

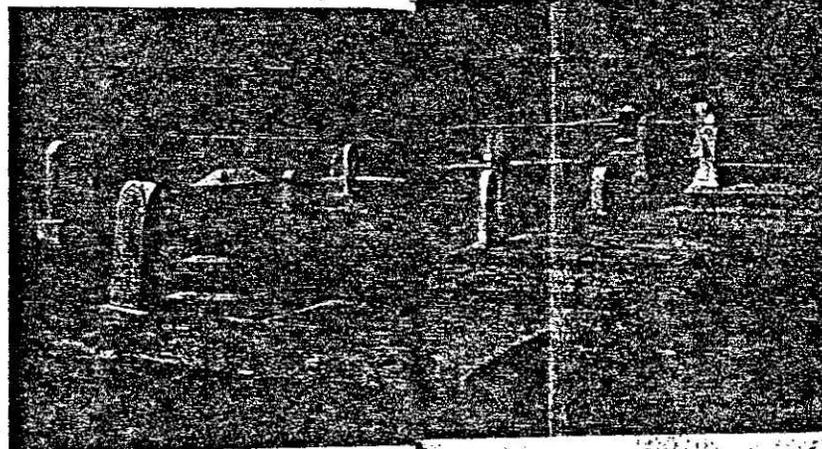
Dear Myra & Linn: This article
 was in the REA July 1986 Magazine.
 Hope all is well. Love
 Louisa & Paul

SLOVEN
 County

The lost Jews of McIntosh County

by Ron Vossler

*A well-kept cemetery
 is the only reminder
 that 60 Jewish families
 once lived near Ashley.*



All gravestones in the tiny cemetery north of Ashley face west (above); all graves are covered in concrete. Another even smaller site about 100 feet southwest of this cemetery contain two graves, including one of a 2-year-old girl who died in 1918, year of the flu epidemic.

those initial years—despite their numbers, established social institutions and a relatively intact way of life tested in Russia—pined to leave the inhospitable prairie. And like similar ill-fated Jewish colonies at Painted Woods Creek in Burleigh County, and at Wing, these McIntosh County Jews eventually departed during the 1920s. Some may even have immigrated to Palestine, which after 1918 had come under British protection.

Before 1911 they met in their farm homes to worship. And for various holidays, weddings and bar mitzvahs—a boy's initiation into religious duty—the services of a rabbi from metropolitan areas to the east were engaged. In the spring of 1911 some 60 Jewish families were living in McIntosh County. It was then the Jewish Chautauquan Society sent Rabbi Hess from Chicago to serve from two headquarters in the state—at Ashley and Wing. By 1917 a synagogue, a simple frame building, was bought and maintained at Ashley. But in later years dwindling membership caused the remaining members of the Jewish community to travel to Aberdeen or Bismarck.

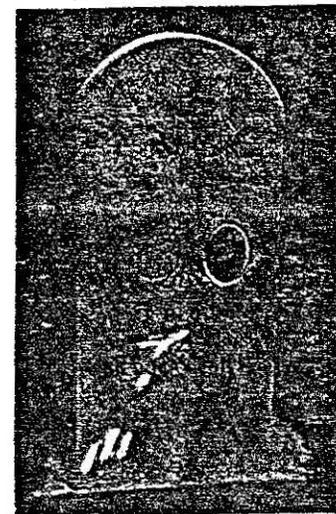
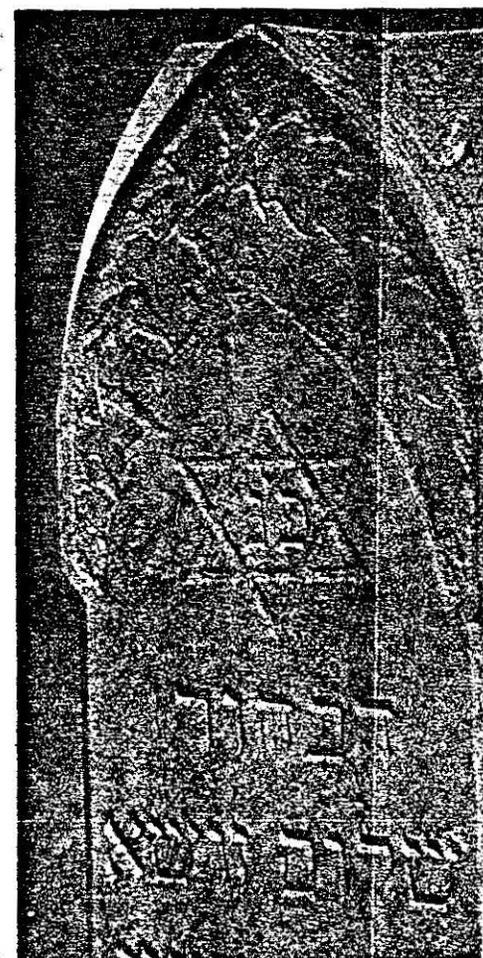
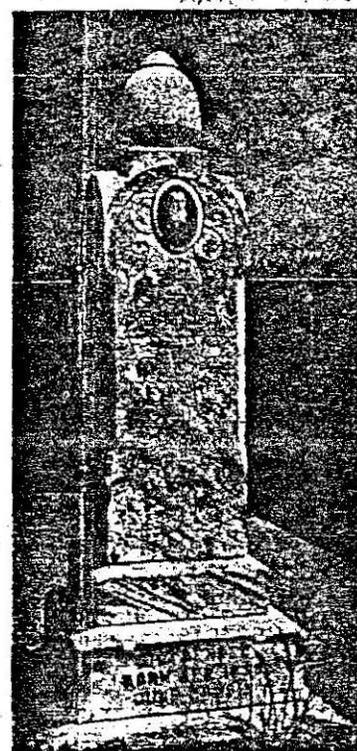
So for a generation they remained, long enough to bury 21 members of their community, some of whom have their photographs under recessed ovals of glass set in the tombstones. There is a photograph of an old man with a patriarchal beard. And there is a Mr. Bloom, a man who looks in the heartiest prime of life, the first person buried there. Just above his name there is a carved relief of a tree, snapped in half—a symbol of his untimely end. And like everyone else during the dreaded Spanish influenza epidemic of

1918-19, a time the German-Russians called "Die Sintflut" or The Deluge, these Jews buried their dead. It was a deluge for them, too; seven of their graves date from that time.

There are none of the original Jewish families living in the county anymore; no descendants of theirs speaking the dialect in the streets of Ashley, as is the case with the German-Russians. The synagogue has been moved away, and not many people remember them. A farmer living near the cemetery said he knew nothing about "those peoples."

Country cemeteries, after the old church has been moved away, are often overgrown and abandoned. But members of that first congregation have made provision; this one is well-tended by caretaker Johnnie Salzer of Ashley.

On leaving that place, one remembers the carved relief of the broken tree. It seems to tell not only about Mr. Bloom, but also about the lost Jewish colony of McIntosh County. □



Intricate carving on tombstone. Two graves of Kiv Bloom" (near who lie beneath)

McIntosh County in south central North Dakota is German-Russian country. It is here hardworking farmers settled around the turn of the century, bringing with them a way of life whose origins, by way of the Russian steppes, stretch back to a troubled Germany of the Napoleonic era. And at first glance the graveyard, just off the highway winding out of the county seat of Ashley, looks like any other rural cemetery: The tombstones stick out of the prairie like thumbs. But it belongs to another group that settled there, too, one whose origins reach further back, to biblical times—a colony of Jews once numbering 60 families.

They came as early as 1900. Like so many Germans-Russians, these Jews came primarily from Bessarabia—once a southern area of Russia, now Rumania, whose rolling hills are similar to the overlooked beauty of McIntosh County.

The Jewish people of Europe long thought of America as Canaan, the Promised Land. So it should be no surprise that we find some of their faith settling in North Dakota. At one time early in the state's history, there was a town, founded by some Jewish entrepreneurs, named Jerusalem. But what is surprising is that these people—inveterate tradesmen as surely as the German-Russians were farmers—attempted to farm.

Prior to the turn of the century there was a current of thought among Jewish intellectuals, unnerved by pogroms in Europe, that agriculture and physical labor might be the driving force needed to transform the people and redeem the homeland of Palestine. When Turkey banned immigration into Palestine in 1882, land was sought elsewhere. And it was the Jewish Agricultural Aid Society of New York City, a back-to-the-land movement, that sponsored the group of Jews to take up land near Ashley, and perhaps in two other locations in the state. But conditions were harsh. Even most German-Russians in