

# Stones tell local tales

## Jewish cemetery traces community's history

By DAN WHITE  
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Terry Spodick opened the creaking cemetery gates and walked under palms and pines, heading toward the graves of Jewish pioneers.

"I keep discovering something new," said Spodick, caretaker of the Temple Beth El Home of Peace Cemetery. She took a few more steps toward the marble inscriptions, which spelled out names of the original Santa Cruz Jews.

These names are straight out of the pages of local Jewish history.

These days, the only sign of those pioneers is the graves where they lie, in the cemetery they founded in 1877. None of their descendants still live here. But these people planted the seeds of what is

now the thriving Temple Beth El. They proved that Jews could move into a community, resist anti-Semitism and build a congregation from the ground up. Modern Jews, including Spodick, still feel a debt of gratitude to the men and women who started it all.

This week, Spodick, along with past caretakers of the cemetery, are remembering these founders. Rabbi Richard Litvak of Temple Beth El in Aptos said this is an appropriate time to think about these early Jews. Friday night marked the beginning of Passover, a holiday which is all about history and remembering. It marks the exodus of Jewish people from slavery in ancient Egypt. It also represents a direct link to the past.

Serving as caretaker of a cemetery is

another link for Spodick, and others who have taken the job. She said it is considered a mitzvah, or good deed, to care for a cemetery because the dead cannot thank the giver. But for Spodick, who looks after the cemetery with her husband, Jerry, it gives a sense of continuity.

"For Jewish people that have been spread all over the world, to even go back 150 years here is really wonderful and an important part of our heritage," she said.

Spodick walked through the grounds, with a historical map in hand. Near the back of the cemetery is the grave of Reuben Bernheim. He and many others came to California in the 1850s after the Gold Rush had fizzled, and new arrivals were

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Terry Spodick caretakes Home of Peace Cemetery on Meder Street.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

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# Jewish history

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hungry for opportunity. Bernheim and others took their chances with Santa Cruz, a backwater town.

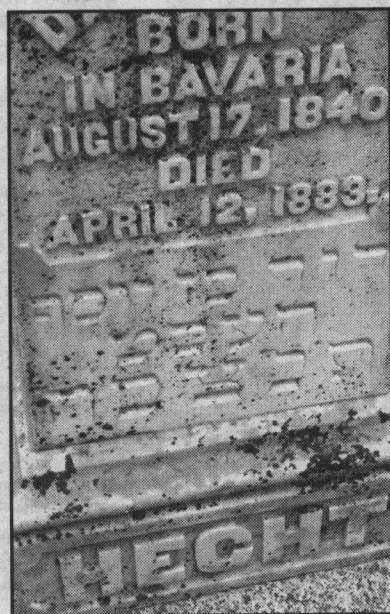
"It was somewhat beyond the Jewish world, living in Santa Cruz," said Litvak. "The thing about a backwater is it is a somewhat unlimited opportunity."

The first Jews arrived in the mid-1850s. Santa Cruz industry was mostly lime, lumber and leather. But the Jews would make their names in business, selling linens, embroideries, laces, stationery, groceries, discount merchandise and other goods. Their presence started to increase in the 1860s.

Success stories were plentiful. Reuben Bernheim set up a humble general merchandise store in 1864, eventually turning a \$3,000 investment into a \$100,000 fortune. The Bernheims would soon grow into the largest and most successful early Jewish families of Santa Cruz, founding the first department store on what is now Pacific Avenue.

Morris Abrams, born in Russian Poland, was known as the "Poor Man's Friend" for secondhand discount goods sold at one of Pacific Avenue's most successful shops. The Gosliners were known as shoe mavens. In fact, the Jewish presence on Front Street, and then Pacific Avenue, was so strong that parts of downtown were dead as a ghost town when Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, rolled around.

But business successes also brought resentment. In 1885, William Stow, state assemblyman from Santa Cruz, said he favored a tax on Jews that would "act as a prohibition to their residence among us." Knowing full well that observant Jews wouldn't work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, he



Detail of a gravestone in the cemetery.

tried to pass a law banning all Sunday commerce in Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties.

Others criticized the Jewish presence in local hotels and beachfronts. Some Bay Area Jews chose Santa Cruz as a summer vacation spot. These people, and their local counterparts, took the brunt of an 1883 editorial attack by a Santa Cruz Sentinel contributor.

"Santa Cruz, as a seaside resort, is now scarcely endurable, by reason of the multitude of common and vulgar Jews who throng its hotels and offensively thrust themselves to every front place," wrote the anonymous contributor. "The Jews (already) ruined Aptos, as they ruin every place where ... Christians choose to spend their

vacations."

The writer added that he only disliked Jews as a "class," but still had respect for the "most cultured, most excellent and altogether companionable" Jewish people.

An indignant response appeared in the Sentinel, but it called the article "anti-Santa Cruz" and made little mention of its anti-Jewish tone.

Several local hotels in the late 1800s barred Jews from lodging.

But Jews thrived, and usually were accepted, probably because so many others in Santa Cruz were also newcomers, said Nan and Martin Goldstein in a study on the area's first Jewish people.

For many years, Jewish people never had formal religious services because they couldn't come up with the requisite 10 men to form a "minyan," required by Jewish law. The first recorded formal observance of Jewish High Holidays was 1869. Samuel Barnett, who was not a rabbi but was educated in Hebrew and religious law, led the services.

Along with formal worship came a demand for a Jewish cemetery. The desire for one increased when two young people, including 14-year-old Amy Steen, died in 1877. She would be the first person buried in the Home of Peace grave yard.

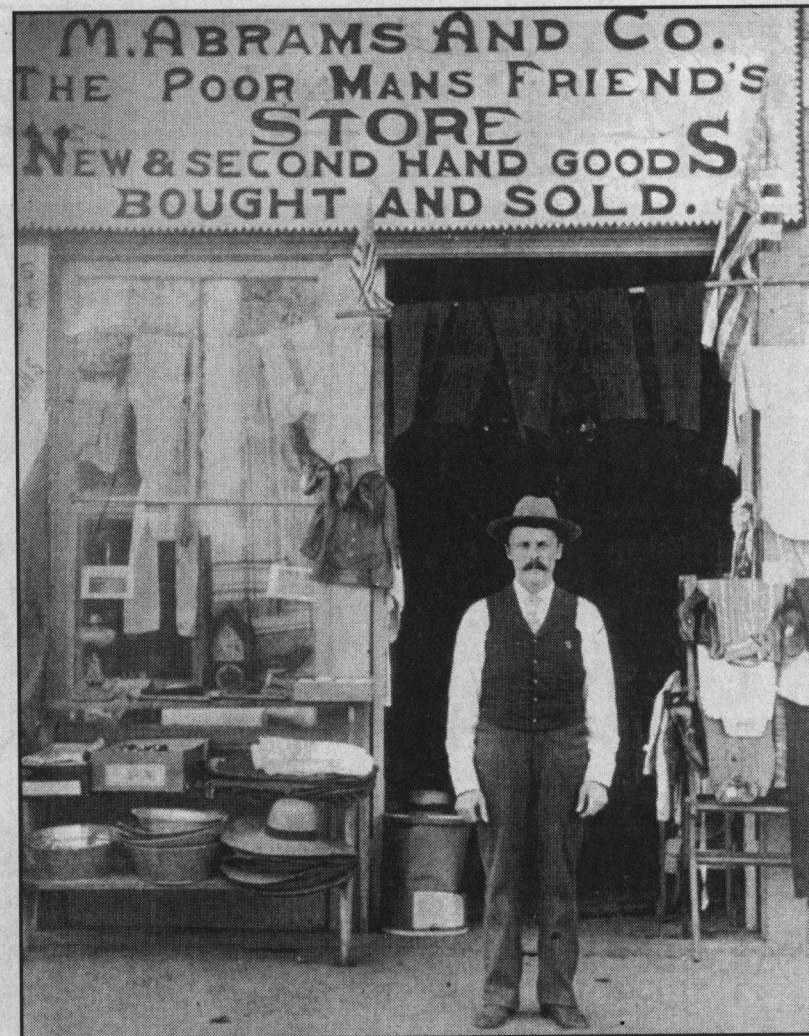
A Mormon named Moses Meder sold the cemetery land for \$100, with the stipulation that he must be buried there. According to local legend, Meder said that "a Jewish cemetery is the only place where the devil can't get me."

The late 1800s community was finally taking off, with a schoolhouse, weekly services and annual events for both Jews and Gentiles.

But the turn of the century brought a plunge in the Jewish population, which dwindled to just 15 people in the early 1900s.

The main reason for the drop-off was the fact that San Francisco seemed to offer more career advancement and cultural opportunities, and more chances to meet a Jewish husband or wife, historian George Fogelson recalled in his "The Jews of Santa Cruz, The First 80 Years."

Only in the 1920s did things start picking up. In 1934, the first incarnation of Temple Beth El occupied a two-story gray Victorian house at



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Morris Abrams was an early Jewish settler in Santa Cruz.

516 Chestnut St. that still stands. It is a modest two-story building with fish-scale tiles and a sharply sloping roof.

Louis Haber, whose family moved to the area 80 years ago, remembers the synagogue — nothing but two rooms made into one big room, for Friday night services.

These days, the Jewish community is well established. Temple Beth El moved out of the Victorian to a larger location in 1964, and finally moved to an expansive new facility built six years ago in Aptos.

But troubles remain. On six occasions over the past four years, someone has vandalized the Jewish pioneers' graves. Former cemetery caretaker Arnold Levine strongly suspects anti-Semitism as a motive "because it would take so much effort to move up the head-

stones and knock them over."

Someone even knocked down the headstone of young Amy Steen, the first person buried there.

But the modern generation of Jewish people plans to rebuild the damaged headstones this year. And no amount of vandalism can erase the fact that these Jewish pioneers paved the way for a thriving new generation.

"I feel an incredible gratitude," Spodick said, when she thinks of the Jewish pioneers. "They contributed to this community in so many different ways, both in business and philanthropic and culturally. They helped to make it what it is today."

Terry Spodick is compiling information on the Home of Peace Cemetery. Those interested in sharing stories, obituaries or other information with her can send it to 304 Darwin St., Santa Cruz, Calif. 95062.