

Deadwood, South Dakota and the Jews

By Jerry Klinger



Sol Star and Seth Bullock

Kill a Man - Start a Cemetery ¹

The air pockets over the northern Rocky Mountains of Montana were shaking the airplane pretty hard. I was trying to write about a recent historical roadside marker project that, my little society, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation had completed in Spokane, Washington. The marker recognized Spokane's Temple Emanuel as being the first permanent Jewish house of Worship in the State of Washington, 1892.

Roadside historical markers are sometimes called *wazzdatsay*. Driving sixty miles an hour down the freeway, someone always yells out when they see a marker zip by, "what's that say". Maybe you were able to read the title and first line of something important. JASHP marker projects are simple, visible, historical facts. Simple, yes, but they are permanent, public affirmations of American Jewish historical legitimacy. We did not get off the boat yesterday. American Jews have been part of the American story since the beginning.

The story is quite different in the Poland of today. For example in the Jewish quarter of Cracow, Poland, called Kazimierz, tourists go there, by the tens of thousands, to see and experience the old Jewish Ghetto world. They walk the streets of a community that Jews had lived in since the 13th century. They visit the oldest remaining medieval synagogue in Poland, the Alte Schul built in 1407. A large marker at the far end of the large rectangular Jewish market plaza from the

Schul recognizes the site of the Umslagplatz. Jews were gathered there in cattle drives by the Nazis and their supporters only to be taken away for slaughter during the Holocaust. The marker does not say Polish Jewish citizens who had lived in Poland for almost a thousand years. They were simply Jews.

The bumping of the aircraft became more violent as the snow covered mountain tops seemed to bounce clearer and clearer from our 30,000 foot vantage point. The pilot's voice, calm as a very cold cucumber, piped in over the intercom "everyone please buckle your seatbelts and will the attendants please be seated". "Great", I thought, "another seat arm gripper of a ride coming up". I shut down my portable computer and reached into the seat pocket in front of me to try and read the eternally present airline travel magazine stuffed there. The lead article proclaimed –"visit one of the great American pilgrimage sites on the continent – Mt. Rushmore, the man made representation, statement and shrine of freedom and democracy. See the faces of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt carved into the mountain heights of the Black Hills near Rapid City, South Dakota."

I had always wanted to make the Haj to see Mt. Rushmore but I had not found the time to do it. There was no hurry and a bit of reluctance to do so. Mt. Rushmore had been carved in the 1930's, a sort of anti-depression work project, directed by Gutzon Borglum. Borglum is also known for being the designing force behind the Confederate Memorial carved into the face of Stone Mountain, outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Stone Mountain is the rebirth and rallying site of the modern Ku Klux Klan and the various nefarious Jew hating types that they attract. The Klan was crushed after the Civil War. It reemerged after the worst anti-Semitic incident in American history occurred, the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank. By the mid 1920's the Klan's national membership ran in the millions. Borglum was reputed to have been a rabid anti-Semite.

I always figured I would go see Mt. Rushmore, someday, when I would be retired. The Mrs. and I would take our obligatory cross the country car tour, slowly, visiting all of the great sites in America. The trip, *of a lifetime*, would last months before we finally ended up in Florida. Probably, we would become settlers in Boynton Beach, where every condo is walking distance to a nice deli or bagel den.

It was the next lines in the travelogue that convinced me to go sooner and not later. Deadwood, South Dakota, it noted, is only 35 miles from Mt. Rushmore. Casino gambling, fun and 2,000,000 visitors a year go to Deadwood.

Deadwood, South Dakota, the name sparks images of the roughest gold rush town of the old frontier West. Deadwood - gun fights, Indians, card games, liquoring up, loose women, wildness, opportunity, where only the hardiest of men went to seek their fortune. Deadwood - where a legend like Wild Bill Hickok was gunned down and mourned by Calamity Jane and Potato Creek Johnny and America's imagination. Murders occurred so commonly there that the phrase "*Kill a Man – Start a Cemetery*" was later descriptively coined. Only the bravest or most fool hardy people dared to come to that Gold Rush town thirty five miles from the later site of Mt. Rushmore. Yet I recollected that the very first mayors, justices of the Peace, people who came and helped tame Deadwood, were Jews.

An idea came to me bouncing around at 30,000 feet. What if JASHP could erect a interpretive historical marker, for the 4,000,000 eyeballs a year that visit Deadwood. They would learn that Jews were not cowardly interlopers, after the frontier had been settled, but were part of the frontier American experience from the beginning. What a stick in the eye of Gutzon Borglum this might be.

Back in Washington the next day, I called the Deadwood Historic Preservation Commission. "Do you have historic interpretive markers in Deadwood" I asked Jim Wilson the chief interpretive historian and director. My name is Jerry Klinger and I am president of Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation and we would like to erect a historical marker about the Jews of Deadwood. My next thought was "Jew go away, we don't need or want to hear from you". "Sure, come on up, we would be glad to meet you, show you around and discuss the project." Astonished and excited, I asked myself, "*Was I welcome?. Did I hear right ??*"

Immediately I arranged to fly to Rapid City, South Dakota and drive to Deadwood. It was mid October. Being an intelligent Jew from the East, I knew that the snows fall early at Deadwood's 4,533 feet above sea level. I wanted to beat the bad weather. I spent the day with Jim Wilson in Deadwood and the night in a blizzard – so much for a *Yiddishe kopf*.

It was back in '75... that is 1875 when a hardscrabble prospector meandered down into the deep ravine of dead trees. Tying his mule up to an overhanging branch, his rifle at his side, John B. Pearson was deep in Indian country. Since the 1868 treaty with the Lakota-Sioux, he was where no white man had permission to be. He bent down and put his flat metal prospecting pan into the cold rushing waters of the mountain creek to sift the sands. Small flecks of yellow quickly emerged. John B. Pearson had found **GOLD**.

The news leaked out even though the U.S. government attempted to honor its treaty with the Indians by keeping the gold hungry hordes of hopeful gold hunters out. The news became a Gold rush torrent overnight. The ravine of dead trees within a year became a teeming mass of prospectors, gamblers, prostitutes, economic hopefuls, preachers, families of respectable citizens, Whites, Indians, Blacks, Chinese and Jews. They called the lawless, wild frontier mining camp, where a murder or two a day by gun, knife or whatever occurred – Deadwood.

Lawlessness also attracts those who wish for the order of the law. Sometimes those attracted who were the law were little more than the lawless themselves. John Butler Hickock, *Wild Bill Hickock* as he was better known, came to town in 1876. He was in his thirties. His eyesight was failing but his reputation as a quick gun killer with a star preceded him. Supposedly, dozens and dozens of men slept in the ground to his credit. Distinctive with his long thick flowing hair and pearl handled guns, he came looking to gamble his way to fortune. Down in Saloon number 10, playing a hand of poker, holding Aces and Eights, a hand that was forever renamed as the dead man's hand, Wild Bill found eternal fortune. Jack McCall, a semi-drunk, semi-frightened and semi-suicidal would be frontier tough guy put a bullet in the back of Hickok's head. A mining camp trial occurred and McCall was found innocent because he was allegedly avenging the death of his brother at Hickok's hand. McCall got out of town real fast but never learned to shut his mouth and bragged repeatedly about his gunning Wild Bill down. He bragged until he was sent to God with a bullet from another wanna be frontier killer.

A few days before Wild Bill was laid down to the shrieks and wails of a alcoholic, part time prostitute, female gun totter and deeply loving admirer, Calamity Jane, a real western lawman and his sidekick rode into town. His name was Seth Bullock and his unlikely partner was Solomon (Sol) Star. An unlikely pair as ever could be seen. They came from Helena, Montana, another rough gold mining town, where Seth had been a marshal. Bullock was a tall, Christian man with a cold look in his gray eyes above his handle bar mustache. Star much shorter, sturdily built, a firm look in his face of reliability and toughness – was a Jew. They came with wagons loaded with Dutch ovens, frying pans, chamber pots, dynamite, axes, rope, picks, pans and shovels. They set up their hardware store, Bullock & Star on the corner of Main and Wall Street in Deadwood. Many people came to Deadwood and left some better off but most not. Bullock and Star stayed.

Star was elected mayor of Deadwood for twelve years. He organized the first fire department. He was Deadwood's first postmaster, active in civic affair and was elected by the citizens to the State legislature in Pierre.

Paul Rewman, another Jew of English background, established the first telephone system in Deadwood in 1879. It was the first telephone system in the state of South Dakota.

Soon other Jewish frontiersman and pioneer types followed Star. German Jewish names, such as Finkelstein and Kugelman, were quickly Americanized.

Harris Finkelstein changed his name to Harris Franklin by the time he had arrived in Deadwood, a penniless young man. Through hard work, opportunity and much luck, he spent his life in Deadwood becoming one of its leading citizens and wealthiest men in South Dakota. He was the owner of the Golden Rewards mine, maintained interests in banking, cattle, land, and was a leading investor in the opulent Franklin Hotel. Franklin's home is on the National Register of Historic places but then the entire town of Deadwood has the special distinction of being the only entire town on the National Register of Historic Places. Franklin's home was designed by Simeon Eisendrath, a renowned Chicago synagogue architect. When Harris died his eulogy noted "he never foreclosed on a mortgage." Franklin's son, Nathan, stayed on in Deadwood. He was elected the second Jewish mayor after Solomon Star.

Nathan Kugelman became Nathan Colman. Colman was repeatedly elected Deadwood's Justice of the Peace all of his long life. A newspaper endorsement from the Black Hills Times, recommending the reelection of Judge Colman read, " If you want an honest (man) elect Judge Colman. He is no slouch.... He is a Western man." One of Colman's daughters, Blanche, was born in Deadwood. She became one of the first women admitted to the Law Bar in South Dakota. She spent her professional life in law working as a legal counsel for the famed Homestake Gold mine up in Lead, just up the hill away –one thousand feet up. Lead is pronounced Leeed not Lead. Miss Colman would walk the two miles up and down the mountain to work to stay in shape. Her last years were spent in a special apartment she maintained in the Franklin hotel. She passed away at 94 in 1978. Some say that if you wander the hallways of the Franklin you can still see her walking along.

The Jews of Deadwood never built a permanent house of worship. They rented space at the Masonic Temple for High Holydays. Mostly they met for religious services in private homes. Nathan Colman was the lay Rabbinic leader for the community. Freda Lowenberg, who married Benjamin Blumenthal brought Deadwood's Torah with her in 1886 from Koenigsburg – across the ocean, then by train and finally by stagecoach.

As the Jewish community aged, their needs evolved. The Hebrew Cemetery Association purchased land (1896) within Deadwood's city cemetery, Mt. Moriah, high up on the hills overlooking the gulch. The locals called the Jewish section "Hebrew Hill." It was not called Hebrew Hill in a derogatory sense but rather to identify it from other parts of Mt. Moriah, such as the Chinese section or the Catholic section. The Jews called their eternal resting place, Mt. Zion. They buried their dead facing east, towards the Temple. Names such Franklin, Colman, Blumenthal, Fink, Zoellner, Margolin, Schwartzwald, Levinson, Jacobs populate the known 86 gravesites among the quiet of the tall pine trees. Some of the graves are carved with English and Hebrew, some are only English. One gravesite stone has the image of a World War II fighter plane and the name of Lester Dansky. He was a young Jewish flier killed over France in 1943. Lester was the adopted child of Mrs. Kiemer and lived in Deadwood.

Deadwood's wild story was only a blink of history before it settled into the more mundane life of a working community. Civilization quickly moved in, took root, and stayed. The Jews were integral to Deadwood's story. As the gold played out the population moved on. So did much of Deadwood's Jewish community. Some stayed, some intermarried and some merged into Western lore.

Today, meander down Deadwood's main street. One of the many casinos there is called Goldberg's. The Goldberg family ran a grocery store, at the location, called the Big Horn Grocery. The name remained with the building site. Goldberg's gaunt face can be seen in a 1930's photograph. He is standing next to one of the greatest characters of Deadwood legend – greater than Potato Creek Johnny, Preacher Smith, Colorado Charlie or Chief Two Sticks. He is standing with his friend, the hardest riding, fightingest frontiersman of the Dime store novel, Deadwood Dick.

The Jewish community of Deadwood has dwindled to just a few individuals.

Ann Haber Stanton ², the recognized historian of South Dakota's Jewish experience who has done much of the research that forms the background of this story, noted that what was so extraordinary about the Jews of Deadwood was their "ordinariness."

The extraordinary character of the American West was not that there was no anti-Semitism because there was. The extraordinary character of the American West was that the Jews were welcome and accepted. They were measured not on where they were from or by their religion. They were measured in Western terms, on their character, their spirit and what they could bring and do on the American Frontier for themselves and for all Americans.

My original hope was to erect a single marker recognizing Jewish historical presence in Deadwood. That hope was changed by the generosity, openness and kind reception to telling the

Jewish story. That kindness, I encountered from all the wonderful people of present day Deadwood.

Jim Wilson and I were walking in Mt. Moriah Cemetery near the gravesite of Wild Bill Hickok. Hickok is buried at the corner of Jerusalem Street and Entry Road. Jim stopped and suggested that this would be a great location for a marker about the Jewish section of Mt. Moriah. "*The tour buses all go by here and many stop to go to see Wild Bill's gravesite and Calamity Jane's*". He recommended the marker location not because it was just below the Jewish section. He recommended it because it would get maximum visibility and information to the millions of visitors each year about the Jewish contribution to Deadwood.

Eventually, two more interpretive markers were erected in Deadwood telling the Jewish story. One is located at the Adams/ Franklin home and the other opposite the Bullock Hotel on the original site of Bullock and Star's Hardware store from so many years ago.

¹ Mount Moriah: Kill a Man...Start a Cemetery. by Rezatto, Helen. North Plains Pr 1980

² Ms. Stanton is author of a forthcoming book: "Deadwood: Where Jake Goldberg met Calamity Jane: A Walk Through Deadwood's Jewish Past and Jewish Ghost Towns of Western South Dakota"