or why. With genealogy research on the increase, recent years have seen a resurgence in interest in verifying Jewish roots of some Mexican families.

Fernando and Alma Russek, he being the temple's president, were to be honored with a testimonial dinner on October 22, 2009 in recognition of their tireless dedication to the Harlingen area Jewish community.