

Excerpt from June 2015 National Historic Registry Nomination, drafted by Rebecca Bender

The Grave Sites

The Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery has the most marked graves of any of the three remaining visible/accessible Jewish homesteader cemeteries in North Dakota. There are twenty-two marked graves identified with markers in the Ashley Jewish Cemetery, sixteen in the Regan/Wing cemetery and eleven in the Sons of Jacob Cemetery near Devils Lake.¹ There is anecdotal evidence (from family histories) and documented evidence (from newspapers and other third party sources) of additional unmarked graves in all three remaining North Dakota Jewish homesteader cemeteries.² It is possible that the markers for the deceased not seen today were never placed at the cemeteries (as it is the Jewish custom to wait at least eleven months after the burial to place any monuments). It is also possible that in addition to the custom of not saying Kaddish (the Mourner's Prayer) over infants, there was also a custom of not marking the graves of infants. Finally, it could be that markers were covered by earth and prairie grasses over the last hundred years, or the markers were made of flimsy material and blew away like tumbleweeds with the strong winds.³

The cemetery markers are of the type from the late rural, garden and romantic cemetery movements. The monuments at the gravesites all face west, towards the setting sun, and away from the rural road. The feet of the deceased point east toward Jerusalem, the site of the Holy Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E. over 1400 years ago. Jewish people also face east toward Jerusalem during formal prayer.

There are ledgers of stone/concrete, covering each of the graves. Covering the length of the grave with stones or concrete was to prevent grave robbers from disturbing the deceased in this remote location, and to keep animals from desecrating the graves. Sometimes called

¹ ashleyjewishcemetery.com (Ashley Jewish Cemetery website); Frances M. Wold August 8, 1976 report on Wing/Regan Jewish Cemetery at North Dakota Historical Society; findagrave.com (Regan Jewish Cemetery), sojnorthdakota.org (Garske/Sons of Jacob Cemetery website)

² The Ashley Tribune refers to Mrs. Golda Ewart of Aberdeen being buried at the Ashley Jewish Cemetery, though no marker for Mrs. Ewart is visible. (Ashley Tribune 1927) There are also a number of infant graves in the cemetery referred to in family histories and in the local newspapers, though their graves are not marked: a five month old Friedman baby from Leola, South Dakota (Ashley Tribune, October 31, 1918) a Silverleib stillborn baby (Morris Silverleib Family History (June 6, 1977) North Dakota Jewish History Project, University of Minnesota, a five month old Berman baby, Susan Berman, *Easy Street*, (Dial Press 1981), and possibly Rose Bender, infant daughter of homesteaders Joseph and Mary Bender (Bender Family History) .

³ Cathy Mauk, *Cemetery is Part of Jewish History*, The Forum (December 2, 1990) refers to Myer Shark picking up the tin marker at the Sons of Jacob Cemetery, twenty miles north of Devils Lake, which had left its original locations and had blown against the inside of the fence. The present fence on the Ashley property was installed in the 1950s and replaced a "deteriorated fence." It is not known if a fence existed prior to the fence that was replaced in 1952, and there is no reference to a fence on the Miles, Latimer Plat from 1933.

“wolf stones”, these coverings were quite common in Europe in the 1800s. Jewish immigrants who came to America continued this European tradition, as a core value of Judaism is belief in “kavod-hamet”, i.e., honoring the dead.⁴

The Monuments

All of the twenty-two monuments are original, from the period of 1913-1932. All of the people buried in the cemetery were either present or past homesteaders or members of their families.



Cement ledgers covering the graves

Within the two portions of the cemetery are three pedestal obelisk monuments on foundations (Egyptian revival style, growing out of the romantic movement), three pulpit (slant face) tombstones on foundations, and many upright block markers on foundations. Three of the block markers which have curved tops and engraved columns on the sides

⁴ Rabbinic rulings as far back as the late thirteenth century state that it is optimal for a Jewish community to have its own cemetery, but if it could not, the area purchased in a non-Jewish cemetery for Jews to be buried should be set apart by a fence or other barrier. Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (1969). The first Jewish burial in the bible is noted in Genesis 23:19, when Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah. The first gravestone mentioned in the bible is found in Genesis 35:20, when Jacob erected a pillar on his wife Rachel's grave on the road to Bethlehem, after she gave birth to Benjamin.

(perhaps representing the gates of heaven), one of which is in the shape of a heart, and one of which is of Victorian gothic style. All of the nineteen original monuments other than one are made of varying grades of marble. One original monument (from the 1930s) and three replaced monuments (from the 1950s or 1960s) are made of granite. Most of the monuments are made of varying grades of marble. Four individual and one family stone are made of granite.

The epitaphs on the monuments are in Hebrew and in English, and most contain the traditional wording found on Jewish gravestones throughout the world for many centuries. For example most stones have the traditional 2 letters in Hebrew for “here lies” at the top of the stone, and the 5 letters in Hebrew at the bottom of the stone for “may his/her soul be bound up in the everlasting bonds of life” (a quote from the Book of Samuel, 25:29), or that entire phrase written out in Hebrew. Several monuments for male settlers contains the descriptive epitaph phrase (in Hebrew), “a blameless and upright man”, from the Book of Job 1:1, 1:8,2:3.



Kiva Bender Monument refers to him in Hebrew as a “blameless and upright man”

Almost all of the monuments also follow Jewish tradition, identifying the name of the deceased’s father and the Hebrew date of birth and death. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet on the monuments for dates of birth and death represent numerical values for the day and year. Jewish people use the Jewish calendar for purpose of recording life milestone events and religious holidays, rather than the Gregorian or civil calendar.

A number of the monuments display a Star (or Shield) of David (Magen David)– a six pointed star (hexagram) symbol of the Jewish people, which some have traced back as far as the sixth Century of the Common Era, but which consistently became used as a Jewish symbol in the late 1800's. The six points of the Star of David symbolize God's rule over the universe in all six directions: north south, east, west up and down. ⁵



Star of David symbol on David Ourach and Isadore Goldstone Monuments

⁵ American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, jewishvirtuallibrary.org, *The Star of David – Magen David*

Other monuments display a variety of symbols - the broken tree (on Louis Bloom's monument) and fallen branch(on Kiva Bender's monument), both signifying lives cut short too soon,



a lamb (atop Maxine Sally Becker's monument), indicating the innocence of youth),



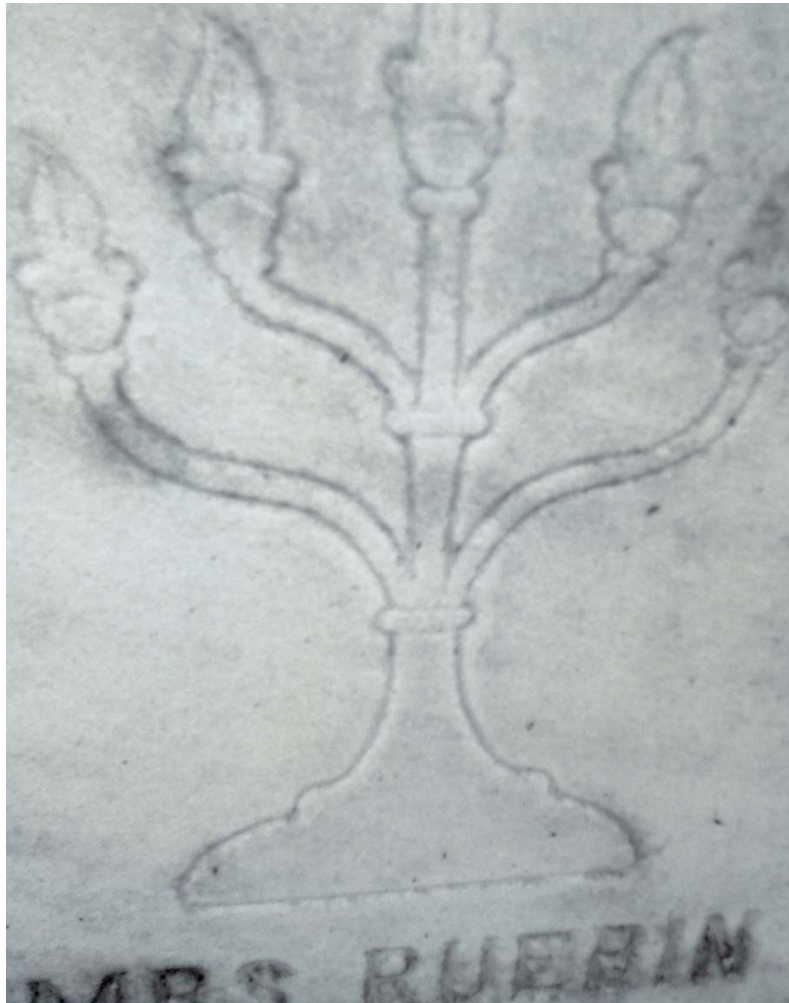
an open book (on the monuments of Isadore Grossman and Yehudah Lev Grossman), indicating how highly they prized learning and Jewish tradition,



an acorn (on the monument of infant Frieda Raich), indicating the tiny life lost,



and a Jewish candelabra (menorah – on the monument of Mrs. Louis Ruebin), symbol of the Jewish woman’s role to light the candles to usher in the Sabbath, while the five branches symbolize the five parts of the soul.⁶



⁶ The five parts of the human soul according to Jewish people are the nefesh (soul, engine of physical life), ruach (spirit, emotional self and personality), neshamah (breath, the intellectual self), chayah (life, the supra-rational self and seat of will, desire, commitment and faith) and yechidah (the essence of the soul, a piece of God within). It is customary to see a five branched menorah at the cantor’s stand at a synagogue, so when a mourner is leading services, five candles are lit in memory of the deceased. Aish Hatorah, *aish.com*, *Star of David*

Two of the monuments (those of Kiva Bender and Louis Bloom), also contain black and white cameo photographs of the deceased homesteaders.



One of the homesteaders' monuments refers to Joseph Raich as the son of a Levi. There are three present lines of descendants who can be traced from the ancient tribes of Israel – the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron (the Kohens or high priests), the descendants of the priestly tribe of Levi (Levi'im), and the descendants of one of the other tribes (Yisraelim). From the time that the Levites were loyal to God at Mount Sinai by not worshiping the Golden Calf while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments and laws, the Levites have been given special duties and privileges. A Jew inherits the same tribal designation as his/her father. In this case, the notation of the tribe on the monument provides a valuable record of the family tribe and links Mr. Raich to the honored priestly tribe from over 5000 years ago.