

# Old Jewish cemeteries in N.D. show once-large community

By Ted Quanrud  
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ASHLEY, N.D. — Just north of here along the highway is a small cemetery.

Viewed from the road, it is indistinguishable from the hundreds of other rural cemeteries in North Dakota, but if one stops for a closer look, a difference becomes readily apparent.

The inscriptions on the headstones are in Hebrew, and each bears the star of David.

The cemetery at Ashley is one of a few rural Jewish cemeteries in the state. One is near Regan in Burleigh County; another is near Devils Lake. All are reminders of a time when Jewish settlers were found in even the smallest communities.

"There are no more Jewish people here," says Lydia Weber, who has lived all her life in Ashley. "The last one was Dr. Leo Cohen, and he died several years ago."

Johnny Salzer also remembers Dr. Cohen, a dentist, and a few others.

"There was Noah Dorfman, he was a cattle buyer, and Hank Greenberg, he was also a cattle buyer, they were sort of together," Salzer recalls. "Then there was Nat Auerbach, he ran a grocery store, and Sam Raich, he had a hardware store."

At one time, as many as 60 Jewish families lived in McIntosh County. Like their German-Russian neighbors, they started coming here about 1900, many from Bessarabia in South Russia.

They were sponsored by the Jewish Agricultural Aid Society, a New York agency dedicated to helping the refugee traders become homesteaders.

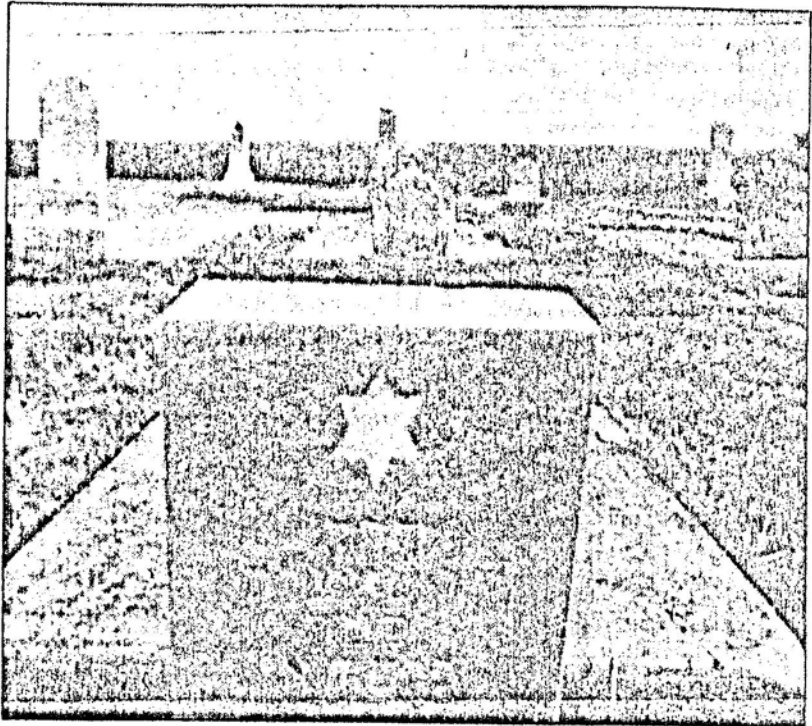
Among the settlers were the grandparents and parents of Kenneth Bender. The St. Louis Park, Minn., man says his ancestors homesteaded in North Dakota to achieve an ambition to be farmers.

"In Russia, Jews were not permitted to be landowners," Bender says. "When they came to New York, they learned about the land being given away, and they seized the opportunity."

Unfortunately, the Benders arrived in the winter, and when they selected their land, they could not see that the soil was extremely rocky.

"They had to clear the rocks away an acre at a time," Bender says. "My father was the youngest, and he did much of it."

There were enough people to support a rabbi — first Rabbi Hess from Chicago, then Rabbi M.



Associated Press

Headstones inscribed in Hebrew and marked with a Star of David fill a Jewish cemetery near Ashley, N.D. Descendants of those buried there maintain the site. Most of those buried in the cemetery were members of a Jewish community in McIntosh County in the early 1900s.

Ostrovsky, who served both Ashley and Wing.

They worshiped in a synagogue provided by Louis Rubin, a prominent Ashley businessman.

"My father used to speak of him," Bender says. "He said he was one of the few men at the time who had some means."

Rubin purchased the old Baptist church in Ashley, and moved it to the north side of town, where it was established as Temple Beth Isaacs.

Born in Romania in 1872, Rubin immigrated to the Eureka, S.D., area in the 1890s. He later moved to Dawson, and then to Ashley. According to the biography in Ashley's golden jubilee book, he was a community leader who directed Red Cross and war bonds efforts. He was also president of the Jewish congregation from 1905 to 1923, when he moved to Bismarck.

Besides buying the synagogue, Rubin also purchased land for the Jewish cemetery.

He specified that no fees were to be charged for the burials, but that each grave must have a headstone.

Not all those buried in the cemetery were from the Ashley area; the cemetery served a much larger region.

The last burial in the graveyard dates from the early 1930s, but Bender says most of the Jews already had left the area.

Among them is Bender's grandfather, Kiva Bender, whose tall stone monument still carries a photograph of a man with close-cropped hair and a flowing white beard.

"Isn't it amazing how that picture has stayed there?" his grandson asks.

While no Jews still live in the Ashley area, there are several who still maintain contact.

Bender visits every year, as did his father.

And the cemetery, unlike many others that have been left behind by their founders, is very well maintained.

Every month, Johnny Salzer and his son, Mark, trim the grass, fill in holes and clear away any debris.

They are paid by members of the Ashley Jewish Cemetery Association, people like Bender and Lionel Greenberg and other Minneapolis-St. Paul-area residents, who are descended from the Ashley settlers.

"My father and Mr. Greenberg and some others decided it was their responsibility to care for it," Bender says. "It is a responsibility they left to us."