

Jewish Pioneers Played a Big Role in Santa Cruz

By Ross Eric Gibson

This eve of the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana, is a good time to recall the small but active group of Jewish pioneers who helped found Santa Cruz.

The first Jewish settler is believed to have been Louis Schwartz, from whose business sprang most of the early Jewish businesses. In 1855, he joined the Brownstone brothers to open a general store in the Werner Building (where the St. George tower is now).

State Assemblyman William Stow of Santa Cruz became alarmed and proposed a tax on Jews that "would act as a prohibition to their residence amongst us." His opinion was unpopular with most Santa Cruz residents, and Jewish pioneers became leading citizens with strong ties to the Protestant community.

In 1856, the Brownstone brothers started their own clothing business, and Schwartz took Samuel Barnet as his new partner in his own building, where Zocholi's is now. In 1858, Barnet became the only married Jew, until barber Joseph Stein brought his wife and five children to town soon after. Barnet and Schwartz gained a new partner and roommate in Solomon Fisher. Schwartz married Stein's sister in 1865 and had eight children.

All these early Jewish settlers were from Poland, which at the time was partly occupied by Russia. The first German Jews were Jacob and Reuben Bernheim, who arrived in 1864. Jacob purchased George Otto's merchandise and brick building on Front Street, including a community hall upstairs called Otto's Hall.

In 1875, the building burned down, so Jacob decided to become part of the new civic center below Cooper Street. Across from the Odd Fellows Building, which housed the post office, he built a fine brick building, said to be one of the best of its day. Upstairs was Bernheim Hall, the town's civic auditorium. Downstairs, he operated the town's first department store. That same year, Barnet moved his business nearby to the north corner of Pacific Avenue and Church Street, where Cinema 9 now stands.

Jewish life was not isolated as it was in some communities. Jews were accepted into the Odd Fellows, Masons, German Order of Red Men and Knights of Pythias, and their wives joined Eastern Star. These organizations supported civic improvement, and some strongly condemned bigotry, promoting universal brotherhood.

The first observance of the Jewish New Year's High Holy Days was in 1869 with Barnet officiating. Barnet and Schwartz had religious training to conduct services, occasionally replaced by a visiting rabbi. They met in various fraternal halls or Protestant churches.

The Masonic hall was used for High Holy Days services, which drew up to 100 Jews from Santa Cruz and San Luis Obispo counties. Jewish holiday balls were held at Bernheim Hall with many Christians attending.

The local Hebrew Benevolent Society was established in 1875, meeting at the St. Charles Hotel. Because Jewish burials were done either at Odd Fellows Cemetery or at the Jewish cemetery in San Jose, the group established Home of Peace Cemetery on Meder Street in 1877. Although Moses Meder was a Mormon, he sold the cemetery site on condition that he and his wife could be buried there.

After meeting several years in the Unitarian Church on Lincoln Street, Jews shared second-floor space with a seminary at Pioda Hall on the corner of Pacific and Lincoln. Josephus Lesser was brought from San Jose to teach Hebrew and conducted services. Men and women worshiped sitting together, unlike the orthodox custom of segregating the sexes. Jewish services continued here when Pioda Hall was moved to become the social hall of the Christian church in 1898.

Santa Cruz County was becoming a popular resort for Bay Area Jews, as it was regarded as lacking overt anti-Semitism. Yet some Christians taught that while "the Jews are a good, moral people, they are anti-Christ." A Monterey paper cried that "vulgar Jewish [tourists] have ruined Aptos." In 1880, the Spreckels Hotel in Aptos came under new management, which excluded Jews.

The Santa Cruz *Sentinel* denounced the exclusion, saying summer hotels had been able to stay open longer into the autumn because of the Jewish trade. It said that as settlers, Jews had contributed to the prosperity of the community.

To familiarize Christians with the Jewish faith, the Benevolent Society invited Christians to attend Jewish activities, and Christians invited Jews to their events. Lesser was even asked to preach to the Watsonville Presbyterian Church on Jews and the Bible.

Sources

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