

## **Rebecca Bender's Ashley Jewish Heritage Day Remarks – November 6, 2016**

Thank you to Carol and the Ashley Arts Council for organizing and hosting this event. When one realizes that it was 1983 when the last Jewish resident of Ashley, dentist Leo Cohen passed away, over 30 years ago, one realizes how special this community of Ashley is. We are honored that you want to learn more about the Jewish people who used to live among you and your ancestors, and we are happy to share some information about Jewish history in this area as well as Jewish observance and study.

In 1982, Father William Sherman, a pastor and professor in Grand Forks and Fargo, as well as author of, "Plains Folks: A History of Ethnic Groups in North Dakota," wrote a paper on the Jewish Homestead Communities of North Dakota, stating:

*Jewish farmers came to the prairies in surprisingly large numbers, but today, Jews are almost totally absent from the countryside. Three small cemeteries with tombstones in Hebraic characters remain in North Dakota to mark their rural presence ... Unfortunately, the whole matter of Jewish agricultural life in North Dakota has been almost completely overlooked by scholars...*

I'm sure that many of you have seen the Jewish cemetery about 3 miles north of the town of Ashley on 48<sup>th</sup> Avenue Southeast. The first burial there took place in 1913, and the last one in 1932. Until recently, very few people who are living knew very much about who these people were who are buried in this cemetery, and how they came to live near Ashley. This is what I would like to explain to you today.

My great-grandfather, Kiva Bender, was the second person buried in that cemetery in 1913. He was the organizer and lay leader of the Jewish congregation in Ashley in the early years before a Rabbi came, performed religious ceremonies for baby namings and weddings, and was the founder of the Sulzberger Colony of Jewish farmers in the area, which allowed the Jewish farmers to band together to get better deals on purchasing seed and equipment, and obtaining credit. By 1909, when the first meeting of The Federation of Jewish Farmers of America was held in New York City, with sample produce from wheat to pumpkins, there were 25 such Jewish agricultural associations represented.

In 1907, less than one year after Kiva Bender had arrived in Ashley, he registered the Ashley Jewish Congregation, as a religious institution, in the annual American Jewish Year Book, published in Philadelphia. At that time, the Ashley Jewish community had no rabbi to lead the congregation, they had no building, but they were a registered congregation. Amazingly, this piece of information, I found by doing a google search of my great-grandfather's name!

But let's go back about 35 years before Kiva Bender and his family arrived to Ashley. The earliest reported Jewish settler in the Dakota Territory was Dan Eisenberg. Mr. Eisenberg operated a trading post on the Missouri River, south of Bismarck,

beginning in 1869. His first store was opposite Fort Lincoln, on what was called The Point. There were at least 50 Jewish agricultural settlements or colonies in 23 North Dakota counties prior to the Jewish homesteaders settling in the Ashley, ND area around 1905. There were also a number of agricultural settlements of Jews in South Dakota, as well.

I am limiting my speech to a discussion of those Jews who came to the Dakotas, and the Ashley area specifically, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> big immigration boom to the area, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, along with 250,000 other immigrants of various backgrounds.

Over one hundred years ago, beginning in 1905, Jewish immigrants from Russia and Romania arrived in this second immigration wave to North Dakota -- escaping pogroms -- organized massacres of Jews - and fulfilling their dreams to farm their own land, a right not afforded them in their native countries. McIntosh County, North Dakota, including the cities of Ashley and Wishek, provided a home to the largest agricultural settlement of Jewish homesteaders in North Dakota. North Dakota had the fourth largest number of Jewish homesteaders of any state, from 1906 – 1915, only behind New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. During this time period there were over 1200 Jewish farmers and their families, on over 250 homesteads in North Dakota.

Specifically talking about the Ashley/Wishek area - there were around 80 homesteads of Jewish families and about 400 people living on the land in 1907. This was the largest agricultural settlement of Jewish people in not only North Dakota, but also more than in South Dakota or Montana.

Prior to my beginning the several years of research in order to attempt to nominate the Jewish cemetery property to be listed on the National Register of Historic places, I had learned from family stories told by my Grandfather Joe Bender, and my Dad, Keva/Kenneth Bender, as to why *my* ancestors left Russia.

I knew that both of my Grandfather Joe Bender's brothers were killed in czar endorsed pogroms, organized massacres of Jews in Odessa, Russia in 1905, aided by the Czar's secret police, the Okhrana and the Cossacks. This was the final straw for my Great Grandparents Kiva and Rebecca Bendersky to want to leave Russia. My Grandfather was the last living boy in the Bendersky family, and his parents didn't want the family line to be extinguished. But until my research, I hadn't known of other Russian Jews' experiences. It was actually my son, Lincoln, here, who started asking me questions about the North Dakota Jewish homesteaders, when we relocated from Minnesota to Eureka in 2013.

I started with online research regarding homesteading in the Dakotas, generally. Then I reviewed reports of the Jewish Agricultural Society, Ashley Tribune newspapers clippings on microfiche and from Ashley historian Leona Neu, treatises

by Father William Sherman and others, homestead patent records, marriage records, census records, and files gathered by Frances Wold (Regan, North Dakota Town Clerk, reporter and columnist). I also toured the McIntosh Heritage Museum with Delores Schneider and read family histories painstakingly compiled in the 1970s by the late Toba Geller of Fargo, who was planning a book on the Jews of North Dakota that she unfortunately was never able to complete. Lincoln and I spent hours listening to interviews of Jewish homesteaders by Alfred Thal, including my Grandpa Joe Bender's interview, at the Historical Society in Bismarck. I waded through boxes of documents and pictures in the archives at the University of Minnesota Upper Midwest Jewish Historical Society in Minneapolis. I reread my Dad, Kenneth Bender's book, "From the Prairies to the Beaches" and memories written down by my grandfather, Joe Bender.

When examining land records at the McIntosh County Courthouse in Ashley, the Court Clerk Carol Fey, who I had just met, came over and said to me, "Excuse me. May I ask you ... Do you have Jewish blood?" I said, "Yes," "My grandparents and great-grandparents were homesteaders in Ashley." Carol said, "I want to take you to see something during my lunch break that might be of interest to you, if you would like." "Sure, thank you," I responded.

When Carol was ready, we left the Courthouse and walked less than two blocks, into a nice residential neighborhood in Ashley. "This is my home," said Carol. "It used to be the Jewish synagogue. Would you like to come inside?" I was so surprised and took her up on her kind offer. The home had been remodeled extensively prior to Carol and her husband's purchasing the property. "Other than the foundation and walls, the only original part of the old church and synagogue is the sculptured tin ceiling," she said. I stood quietly in the building and tried to picture the Ashley Jewish community meeting and greeting each other, and then beginning the serious business of praying in this spot.

Carol left me alone for a moment. I closed my eyes and tried to hear the sounds of the Jewish morning prayers from long ago, in the silence, under the tin ceiling. It was an incredible experience for me, and one that would not have been possible without Carol's kindness. I felt this same kindness when I met with Leona Neu, who I was told is Ashley's resident historian, and she shared her Ashley Tribune clippings regarding the Jewish community with me as part of my research. And I was lucky enough to meet Delores Schneider, who took me on a wonderful tour of the McIntosh County Heritage Museum, as well.

Soon, all of the research started to fill in the pieces of the puzzle regarding the Jews of McIntosh County. It also served to answer most of the questions that I had, which I will share with you.

## **Were there commonalities in why Jewish immigrants left Eastern Europe and came to the US and to the Dakotas to farm on homesteaded land?**

*Simply, yes - Through my research, I learned about the May Laws, passed in Russia in 1881. Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, and all Jews were falsely blamed for this event. His son, Czar Alexander III passed these laws, which among other things prohibited Jews from owning land or farming. Jews were also restricted from living outside of an area called the Pale of Settlement. Jews could not freely travel beyond the Pale to other areas. Jewish artisans could not work outside the Pale. Jews were excluded from participating in the Zemstvos, local governing bodies, Jews were restricted from attending Russian schools, and were straddled with very harsh taxes. Jewish boys were conscripted into the Russian arm for a period of 16 years. But it was the pogroms that resulted in the killing and injury of innocent Jewish men, women and children, which caused the mass exodus from Russia.*

*Along with these worsening conditions for Russian Jews, there were a number of back to the land movements, which provided hope to the Russian Jews. Am Olam, which means Eternal People, had as its goal to help Jews escape the conditions in Russia, to move to the US and to become farmers. The Homestead Act of 1862, signed by President Lincoln, offering 160 acres of free land to persons over 21 or heads of family, and came at just the right time, as conditions in Eastern Europe were worsening for the Jews. Jewish charitable organizations, as well as relatives of the Russian Jews who had already immigrated to the US, provided funds to the lucky ones, to get them out, and to take advantage of this amazing offer for free land.*

### **WHAT MADE NORTH DAKOTA SO ATTRACTIVE TO THE JEWISH HOMESTEADERS YOU MAY ASK**

*Homestead land in other areas of the country was gone or nearly gone by 1905. But in North Dakota, called the Great Northwest or called the Garden of Eden by the railroad companies, the land had not been homesteaded that quickly. Some of the reasons for this were the ongoing Civil War, reports of Indian raids, the blizzards, droughts, prairie fires, grasshoppers, and lack of efficient transportation to many parts of the Territory.*

*Also, Jewish people had lived in the Dakotas since 1869, and had found it a friendly, welcoming place. The Jews came from the same area of Russia where the German Russian immigrants of the Dakotas came from. They were used to living near each other in the Pale of Settlement and treated each other with kindness and respect once they were both in America.*

*As many of you know, Eureka was called the Odessa of the North, as Jews and non-Jews moving on to their homesteads, took the train to Eureka and then proceeded from there, sometimes on foot in ox cart trails, to find and claim land.*

## **WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES THAT JEWISH SETTLERS IN THIS AREA FOUND IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THEIR FAITH**

*For important prayers, including prayers to honor the memories of the dead, Jewish people require a minyan, which just means 10 people praying together at the same place and the same time. Specifically, Jewish people believe that if the Mourners Kaddish or prayer is said on the anniversary of a loved one's death, he or she goes up higher to be closer to God. With the distances between homesteads, it was not always easy to get together 10 people to pray. I read one family history of a gentleman who said he was always happy if 11 showed up to participate in the minyan, as if one had to go outside to the bathroom, they would not have to wait for him to come back to continue their prayers.*

*Another challenge was having kosher meat available. The Bible prescribes certain types of animals which may be eaten, and some which may not be eaten. There is also interpretation by Rabbis over the years, as to how to humanely slaughter animals for food. Joe Bender told of trying to get kosher meat from Minneapolis or Grand Forks delivered on the train. By the time the meat would arrive, it was spoiled. So, one member of the Ashley Jewish community actually traveled to New York to get proper training in slaughtering. Also, a Rabbi who came to town later would help slaughter the animals. But by necessity, the rules regarding eating only kosher food were sometimes bent a bit, if it had been a tough growing season, and rabbit and pheasant were available.*

## **WHERE THE JEWISH FARMERS IN THIS AREA GENERALLY SUCCESSFUL? I HAD ASSUMED NOT, AS THEY HAD MOVED ON TO OTHER OCCUPATIONS. I FOUND OUT FROM MY RESEARCH THAT I WAS WRONG.**

*The McIntosh County land had been picked over before they arrived, so the Jewish farmers claims were almost all on very rocky land in the hills. Their German Russian neighbors called the area where the Jewish homesteaders settled as "Judenberg", the Jewish Hills. Despite their lack of experience and the land quality, the great majority of the Ashley/Wishek homesteaders purchased their land prior to the 5-year waiting period required under the Homestead Act. They were able to do this by rotating crops, diversification of crops, buying and selling cream, and raising cows and chickens. They also lived frugally, like their neighbors - living on potatoes when times were tough, because one could dig a hole, cover it with straw, and keep the potatoes there all winter. They also worked off their farms to make ends meet - working in the engine room shoveling coal for the railroad, working on threshing crews, working to build roads.*

*Their ability to make ends meet was only limited by their creativity - once Joe Bender's sister and a cousin brought their cow, a stove and necessary ingredients to set up shop near a road building crew in an abandoned building. They made fresh bread for the men and served them milk, making some nice money to bring back home.*

*In 1907, the Grand Forks Herald , in an article entitled “Jews take to the farm - Colony in Ashley, ND prospering at Beginning of Third Year”, provided*

*The Jewish colony which was started near Ashley, ND in September 1905 is prospering wonderfully. They are proving daily that the Jews make as good farmers as students, vindicating that they are willing workers, and many of them would have long been “tillers of the soil” had they but had the opportunity.*

*The Ashley newspaper in 1913 expressed the common view of the citizens of the town toward their Jewish neighbors:*

*Since history began, the Jew has been the middleman and the lender of money - reason for this is found in the law of other countries forbidding him ownership of real estate. In the US today, this is changing and the Jew is going to the land in ever increasing numbers. Statistics on file with the North Dakota Development league at Grand Forks show that there are now 7500 Jewish families on farms in the US, with 37,000 Jews engaged in agriculture. On the land the Jew is proving competent and making for himself a place of importance in the agricultural life of the country.*

#### **WHAT WAS THE REALTIONSHIP LIKE BETWEEN THE JEWS AND THE NON-JEWS IN MCINTOSH COUNTY?**

**I learned what a wonderful bond the homesteaders, Jew and non-Jew, had with each other in their neighboring sod houses. There was a feeling that they were all in this together, and it was not unusual for them to socialize together or do favors for each other.**

*When my Grandfather Joe Bender’s sister got married in Ashley in 1909, the wedding was held outside, all the neighbors were invited, Jew and non-Jew, my great-grandfather Kiva made wine, my great grandmother and other family and friends made spongecakes and cookies, the food and drink was all gone within an hour, but everyone danced until dawn – even after the paid musicians went home, the groom (my late – great uncle Joe Miller, who later owned the general store in Hillsvew, SD) picked up his violin, someone got a washboard, and they all continued celebrating together.*

*My grandfather, Joe Bender told of a story regarding a German-Russian homesteader named Mattias Kopp, who was not Jewish. Each time Joe would ride to town in Ashley on his horse, he would go past Mr. Kopp’s farm. One year he saw that Mr. Kopp had not planted his field. Joe went to his home and asked him why this was. Mr. Kopp with tears in his eyes, said his horses had all gotten sick. Joe told his Dad about it that evening, and his Dad said they should try to all help the Kopps together. Joe rode his horse that night to many Jewish homesteads and asked them to show up the next morning at Kopps farm. When Joe arrived before dawn at the Kopp farm, with his team of horses, plow and seed, he was the only one there. Then he heard horses hooves*

*and more horses hooves as the sun started to rise. Thirty Jewish homesteaders with thirty teams of horses and thirty plows had come to help their neighbor. In one day they plowed and seeded the Kopps' acres. Mr. Kopp came out and looked with disbelief. Why did you do this, he asked. Joe told him, "What we did for you, you would have done for any of us."*

*The Bender's Uncle Israel Auerbach, owned the general store in Ashley, after he sold his farm. He would sell flour and other staples at cost to the farmers, as it was the compassionate thing to do. When he later had financial difficulties, it was his non-Jewish customers who co-signed notes to the bank, so he could resume his business.*

*The Ashley synagogue was purchased in 1917. It was formerly the Ashley Baptist church. It was eventually moved to the lot in Ashley where it now sits. The lot was sold for a low price to the Jewish congregation by Mr. John Wishek, with the understanding that it would revert back to the Wishek family once it was no longer being used as a synagogue. This is the home where the Fey family now live.*

*On the prairie, Jewish and non-Jewish friends and relatives gathered frequently to talk, play chess, sing songs, and consume endless glasses of hot tea sweetened with lump sugar or vareneya, jam. In good weather, the women walked across the prairie to visit each other, the small children clinging to the mothers' long skirts. In early summer they gathered wild rose petals to make a rose-amber jelly. Later in the summer, they would go on excursions to pick chokecherries for jelly, using their hairpins to poke the fruit.*

*Joe Bender's sister Sarah and her husband Noah were part of a group that had brought with them from Russia a volume of plays by Anton Checkhov. They rented the Ashley Town Hall and put on the plays with their Jewish troop of actors. A local bank official translated the synopsis of the plays into German and English for the playbill. The performances were sold out.*

*As many people in Ashley could not speak English, Israel Auerbach's wife Sarah served as a go between for the doctor when the women were ready to give birth. Farmers would come to the back door of the Auerbach's house at all hours of the day and night, knock, and Sarah would go with them for the doctor and would stay to translate until the baby was born.*

### **WHY DID THE JEWISH HOMESTEADERS MOVE OFF THEIR FARMS - this was a question that I didn't know the answer to before performing my research**

*By the late 1920s, few Jewish homesteaders were left in McIntosh County. The reasons are found in the homesteaders' interviews and written family histories. They range from mothers dying in childbirth, or from the Spanish flu, and fathers not being able to care for the farm and the children alone, to parents believing that the climate of the area was too risky to continue providing for their family, to Jewish farmers wanting their children to have easier access to a Jewish education or a future Jewish spouse to*

*continue the religion, to homesteaders being offered other opportunities in bigger cities or towns, to catastrophic events like prairie fires, tornados and blizzards, to lack of credit at stores, to poor living accommodations, to loneliness, and the Great Depression ...*

*With the money the Jewish farmers had saved and the money received from selling their land, most of these homesteaders had enough money to settle in villages and town and maintain their independence as business owners. Father William Sherman, who researched many different ethnic groups of North Dakota, once said that in the 1930s it was difficult to find a county in North Dakota that did not have a Jewish shopkeeper.*

*Even after they left the prairie, they continued to appreciate the freedoms and opportunities afforded to them and their children in America. It was possible to be a good American and still maintain one's religious identity, even on the harsh prairie.*

People used to ask my Grandpa Joe if he loved Russia - his response was always the same - "How could someone love a country that treats it people so ... I love America."

## **CONCLUSION**

In North Dakota now, there are believed to be 400 Jews, making up one tenth of one percent of the population (as of 2014). In South Dakota, there are believed to be 250 Jews, making up less than one tenth of one percent of the population. These are the two states with the smallest Jewish population. Wyoming has the third least numbers of Jewish people with around 1200.

The same reasons for this are those that the Ashley/Wishek Jews faced - being far from Jewish education for children, the low odds of finding Jewish spouses to continue the tradition of raising Jewish children, the 10 person requirement for Jewish people to say some prayers, the difficulty getting kosher food, etc.

But I believe that with our present transportation and communication connections, many of the reasons why Jewish people left the Dakotas no longer exist.

For Passover time, Jewish people only eat unleavened bread products, and no flour that has risen, to remember how hastily the Jews were forced to leave the slavery of Egypt on their way to freedom. The special products are easily accessible now, as opposed to years ago. Lincoln and I attend the closest synagogue, in Aberdeen. We were able to drive to Minneapolis this past spring, pick up 10 fellow congregants' requested products at a grocery store and deliver the matzah meal and other Passover food to them before the 8-day Passover holiday. Actually, we met the Premacks, who are the lay leaders for the Aberdeen synagogue one night in Aberdeen at the Kessler's parking lot and transferred the congregation's Passover groceries into their car.

When I wanted to order a willow branch and a citron (like a lemon) for Lincoln and I to celebrate the ancient harvest festival of Sukkoth, once we moved to Eureka, I was able to find a company on the internet that would send these, and they arrived in good shape to Eureka.

And if a person really wanted kosher meat, it could now be sent overnight in dry ice to just about anywhere (with cost as the only limiting factor)

**And education of Jewish children far from established Jewish centers and schools, how does that work nowadays?** I will ask my son, Lincoln Bernhard, who is a senior at Eureka High School to tell you a little about that and how our age of technology has helped with this process.

But before he makes his remarks, I would like to conclude by first referring to the fact that my grandparents, Joe and Mary Bender, moved from Ashley to Eureka around 1918. They opened Benders General Store at that time. They would hang a sign in their store window each year that the store was closed for the Jewish High Holidays, just as their Uncle Auerbach had done in Ashley for years. Joe and Mary Bender would then travel to Ashley, Bismarck or Aberdeen, to pray and celebrate with fellow Jews. Not only did my grandparents' customers return when they did, Joe Bender was also elected to the school board, was an alderman and was the mayor of Eureka. The fact that the community supported him in this way is a testament to the fact that this area is one with kind, open-minded people.

Second, briefly, regarding the listing of the Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery on the National Register -- I had been told it would be unlike any process I had ever attempted before, and those who told me that were correct. It ended up being over 100 pages of descriptions of the property, the statement of the significance of the property, the bibliography, and answers to numerous questions on this very detailed form. After working painstakingly to fill in all the blanks on this form, I sent the form to the Architectural Historian at the ND Historic Preservation Board, expecting her to compliment me on my hard work. Instead, she gave me about 150 comments and questions, and told me I wasn't ready to present the nomination.

In hindsight, I thank her for challenging me to investigate further, as I learned even more in my second round of research. In August of 2015, I was allowed to present the Nomination to the ND Historic Preservation Board, which voted unanimously to recommend the property's listing. In November 2015, the United States Department of the Interior, through the National Parks Service approved the Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery to be listed on the National Register as a significant historical property. We are working on having a rededication ceremony within the next couple of years at the cemetery, to honor the homesteaders and this recognition of who they were.

## **Finally, what is the legacy of these Jewish pioneers**

The legacy of these Jewish homesteaders is the family they raised to love America and appreciate America's freedoms and the inspiration they provided to all of us. My Dad, Keva/Kenneth Bender happened to be the first volunteer for the Army in World War II from your neighboring McPherson County, South Dakota in 1940. He enlisted as a private in the infantry after graduating from law school, and ended up leading 200 men onto the beaches of Normandy on D-Day + 1, and receiving a silver star for his gallantry, along with 2 purple hearts and other medals. In addition to my dad, Keva/Kenneth Bender, Descendants of those buried in the Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery include a number of other World War II decorated heroes - - Larry Schlasinger (KIA, US Army Infantry Intelligence Normandy), Kenneth Schlasinger (US Air Force , bombardier European theater and Africa), and Lionel Greenberg (US Army Air Corps, Germany, POW). Other descendants of the Ashley Jewish Community are evidence of the many choices that a free society provides, and include a Rabbi, a Pulitzer Prize winner, an American Bible Contest Champion, a New York Times Bestselling Author, a medaling World Synchronized Skater, a National Book Award Finalist, a Canadian Screen Award winner, the founder and artistic director of a theater company, a dentist, a playwright, composers, civil rights activists, an airshow pilot, broadcasters, a school superintendent, a member of the United States Foreign Service, a college baseball player, a maker of stained glass windows, a choreographer, business owners, a mayor, alderman and school board member, tennis and racquetball champions, a landscaper, and acclaimed doctors, lawyers, judges, authors, journalists, accountants, psychologists, realtors, teachers, homebuilders, social workers, photographers, advertising and marketing executives, actors, musicians and volunteers for a variety of charitable causes.

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I'm happy to answer any questions once the meeting is over. I will also write your names out phonetically on little cards once the speeches are completed if you wish, and thank you again for giving me the opportunity to speak with you. Now here is my son, Lincoln Bernhard.

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*Things to bring to Jewish Heritage Day*

Copy of National Register Nomination

Copies of Recipe for kugel

Cd and Cd player

Kugel

Kugel

Kugel

Knife and spatula

Sour cream

Sour cream

Sour cream

Apple sauce

Apple sauce

Camera

Jewish traditional items

Papers identifying items

Pictures of cemetery

Extension cord