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JEWES AND OTHER OKIES': HOW JEWS EXTENDED THE FRONTIER IN INDIAN
TERRITORY AND OKLAHOMA, 1867-1952

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Abstract

The topic of this thesis revolves around Oklahoma Jews and how their lives and works have shaped and challenged conceptions of Oklahoma History. Like many in the American West, Jews came to Oklahoma for economic opportunities and new beginnings. These Jews were both legally white and could readily pass as such. The frontier realities of Oklahoma, however, only exacerbated the differences in, and the positionality of, different peoples. As merchants and other professionals, Oklahoma Jews found themselves in a curious place between the various nonwhite ethnic groups that existed in the state, and white Christians whose populations would eventually dominate the state's demographics. In this middle ground, Jews would negotiate their own identities as both Jews and Oklahomans in the face of cross-cultural interactions, shifting racial hierarchies, and dramatic demographic change.

I argue that these Jews, rather than just contributing to the growth of capitalism and colonization, extend the frontier well beyond its proverbial "closing" in 1890. This thesis considers a frontier to consist of different groups both coexisting and negotiating their own identities in the face of cultural exchange. Jews, occupying a middle ground between whites and nonwhites, extended the frontier by maintaining and adapting their own identities as both Jews and Oklahomans throughout tumultuous shifts in population, economic change, and insidious racial politics. Rather than providing a massive account of Oklahoma Jewish history as a complete story, I have selected specific historical actors, communities, cities, and time periods in order to give readers a sense of historical cohesion without being bogged down in detailed exposition. Indeed, through the examples of Muskogee, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Ardmore, I argue that the state's history lies in the stories of cultural interaction and identity preservation, rather than in the whitewashed narratives of Land Run centric Christian pioneers.

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List of Terms and Abbreviations

| | |
|-----|-------------------------------|
| KKK | Ku Klux Klan |
| OHS | Oklahoma Historical Society |
| OKC | Oklahoma City |
| WPA | Works Progress Administration |

Notes

Mvskoke This spelling is a modern reclaiming of the Muskogee name, but still refers to the people and government of the sovereign Muskogee Nation.

Creek This term was used by colonizers to refer to the Muskogee People. Within scholarship, it has become increasingly outdated but is still used by some members of the Muskogee Nation.

INTRODUCTION

In 1867, Joseph Sondheimer, the earliest known Jewish merchant in the history of the state, stepped off a steam ferry for the first time at Fort Gibson, Muskogee (creek) nation, Indian Territory. In 1952, Temple Emeth, the official home of the oldest Jewish Congregation in the state, completed construction in Ardmore, Oklahoma. The 85 years of Jewish history that took place between these two events are significant as markers of an epoch of Jewish history within Indian Territory, Oklahoma Territory, and eventually the state of Oklahoma itself. During this period, Jews from many walks of life made a place for themselves within the highest public offices, to the most remote outposts of the state. In these places Jews contributed to communities, developed businesses, and created space for themselves in a state opposed to narratives that exist outside White Christian normativity. Here, Jews formed lasting and meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities, whilst also contributing to western colonization. Here, Jews formed congregations, made lives outside of their faith and heritage, or left the state all together. No matter the direction their lives took, all contributed to the history of Oklahoma. Their lives challenge white Christian conceptions of state history by revealing a frontier mosaic of socio-cultural interaction. Their footprints are forever enshrined in the state's iconic red dirt, and their descendants still walk under its country-blue sky.

The purpose of this thesis is to both present little-known histories of Oklahoma Jews, whilst simultaneously challenging whitewashed conceptions of Indian Territory and Oklahoma. In recent years, great effort has been put into the teaching of Oklahoma history with the goals of recognition, justice, and reconciliation. Each day university professors, public school teachers, museum curators, journalists, coaches, and community leaders strive to present Oklahoma

history in a way that includes all its people and all its moments with clarity and understanding. This thesis is no different.

The History of Jews in the American West remains a distinct and complex crossroad of Judaic and Western Studies. How Jews participated in, dreamed off, talked, and wrote about the American West reveals a world of interactions between peoples on real and imagined frontiers. Over the past several decades, this relatively obscure subfield has grown dramatically thanks to the effort of scholars from a variety of professional fields. The scholars that have had the most impact on the formation of this research, however, are Historians.

The works of David S Koffman, Shari Rabin, and Bryan Edward Stone have transformed the concentration of Jews in the American West. David S. Koffman has written extensively on relationships between Jews and Indigenous communities in North America. Koffman's works are primarily concerned with how Jews use Native Americans and First nations peoples in order to understand their own place within white settler societies. Historian Bryan Edward Stone similarly writes on the importance of the "frontier," a place far separated from the homogeneous European-style societies, in creating a Texas-Jewish identity. Historian Shari Rabin focuses on the importance of mobility in the formation of American Judaism and the peculiar role that western expansion had in propagating a distinct American diaspora. I adopt and adapt frameworks of these authors in order to claim that the frontier existed long after its proverbial "closing". Indeed, I argue that the diverse interactions Jews experienced with White Christians, African Americans, and Indigenous people in Indian Territory/Oklahoma inherently reveals a frontier mosaic of multi-cultural relations that disrupt traditional White Christian Land Run centered narratives of Oklahoma history, as the frontier lives on today.

Jewish Migration

The history of Jewish Migration to the United States of America is long, storied, and contested. In her seminal work *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America*, Shari Rabin introduces the story of Jewish Migration to the U.S. with New England in the Seventeenth Century. Rabin states “Jews first came to what became the United States in 1764 and established a community in New Amsterdam, which was followed soon after by Philadelphia, Savannah, Charleston, and Newport.”¹ Truly, it would be nearly impossible to find the true “first” Jew to set foot in the future territory of the United States. Indeed, only a few pages later Rabin admits that “Jews had been present in North America at least since 1654[...]² implying a gap in definitive evidence fore before this time.

Considering the extensive history of Jewish Diaspora, claiming a definite date and time for the beginning of “Jewish history” in North America would be dubious at best. In Historian Bryan Edward Stone’s 2010 work *The Chosen Folks: Jews on the Frontiers of Texas*, Stone introduces readers to the complexity of this question with the history of Spanish colonization in Mexico. Stone claims “by some accounts, the History of Judaism in the United States began in Texas. In 1579[...] the Spanish crown granted an enormous land charter in New Spain, including much of what is now northern Mexico and South Texas, to a Christian descendent of Portuguese Jews” and the noble in question was Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva.³ Cueva, or at least the family that accompanied him were Crypto-Jews, Jews who’s families were coerced into

¹ Rabin, Shari. *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-century America* / Shari Rabin. North American Religions. 2017. P. 3

² Ibid. P. 14

³ Stone, Bryan Edward. *The Chosen Folks*. 1st ed. Jewish Life, History, and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. P. 22

Christian conversion, in this case by the Spanish inquisition, who secretly practice their Jewish faith while publicly professing adherence to another.

Stone points out, however, that Jews being close to or owning property in Texas does not mean they ever stepped foot in the country. He writes, “Carvajal established no Spanish settlements north of the Rio Grande in Present Day Texas, nor is there any indication or any of his crypto-Jewish Colonists ever crossed the river into what is now Texas.”⁴ The rest of Stone’s exposition is much more complex, with inquisitorial records very possibly expressing fraudulent data.⁵ The example, however, clearly demonstrates the difficulties of identifying the first Jews in America.

Whoever the first were, Jews continued to immigrate to North America for a variety of personal, political, and economic reasons. As Rabin points out, “Jews and their fellow migrants came from places in Europe where Religious Identity was a bureaucratic category that determined ones possibilities for residence, travel, economic opportunity, and religious life”⁶ America, by contrast, offered opportunity despite religion, not, however, despite gender and racial categorization, as Rabin clarifies: “[...]such regulations were almost nonexistent for those who were determined to be white and male.”⁷ Luckily for Ashkenazi Males, white passing skin pigment allowed for much greater civil, political, and economic rights. With comparatively boundless opportunities awaiting them, Jews ventured to America in both slow trickles and grand migratory movements.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid P. 24-25

⁶ Rabin, Shari. *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-century America* / Shari Rabin. *North American Religions*. 2017. P. 4

⁷ Ibid

With the expansion of the nation westward, Jews, as with many settlers, saw opportunity in lands far from the comforts of urban life, the reach of federal power, and lacking in the traditional institutions of capitalist economies. In the groundbreaking work *the Jews' Indian: Colonialism, Pluralism, and Belonging in America*, David S. Koffman analyzes the ways Jews participated in the colonization of the American West through real and imagined interactions with Indigenous communities. Having transformed their positions dramatically from marginalized and oppressed to “[...]relatively powerful agents of empire,”⁸ Jews sought belonging in America through participation in the grand project of western expansion in all its facets. Indeed, as Koffman poignantly recognizes, “Jews conceived of their own movement from Europe to America, a stunning, enormous demographic transformation with myriad social, cultural, and political implications, not as yet another displacement in their long history, but as a new beginning.”⁹ To take part in the “civilizing” of the West was to claim belonging in the American project.

Jews took part in the colonizing of the West in all of its forms from fighting in Indian wars to writing stories about brave pioneer Jews settling the frontier expanse. Perhaps the biggest roles Jews had in the West, However, were their particular strength as Merchants. As Koffman describes:

In particular, Jews acted and proudly described their own efforts to “improve” Indian lives by teaching them to be better capitalists. But unlike American Christians, Jews did not articulate this effort in spiritual, religious, or providential terms. Jews did not proselytize to Native Americans. Rather, they understood their role in Indian uplift in terms they could celebrate—namely, in

⁸ Koffman, David S. *The Jews' Indian*. 1st ed. United States: Rutgers University Press, 2019. P. 7

⁹ *Ibid*

service of patriotism, modernization, and the progressive march of capitalism, which appeared to benefit them all, the immigrants themselves foremost.¹⁰

If the West was lacking in goods and cash, merchants could seize their chance to create businesses in far flung places and eventually incorporate their efforts into the greater economies that would eventually follow western migration. For the purposes of this thesis the principle historical actors that I am concerned with are Jewish merchants, Rabbis, laymen, and citizens alike who sought opportunity in Indian Territory and eventually Oklahoma. How these Jews came to work and live in Oklahoma, and the relationships they formed with the mosaic of cultures that lived there is the primary focus of this research.

The Frontier, The Pioneer, and People Who've Been Here

The “frontier” I argue, similar to other scholars over the past decade, is much more than a border, or lack thereof, on a map. Indeed, when I refer to the Oklahoma Frontier, I am referring to spaces that go beyond White American concepts of economic, legal, and social normativity. For the purposes of this paper, the frontier serves as a place where distinctly different cultures and ethnicities converge and negotiate their existence with one another.

The frontier has always possessed a special place within American History and the psyche of the American Public. Traditional narratives of western expansion express the importance of White Christians filling empty spaces and correcting local native populations into White American normativity. Indeed, As Brian Edward Stone has described, “In American history, similarly, ‘frontier’ is usually used in the context of westward expansion to describe new territory that was discovered, claimed, fought over, settled, and eventually annexed into the

¹⁰ Ibid P. 13

nation...”¹¹ A frontier, then, is a place that has yet to enter the fold of the American nation in all of its facets from Christianity to capitalism. Bryan Edward Stone, however, also points out:

The external reality is only an outward expression of a conceptual divide, a perceived difference between the people or conditions that exist on either side of that divide. A frontier is fundamentally a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and marks differences of culture, personality, condition, and identity among groups of people.¹²

Indian Territory and Oklahoma, then, can be seen as the frontier par excellence. Here, Jews, Indigenous communities, Afro-Indigenous people, Black migrants, and White Christians coexisted within the socio-legal space of Tribal, State, and federal governments, creating the vibrant social space of frontier interactions.

Land Run Mythology

To this day the mythology of Oklahoma is similar to that of other parts of the American West. It’s a story of empty space that only becomes habitable once white settlers terraform the physical, social, and economic conditions of space to better fit White Christian normativity. In the case of Oklahoma, this is traditionally represented by the Land Run of 1889. At Noon on April 22nd, 1889, large sections of Oklahoma such as the unassigned lands that included portions of Indian territory, were opened up for mass settlement. From various staging areas in bordering states, settlers rushed into the unassigned lands to claim 160 acres per family.¹³ This event saw tens of thousands of settlers enter the territory within a very short amount of time.

¹¹ Stone, Bryan Edward. *The Chosen Folks*. 1st ed. Jewish Life, History, and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. P. 3

¹² Ibid

¹³ Stan Hoig, “Land Run of 1889,” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=LA014>.

The Land Run helped foster a distinct Oklahoma settler identity. To many Oklahomans, the influx of settlers from the Land Run is the official beginning of their state's history. The 89'er day parades across the state joined by dedicated celebration days in public schools ultimately reinforce this timeline in the public imagination. The website of the Oklahoma Historical Society claims:

...April 22, 1889, was... a significant day in national history, one that gave birth to new hope for thousands of Americans and became an iconic image in the history of the West...By setting the stage for non-Indian settlement of other sections of Indian Territory, the Oklahoma Land Run of 1889 quickly led to the creation of Oklahoma Territory under the Organic Act of 1890 and ultimately to the formation of the forty-sixth state of the Union, Oklahoma, in 1907.¹⁴

This description of the Land Run seems to imply the historical inevitability of statehood whilst failing to mention the tribes who had already co-existed with settlers and traders in previous decades. Considering that intruders in the various nations were of great concern to some tribal governments, it is difficult to believe that the many Indigenous citizens of Indian Territory possessed the same positive outlook.

Most Oklahomans, of course, learn about, grow up with, and work alongside Native Americans. Indigenous history and culture, however, is primarily taught in the background of white settlement, as if the narratives existed in two separate vacuums tethered to one another by coincidence. By contrast, the narratives that unfold in this thesis will reveal a more colorful and sometimes even cooperative history: that of Indian Territory, Oklahoma, Jews, and the diverse frontier they interacted with.

¹⁴ Ibid

Race and the Paradox of Color

Before we begin our stories in earnest, before we can analyze our historical actors' encounters with peoples and systems, we must deconstruct prejudice, the 1920s, and the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). By 1920, Oklahoma had already faced dramatic changes in the economic and social ordering of the region. The Land Run of 1889 sparked a massive influx of mostly white settlers into Indian Territory, dramatically changing the socio-ethnic hegemony of the region. As the years advanced towards statehood, the discovery of massive oil deposits, and changing agricultural trends across the state warped the economic status of individuals, towns, cities, and whole governments alike. Despite opposition from tribal governments and territorial citizens, Oklahoma joined the union as an official state in 1907, forming a government that can challenge tribal sovereignty and enforce state law across all its counties.

Federal law also directly influenced law-and-order in the state. In 1920 the implementation of the eighteenth amendment prohibited the production, sale, and distribution of alcoholic consumables across the United States. What had been an ages old and internationally storied hobby and profession, became illegal practice seemingly overnight. The Temperance movement that worked tirelessly to lobby for the amendments' passing, finally succeeded in enforcing a highly specific form of "moral" normativity upon the entire nation. In Oklahoma, the Ku Klux Klan would ride the anxieties of "moral" temperance by confronting crime, "moral" decay, and racial impropriety with often violent vigilantism. With both words and whips, the KKK's re-emergence shook the positionality of anyone who did not fit the ethno-religious designs of white supremacy.

Oklahoma has rarely provided historical examples of warm welcomes to minority communities. After the Civil War, many diverse peoples found refuge, some by force and others by choice, in the remoteness of Indian Territory. Especially before the Land Run of 89', the Federal Government had little presence outside military installations that sparsely dotted important trade routes. This meant that the racial hierarchies of both federal and state law had little tangible influence within the boundaries of tribal sovereignty. Within Indian Territory, the Mvskoke/Creek, Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw tribes possessed landed sovereignty over their incorporated counties, allowing all if not most peoples to apply for residency within their territories. This relative autonomy attracted immigrants, Black homesteaders, white businesspeople, disenfranchised Indigenous peoples, and, of course, Jews.

Jews faced an odd middle ground between whites and other minorities within Indian Territory and later in the state of Oklahoma. Appearing white to many, European Jews could often dodge the daily face value prejudice that haunts other ethnic groups. This whiteness, however, did not provide much protection against the previously conceived notions of White Christians. Despite the prejudice and the violence that many groups experienced at the hand of another in Oklahoma, many different peoples dreamed of Indian territory, Oklahoma territory, and eventually a state of Oklahoma, as a new home. As David A Chang poignantly recognizes in the opening paragraph of his seminal work *Color of the Land*: “‘Oklahoma’ means ‘red man’ in the Choctaw language, is run though by a ‘Black Belt,’ and has been claimed by some as ‘white man’s country.’ It has been termed an Indian homeland, a black promised land, and a white heartland.”¹⁵ Oklahoma/Indian Territory was an opportunity for all, a new start for most, and a home to many before and after major migrations into the territory changed its demographics.

¹⁵ Chang, David A. *The color of the land: race, nation, and the politics of landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* / David A. Chang., 2010. P. 1

Much of what Oklahoma had to offer the average migrant was land. Land ownership was an important dream of agriculturists looking to independently support themselves and their families, and during the Land run of 1889, each settler was supposedly guaranteed a plot of land once they laid a valid legal claim to that portion of the unassigned lands. Before 1889 African Americans, white settlers, members of other Indigenous groups, European immigrants, and Jews alike could apply for permission to homestead, farm, or run other businesses through the various indigenous governments in Indian Territory. With so many diverse peoples sharing space, racial hierarchies could often blur in the day-to-day business of life.

This little-known period of history, however, did not survive the eventual overwhelming numerical superiority of white settlers and the subversion of Indigenous sovereignty with the advent of statehood in 1907. Indeed, racial hierarchy in Oklahoma gained a sharp rigidity by the first decades of the 20th century. Perhaps no event exemplified this rigidity more than the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, in which multiple blocks were completely decimated and upwards of 300 African Americans massacred by armed mobs of white citizens, including police, as a reaction to falsified claims of an African American man sexually assaulting a white female elevator attendant. The famous “Black Wallstreet” was destroyed, and its community members killed with extreme prejudice. Interestingly, scholars such as David A. Chang and Charles C. Alexander have pointed out that this event was orchestrated without the help of the Ku Klux Klan, which would reemerge to take up the baton of enforcing White Supremacy in Oklahoma in the 1920s.

Before we can analyze the roll of the KKK in enforcing white protestant normativity in Oklahoma, we have to understand that much of the politics leading up to their reemergence was

bound up in land ownership, economic class, and agrarian revolt. For many, land ownership meant control over their own lives. African Americans came in great numbers to Indian Territory and later the State of Oklahoma to escape Jim crow and the post reconstruction south. Oklahoma represented an alternative to the terrible rigidity of white supremacy. As Chang describes, “They had come to Oklahoma in large part because the South that they left denied most African Americans both economic self-sufficiency and political rights.”¹⁶ In a very real sense, to own land was to take control of one’s life.

Of course, land ownership was attractive to more than just those looking to escape the landed political dominance of whites. Poor whites also came in droves looking for opportunity through land ownership. The agrarian ideal of the “yeoman” farmer was present within the minds of any farmer looking for independence. This brought in droves of poor whites with diverse backgrounds, economic and social means, and behaviors, compared to the middleclass protestants that made up significant portions of the KKK’s roster. Indeed, for the KKK to enforce normativity, even other Whites would have to be coerced, often violently, into conforming to a highly specific vision of white supremacy.

Indian Territory/Oklahoma was ethnically diverse. By 1910, Chang describes “black settlers made their homes especially in areas that became part of Okfuskee and Okmulgee counties, but also in Muskogee, Wagoner, Seminole, and other counties that would make up Oklahoma’s ‘Black Belt.’ These counties were between 20 and 41 percent African American.”¹⁷ With such a large percentage of the population being African American, and tribes possessing either sovereignty or communities in those counties, exposure to racial diversity in those regions

¹⁶ Chang, David A. *The color of the land: race, nation, and the politics of landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* / David A. Chang., 2010. P. 150

¹⁷ Ibid P. 152.

would have been the norm. Indeed, as will be explored in the next chapter, the Muskogee nation alone was a diverse microcosm of Native American, white, African American, Black-Indigenous, and Jewish life. From the first well-documented Jewish Settler in 1867 to statehood in 1907, white supremacy is blurred by this ethnically complex reality. Indeed, even the Jews who could easily pass as white faced a changing and sometimes hostile ethno-religious game of social acceptability.

Within the historical confines of this thesis, 1867-1952, perhaps no other time was more precarious for Oklahoma Jews than the 1920s. One of the biggest issues facing Oklahomans at the turn of the 20th century was land ownership for farmers, a profession that most Jews in the state did not hold. So, severe and complex was the conflict over landed wealth at the turn of the 20th century that many different organizations were formed along the basis of both race and class in order to protect diverse self-interests. The extent of which different races cooperated in these organizations is not entirely clear, but literal violent class warfare threatened pan-white unity by challenging traditional methods of racial identification.

It should be said that the diversity of identity and political interests within Oklahoma not only obscured white identity, but also conversely highlighted the differences between, and the difficulties of, organizing along all racial lines. One of the best examples of this being the cooperation of Black-indigenous and Black Migrants into politically salient communities. Although real and sometimes deep differences between the two peoples existed, Chang points out “Constitutional definitions of race, the end of Indian citizenship, the removal of restrictions, disenfranchisement, and discrimination had created shared conditions for black Creeks and newcomers.”¹⁸ Black migrants and Afro-Indigenous peoples would eventually experience similar

¹⁸ Ibid P. 173

economic, social, and legal circumstances as racial categorization became both rigid and sweeping in its scope. Whilst the deliberate grouping of different people of African descent into the same racial category occurred, white supremacists also strove to create a socially and politically fabricated pan-whiteness that ironically highlighted as many differences in “whiteness” as it did similarities.

Although many people worked diligently in order to enforce a collective sense of whiteness, perhaps no group of people in this period worked harder to enforce white supremacy and “moral” normativity than the Ku Klux Klan. However, unlike some white supremacists in Oklahoma, the Ku Klux Klan sought to enforce highly specific social, economic, and religious forms of domination throughout the state. As the promises of Land ownership slowly became less attainable in the first couple decades of the 20th century, a divide between the relatively class-conscious rural proletariat and the urban middle class formed. As Chang describes about the Klan’s make-up, “Its largely middle-class and affluent advocates sought to replace rural whites’ class-conscious whiteness with one that would tie them to the new landlord and business elite of the state.”¹⁹ In the beginning of mass white migration to the state, land was a promise of safety and security. Yeomanry, to many farmers regardless of race, freed the worker from reliance of modern wage slavery. However, as the twentieth century brought new changes, agrarian dreams wilted into dependence on capitalists and wealthy landowners. Indeed, “instead of creating a vast class of white yeomen, the creation of fee-simple property in land created landlessness for most whites and landed wealth for a few.”²⁰ This lack of landed opportunities created a sort of crisis for wealthy whites in Oklahoma. As wealthy individuals, large agriculture operators, and oil men bought up massive tracts of farmland, affluent whites slowly witnessed

¹⁹ Ibid P. 194

²⁰ Ibid P. 177

coalitions of whites, Native Americans, and African Americans take to serious and sometimes militant political action in the first couple decades of the 20th century. This does not mean that poor whites completely put aside their differences or even their own preconceived notions of racial superiority in the name of agrarian reform.²¹ It was, however, a clear threat to the creation of an ideal whiteness that was at the center of Klan ideology.

The Ku Klux Klan did not arrive in Oklahoma, in an official capacity, until 1921 after reported interest prompted the Klan to send organizers, with chapters soon sprouting in the major urban centers such as Oklahoma City (OKC), Lawton, Tulsa, Muskogee, and Enid.²² According to historian Charles Alexander, “[...]the kluxing of Oklahoma followed a pattern of organizing the cities first, then moving on to the county seats, towns, and villages.”²³ Naturally then, the clans first organizations in Oklahoma were made up of urban white protestants.

Charles Alexander also makes a point to introduce Reverend Caleb Ridley’s speech in Tulsa as the beginnings of Klan activity in the county. Ridley, a Baptist minister, professed the Klan’s values and their objectives in Oklahoma to a crowd of mostly men at the Tulsa Convention Hall.²⁴ The Morning Daily Tulsa World of August 11 gave a brief summary of Ridley’s speech along with limited commentary. Caleb Ridley was an Imperial Kludd for the Klan in Georgia, and as such represented the values and direction of the “Invisible Empire.” In the Tulsa world summary, “indeed the provision of its membership barring negros, Jews and Catholics has led many people to believe, according to Dr. Ridley, that the Klan is negative and not positive in it aims” and although Ridley reportedly professes that the Klan does not

²¹ Ibid P. 176

²² Alexander, Charles C. *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*. 1st ed. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2014. P.44

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid P. 45

“[...]fight the Negro because he is a negro[...]" he does claim “[...]but a white man is a white man weather he lives in New Jersey, Indiana, Illinois, Oklahoma, or Georgia, and a white man’s job is to see that civilization comes under the dominion of no inferior race so long as he lives.”²⁵

The summary, despite its limited detail, still provides pertinent information for us to contextualize. For whatever reason, the summary’s author does not provide Radley’s response to antagonistic relations between the Klan, Catholics, and Jews. Only conflict with African Americans was somewhat addressed. Whatever the purpose, his dismissal of people’s anxieties by claiming white men are the same all over the country ironically shows the Klan’s own narrow definition of whiteness. If white Catholics and white Jews are prohibited from membership, then clearly whites were not the same everywhere. This was the point.

To the Klan of 1920s Oklahoma, Whiteness was more than skin color and religion, it was also behavior. Whiteness had to be earned through adopting specific examples of moral normativity in public and private life. Jews, with very few examples to the contrary, inherently could not participate in this normativity. Perhaps most jarring is that this article was placed front and center on the opening page of the Tulsa World, only inches away from another article advertising Jewish high holiday services.²⁶ This further suggests that the clan knew that it would have to contend with communities that possessed influential Jewish minorities, who sat in the awkward racial middle ground of passing as white, but clearly not meeting the criteria of ideal protestant whiteness.

The emergence of the Klan probably would have ushered in a mix of reactions from Jewish communities across the state. Many Oklahoma Jews considered themselves to be white

²⁵ The Morning Tulsa Daily World (Tulsa, Okla.), Vol. 15, No. 314, Ed. 1, Thursday, August 11, 1921, newspaper, August 11, 1921; Tulsa, Oklahoma.

(<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc77739/>: accessed March 26, 2024) Pg. 1

²⁶ Ibid

Americans. Thousands of Jews tried to claim their rightful place as Americans by participating in western expansion, fighting frontier battles or helping develop local economies. It should be said, Klan members were far from the only whites in Oklahoma who did not possess favorable opinions of Jews. The emergence of the Klan, however, openly threatened the status Jews held as both Americans and red-blooded Oklahoma frontiersmen.

Ironically, in another world, The Klan of the 1920s might have considered many of the urban Jewish population well suited to join their ranks. Urban Jews in Oklahoma were often middleclass, possessed clothing and accents that, for the most part, were indistinguishable from that of white people of similar status. Many Jews throughout Oklahoma were also intimately involved in the affairs of their communities and sometimes held important private and public positions within them. Just as Jews could not attain whiteness for their religion, poor whites could not possess whiteness whilst articulating the opinions and behaviors of the working class. Indeed, its well known within scholarship that working class whites were the primary targets of white supremacist violence by the Ku Klux Klan.

Poor whites, to the Klan, threatened white supremacy within the state. In order to convince whites that they were inherently separate and superior to all other groups, class distinctions needed to be erased in the minds of Oklahoma's white proletariat. As Chang elaborated, "To the Klan, being white was not just an issue of who your parents were. It was also a matter of how you acted. Put another way, race was a matter not merely of biology but of performance. Klansmen were attempting to enforce middle-class whiteness on the white working class."²⁷ The behaviors that the Klan wished to enforce varied from chapter to chapter and state to state, just as their goals did. Generally, however, the Klan brought vigilante violence against

²⁷ Chang, David A. *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*. 1st ed. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. P. 200

accused bootleggers, wife beaters, conmen, and people who were too well acquainted with African Americans. Chang also provides interesting insight into the direction and patterns of the Klan's violence sighting that "[...]the possession or sale of alcohol, sexual improprieties, the nonsupport or abuse of family, or couples' living together out of wedlock—together accounted for more than 60 percent of attacks in cases in which motivation could be determined."²⁸

The Klan's cult of normativity struck fear and frustration in the hearts of more than just nonwhites and poor whites. City officials, law enforcement, and even federal actors concerned themselves with the Klan's lack of any real accountability. In some towns, even members of law enforcement were proud Klan members and perhaps even took part themselves in the violent vigilante "nightriding" the Klan had become so synonymous for in the state. Although the clan tried to fix their image as saviors of the promise land for whites in Oklahoma, their own influence as Klansmen would fade as the organization faced more opposition to their methods than they did support. The damage, so to speak, had been done.

The positionality of Jews, although not perfect before the rise of the Klan, had taken a significant blow as chapters formed in almost direct opposition to what Jews represented: whites that threatened the Anglo-Protestant order of the state. Jews, although considered white, always, in one way or another, faced difficulties due to their intermediate place in racial hierarchies. However, conversely, Jews then also brought with them a great diversity of their own, which only further complicated notions of Oklahoma as "white man's country", essentially extending the frontier by existing. In the following chapters readers will explore the stories both individual Jews, and Jewish communities in key parts of the state. Each historical actor faced victories and

²⁸ Ibid P. 196

setbacks intimately intertwined with the issues of their time and space within Indian Territory and Oklahoma.

To clarify, the purpose of the content of this thesis is not to give a detailed timeline of Jews, their communities, and the milestone of their story as communities change over time. Many other works have already endeavored, and largely succeeded, to provide long lists of every Jewish person in the state and their basic statistics of population, occupation, and wealth. In contrast, this thesis embarks on a critical exploration of selective Jewish actors and communities, and the spaces they carved out for themselves in the face of changing racial, social, and economic conditions within Oklahoma.

In chapter one, I will analyze the examples of Joseph Sondheimer, whose arrival heralded the beginning of our timeline, and Barney Zimmerman, whose story reflects that of Sondheimer's, only decades later before and after statehood. In this chapter I will introduce a critical analysis of primary sources, some of which have never been used before, and secondary scholarship from modern historiography of the American West and Jews' places in it. The existence of Jews in both busy and remote places reveals a distinct flavor of cooperation in the face of communal diversity in Indian Territory.

In chapter two, I will explore the important features of the Oklahoma City and Tulsa Jewish communities respectively. Each city housed the first and second largest Jewish communities in the state by the first decades of the 20th century, and both faced differing struggles within the political and social climates of city societies. In terms of racial categorization, the awkward middle ground Jews occupied between whites and non-whites affected their social standing, their professional opportunities, and their abilities to integrate within these cities.

In chapter three, I will recount the creation and survival of Ardmore's congregation Emeth, the oldest Jewish congregation in the state. Ardmore's distinct history as a transit city between Texas and the rest of the state of Oklahoma, provided it with early opportunities for Jewish settlement. Although the congregation never surpassed or even rivaled the populations of OKC and Tulsa post-statehood, they faced similar barriers as Jews in larger cities. The commitment of the Ardmore Jews to their congregation, and to the development of the city, created a tight and meaningful frontier community. Ultimately, their story will culminate with the ending of our timeline, symbolized by the founding of the congregations first synagogue created by Ardmore Jews, for Ardmore Jews.

CHAPTER ONE

Joseph Sondheimer: from Paved Streets to Red Dirt

Jews have never possessed a large population within Indian Territory or later in the State of Oklahoma. Perhaps because of this and the ability of many Jews to blend in with white Christian populations, most Jewish pioneers and Oklahomans are not often recognized as Jews in historical documentation. Similarly, this also translates to a lack of examination into the implications of Jewish-Native interactions in Oklahoma History. Significant questions have yet to be asked or given proper attention, questions such as: what does it mean that Joseph Sondheimer and the Laupheimer Brothers wrote individually to chief Samuel Checote of the Muskogee Nation about their tax status? what is the significance Jews, white Christians, and native communities competing for and trading furs and other animal products? Why would Barney Zimmerman forsake security and comfort to help settle the remote and predominantly indigenous town of Antlers? What does Barney Zimmerman mean when he claims Choctaws amongst his closest friends' decades after his arrival? These are some of the important questions explored in the following pages.



Figure 1: Joseph Sondheimer (date unknown)²⁹

Joseph Sondheimer is one of the few Jews recognized by the state of Oklahoma for his contributions to its development, but his story is rarely examined in detail outside of his relationship to the town of Muskogee. I first discovered Sondheimer whilst browsing the 1946 rabbinical thesis of Randall M. Falk. Randall Falk is perhaps best known for his civil rights activism during the second half of the 20th century, if he is known at all. Before he joined the movement for civil rights, however, he was a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio, and conducted his research in 1940s Oklahoma. Personally, this work was the

²⁹ <https://www.isjl.org/oklahoma-muskogee-encyclopedia.html>

starting point for over a year of feverish interest in the underwritten history of Oklahoma Jewry. Sondheimer's story, however, has not always been agreed upon.

The most noticeable discrepancies in the recounting of Sondheimer's story are the year he first arrived in Indian Territory and the year he moved his family permanently to Indian Territory. According to the Oklahoma State Historical Society's (OHS) summary of Sondheimer's life, Sondheimer first arrived in Indian Territory in 1867.³⁰ In Randall Falk's thesis he claims that Sondheimer came to Indian Territory in 1881.³¹ In Henry J. Tobias's *The Jews in Oklahoma*, Tobias claims that he came to the territory in 1866.³² Even the article on Sondheimer in the Muskogee Phoenix that Falk includes in his notes, claims he first came in 1870.³³ Luckily, the Oklahoma Historical Society has the right of it, as Sondheimer explains himself in a letter to Chief Checote of the Muskogee nation that he had come in 1867.³⁴ The Works Progress Administration (WPA) interview with his only surviving son Samuel Sondheimer, also confirms this date as correct.³⁵ Although the exact date might seem inconsequential for the purpose of this paper, it is of great importance to know the historical context of the United States and the Muskogee nation at this time. Unfortunately, the exact date that his family joined him in Muskogee was unable to be verified, but we can safely assume it was shortly after the establishment of a rail line through Muskogee in 1872.

³⁰ Larry O'Dell, "Sondheimer, Joseph," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=SO006>.

³¹ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 8

³² Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma* / by Henry J. Tobias. 1st ed. *Newcomers to a New Land*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 12

³³ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. Appendix B

³⁴ Sondheimer, Joseph to Samuel Checote, June 28th, 1880, Creek Agency records, Oklahoma Historical Society. Roll CRN-50, frame 39136-39140

³⁵ Robinson, Ella. Interview with Samuel Sondheimer about Joseph Sondheimer, Indian-Pioneer Oral History Project. Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Library, Norman, Oklahoma, 1937.

In the WPA interview with Samuel Sondheimer, Joseph's son, we are given a fairly common story of a German Jewish immigrant whose family came to the big cities of the American Northeast for better opportunities. After a few years of bouncing between jobs, Sondheimer gradually made his way westward. When the Civil war broke out, Sondheimer was able to follow elements of the union army in order to sell merchandise. Eventually Sondheimer established an official business front in St. Louis sometime between the beginning and end of the Civil War. Shortly after the conflict ended, Sondheimer decided to take another risk farther west in the Creek Nation of Indian Territory.³⁶ Just like many enterprising Jewish merchants, Joseph saw growing economic potential in the expansion of the American West and followed opportunities as they surfaced. It is unclear what attracted him to Indian territory specifically, but it was enough to eventually keep him and his family in Muskogee until after his death in 1913.

As previously established, Sondheimer first arrived in Indian territory at Fort Gibson in 1867. To put this date into historical perspective, a German-Jewish merchant had arrived in the Muskogee Nation 2 years after the end Civil War, 40 years before Oklahoma was ratified as a state, 23 years before the proverbial closing of the frontier in 1890, and 9 years before the battle of little big horn, the last great military victory of Indian nations against federal forces. Sondheimer, then, had arrived in Indian territory at the beginning of a pivotal Epoch in American History. Well before the state was even conceived, a German Jew was contributing to its history in earnest.

By coming to Indian territory so early in the state's history, Sondheimer provided a transitional role for Indigenous communities and cashless economies. The services and modes of exchange that Sondheimer facilitated were not unique to his own story, but rather part of a

³⁶ Ibid

larger historical trend. As David S. Koffman recognized, “In their commercial interactions with Native Americans, Jewish settlers navigated ambiguous ground between Native outsiders (as they saw them) and fellow second-generation American-born Jews, acting as economic and cultural intermediaries between American whites and Native Americans.”³⁷ It is unclear if Joseph Sondheimer was conscious of or intended to pursue such a role, but the lucrative mercantile opportunities must have provided enough reason to separate himself completely from the relatively comfortable amenities of big cities such as St. Louis. Either way, Sondheimer made a name for himself in the buying of furs, the shipping of pecans, and paying in cash.

³⁷ Koffman, David S. *The Jews' Indian*. 1st ed. United States: Rutgers University Press, 2019. P. 84



Figure 2: The “Old” Creek Agency³⁸

Before the construction of a rail line through Muskogee, many traders including Joseph Sondheimer conducted much of their business from the “Old” Creek Agency. The “Old” creek

³⁸ Meagher, Thomas. Map of the Old Creek Agency, map, April 5, 1938; (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1776960/>: accessed December 10, 2023), The Gateway to Oklahoma History, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society.

agency was located northwest of Muskogee and east of the Fern Mountain with northern access to the Arkansas River. Waterway access was important for the agency as trade in the region was done by way of the Arkansas River. By the time of Joseph Sondheimer's arrival in the territory, the Creek Agency was no more than a collection of wood cabins and basic structures, a far cry from the Mississippi river transit hub of St. Louis. At this time the Muskogee nation was also facing deep hardships exacerbated by internal conflict between Lower and Upper Creeks and their differing involvement in the Civil War. Indeed, according to the *Economic conditions of the creek nation, 1865-1871* in the 1973 edition of *the Cornicles of Oklahoma*, "...the Creeks were an utterly impoverished people in 1865."³⁹ Sondheimer entered the Muskogee nation at a very complex historical crossroads, and his role in the region's future would be both social and economic.

Whether the Muskogee nation was truly "impoverished" or simply deficient in the specific qualities valued by White Christian society from the perspective of Professor Harriman, is unclear. What is clear, however, is that the creek agency was a center for commerce and community, facilitating a frontier mosaic of cultural interaction. What is most interesting about the Old Creek Agency is the people that lived and worked on it. According to Helga Harriman, "At Least fifty Indian and Negro families lived at the agency in the post-bellum period."⁴⁰ The Agency included an office for the Indian Agent, a main general store run by a James A. Patterson, a cake shop ran by a woman named Sopha Canard whose husband would also sell whisky, a tavern that was run by an African American woman by the name of "Aunt" Sarah

³⁹ Harriman, Helga H. *Economic Conditions in the Creek Nation, 1865-1871*, article, Autumn 1973; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2124237/m1/4/?q=Helga%20Harriman>; accessed December 10, 2023), *The Gateway to Oklahoma History*, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society. P.326

⁴⁰ *Ibid* P. 328

Davis, and other stores run by a Mr. Stidham, J.S. Atkinsons, and the Parkinson family.⁴¹ For perspective, the “tavern” was “a yard fenced in with rails and several log cabins within – one a kitchen, one a dining room, and others bed rooms”⁴²

From The Creek Agency, Sondheimer would go in person to native communities that could supply him with the pelts and furs that made up the majority of his early business. As his son Samuel remembers: “Mr. Sondheimer Traveled over the country on horseback, riding his favorite gray saddle horse. He went from house to house among the full blood Indians buying their skins and pelts. He also traded with the small merchants throughout the country, who in turn had bought from the Indians. His business dealt exclusively with the wildlife of the country”⁴³ it is very possible then that Sondheimer traveled some distance in order to acquire goods from the local population. As future Muskogee businessman Clarence W. Turner would recall from his youth, “one of my first duties was to assort the furs we bought during the day...Later fur buyers Frankel, Sondheimer, and Luapheimer, would come and bid on the furs which went to the highest bidder”⁴⁴ considering Turner’s Father’s store was in Okmulgee, Sondheimers commute would have been at least 40 miles one way.

By coincidence, this recollection by Turner was the first place I discovered the names Laupheimer and Frankel, two possible sets of Jewish brothers who opened businesses in

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Oklahoma Historical Society. *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume 10, Number 1, March 1932, periodical, March 1932; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1827131/m1/26/?q=Laupheimer>: accessed December 10, 2023), *The Gateway to Oklahoma History*, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society. P.22

⁴³ Robinson, Ella. Interview with Samuel Sondheimer about Joseph Sondheimer, Indian-Pioneer Oral History Project. Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Library, Norman, Oklahoma, 1937. P. 3

⁴⁴ Oklahoma Historical Society. *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume 10, Number 1, March 1932, periodical, March 1932; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1827131/m1/26/?q=Laupheimer>: accessed December 10, 2023), *The Gateway to Oklahoma History*, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society. P.22

Muskogee and Shawnee respectively.⁴⁵ The possibility of Sondheimer having worked and competed with other Jewish merchants by 1870 is important to keep in mind, as the existence of multiple Jewish merchants working within relative proximity of each other suggest the beginnings of Jewish community in the Muskogee nation. Although there is no evidence to suggest any kind of relationship between them, it is possible to imagine these traders competing by day and forming prayer quorums by night.

The implications of Joseph Sondheimer's potential everyday interactions is significant for several reasons. Firstly, we know that Sondheimer bought directly and indirectly from Creek/Mvskoke Indians. Considering much of his business was conducted at the Creek Agency itself, it is fair to assume he also interacted with Black homesteaders, Afro-Creeks, and Afro Cherokees as well. The possible images that are invoked by these relationships are extraordinary. Imagine a scene: it's the end of the working day as the sun sinks into the horizon reflected by the Arkansas river. You arrive at the Creek Agency for a plate of food and decent shelter. You look at the nearest gathering of people and see known Jewish merchants, Creek citizens, white laborers, and Black migrants all sharing space. Perhaps they are finalizing a deal, or they're merely catching up on the ins and outs of the territory. Either way, it is a mental photograph with a time stamp (1867) most Oklahomans might not believe. Without an actual photograph, however, we need to use a measured amount of historical imagination to better glimpse cultural interactions that existed on the Oklahoma frontier.

Despite a lack of photographs, C.W. Turner luckily gives us more than just a description of fur traders. In his same recollection, recorded within the Chronicles of Oklahoma, Turner journeyed from Ft. Smith, Arkansas to Okmulgee, Muskogee Nation. The process of the multi-

⁴⁵ Laupheimer to Samuel Checote, April 8th, 1882, Creek Agency records, Oklahoma Historical Society. Roll CRN-50, frame 39177-39178

day journey stresses the distinct tapestry of cultures Turner was exposed to Just in his first introduction to Indian territory. Indeed, during the journey the Turners relied on the services of Native Americans and Black homesteaders alike, before finally selling furs to Jewish traders the day after they arrive. If it was not history, it would sound like the beginning of a bad joke.

In 1870, C.W. Turner accompanied his father along the journey from Ft. Smith Arkansas to his store in Okmulgee Indian Territory. On November 25th of 1870 Turner left Arkansas by ferry, eventually needing to stay the night at a “stage stand” of an “Aunt” Manervia Thornton at Sallisaw creek, a tributary which would be near the town of Sallisaw Oklahoma today. Manervia is described as a Cherokee woman by Turner. After continuing their journey by ferry and animal they eventually reached the Old Creek Agency. The description of the Creek Agency I used earlier was actually from this same first-hand account. At the Creek Agency Tuner and his father stayed at the tavern of “Aunt” Sarah Davis.⁴⁶ We know that Aunt Sarah Davis was at least African American from the report of Helga Harriman who describes her with the racially charged label of “Negress”. Harriman also adds that Davis’s business was “famous for clean accommodations and good food.”⁴⁷ After Turner and his father stayed the night at the Old Creek Agency, the duo continued on until raised water levels from heavy rainfall caused them to stop at Sugar Creek, probably somewhere between the Agency and Okmulgee. Here they “put up at the home of Abe Nevin, an old darky who had just come back from the Army and built a cabin.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Oklahoma Historical Society. *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume 10, Number 1, March 1932, periodical, March 1932; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1827131/m1/26/?q=Laupheimer>: accessed December 10, 2023), *The Gateway to Oklahoma History*, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society. P.22

⁴⁷ Harriman, Helga H. *Economic Conditions in the Creek Nation, 1865-1871*, article, Autumn 1973; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2124237/m1/4/?q=Helga%20Harriman>: accessed December 10, 2023), *The Gateway to Oklahoma History*, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society. P. 328

⁴⁸ Oklahoma Historical Society. *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Volume 10, Number 1, March 1932, periodical, March 1932; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

From the unsavory description, it is reasonable to assume that Abe Nevin was a Black homesteader. After a last day of travel and navigating the flooded creeks of the region, Tuner and his father reached Okmulgee on November 28th, 1870. It was from here that Turner would finally meet Sondheimer as “the next day [after arrival] father put me to work. One of my first duties was to assort the furs we bought during the day...later the fur buyers Frankel, Sondheimer, and Laupheimer would come and bid on the furs [...]”⁴⁹

In just a few days’ time, C.W. Tuner and his father not only used but depended upon the services and kindness of a Cherokee woman, the Black proprietress of the only tavern at the Creek Agency, and a Black veteran before finally being able to do business with at least one Jewish fur trader. Although Turner would later express negative opinions about Native Americans and their Afro-Kin, it is clear that they were not above soliciting the services of non-whites and non-Christians alike. On the frontier, relationships between different peoples can take many forms and be expressed through equally varied shades of grey that racial hierarchies could not properly address.

Sondheimer and Friendship

The Works Progress Administration, a New Deal program that supplied thousands of jobs for Americans during the Great Depression, funded interviews of both settlers and Indigenous individuals in Oklahoma resulting in the Indian-Pioneer Papers collection. The WPA interview of Samuel Sondheimer, Joseph’s surviving son, also unveils some interesting insights into the relationships his Father fostered with tribal citizens. As Samuel points out: “Among his many friends throughout the territory were several Indian Chiefs, Sam Checotah, General Pleasant Porter and Legus Perryman were among them. Mr. William P. Ross. A prominent Cherokee,

⁴⁹ Ibid P. 23

whom he became acquainted with on his coming to Fort Gipson in 1867, remained his staunch friend throughout the life of Mr. Ross.”⁵⁰ Certainly Joseph Sondheimer had to form some kind of amicable relationship with the most influential actors in the region in order to grow his business. From the beginning of his time in Indian Territory, as for any non-citizen, Sondheimer could not legally live and trade in the territory without authorization from the Mvskoke government. Unfortunately, the permit lists of the Muskogee/Creek Nation at the Oklahoma Historical Society are incomplete. The earliest records that contain Sondheimer’s (and Laupheimer’s) permits are from 1881.⁵¹ Although the archives are incomplete, one can safely assume these traders, who had operational businesses, were licensed well before 1881 as they would have been escorted from the nation by federal agents otherwise.

Indeed, both the list of traders and the *letter book of principle Chief Samuel Checote* microfilm in the Creek Agency collection at OHS reveal, at the very least, an amicable business relationship between the Sondheimer, Laupheimer, and Chief Checote. Both traders wrote to Checote asking for exemptions to certain taxes. For example, in Sondheimer’s letter he writes:

“I herewith respectfully inform you that a Tax Collector, so called Lighthorse man for the Muskogee Nation called on me several days ago to collect taxes from me (illegible) as if I was a Merchant in the business of selling Merchandise to the people of your nation and others at Muskogee. I answered him that my (home?) of business does not come under that clause and I am not selling goods at all but only buy for cash the produce of the people of

⁵⁰ Robinson, Ella. Interview with Samuel Sondheimer about Joseph Sondheimer, Indian-Pioneer Oral History Project. Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma Library, Norman, Oklahoma, 1937. P. 7-8

⁵¹ Indian agent Tufts to Samuel Checote, May 5th, 1881, Creek Agency records, Oklahoma Historical Society. Roll CRN-50, frame 39143-39145.

the Muskogee Nation such as (illegible) hides wool deerskin furs and pecan nuts and (illegible) to the States for Dispersal [...]"⁵²

Although I have been unable to find the legislation regarding the exact tax, he is claiming exemption from in 1880, Sondheimer insists exemption because he does not technically sell goods to the Muskogee nation's people. later in the letter Sondheimer claims "I brought my money, my time, and my labor to your people and never took a dollar out of your country."⁵³

Although the logic of the letter does not entirely add up, goods bought from the Muskogee/Creek that are then sold outside of the nation at profit, inherently takes that capital potential out of the Nations hands. Perhaps Sondheimer is stressing his value as a source of cash as he regularly underlines and capitalizes the word Cash.⁵⁴ But as a middleman between the nation and the greater markets outside of Indian territory, it is entirely possible that Sondheimer was attempting to appeal to a sense of symbiosis between his services and the needs of the nation, thus exempting him from a specific tax. Another implication of the two letters is that Sondheimer and Laupheimer both felt comfortable enough to not only challenge their tax status but also, in the case of Sondheimer, emphasize their special role within the territory.

The Difficult Case of Laupheimer, Frankel, Sanger, and Greenberg.

Throughout the entirety of the research process for this thesis, persons with potentially Jewish origins have been uncovered in official records and firsthand accounts from throughout the state. Unfortunately, the process of tracking the surnames down in both native collections as well as federal and state records requires an immense amount of time that did not fit within the

⁵² Sondheimer, Joseph to Samuel Checote, June 28th, 1880, Creek Agency records, Oklahoma Historical Society. Roll CRN-50, frame 39136-39140

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

timeframe of this research. It feels personally and professionally inappropriate to assume Jewish ancestry based solely on name and profession. However, when working within a space and time that is characterized by under-documentation, specifically rural communities' pre-statehood it is reasonable to infer their status as Jews in order to better explore the valuable implications of such historical data.

Sondheimer, Zimmerman, Laupheimer, Frankel, Sanger, and Greenberg are all examples of Jewish surnames that can be found scattered throughout mentions of traders in the Nations of Indian Territory. They are also names that could be identified as Jewish. Sondheimer and Zimmerman, however, are the only individuals who have their identities as Jews corroborated by primary documentation and the secondary works of David S. Koffman and Henry J. Tobias. Indeed, it has been well documented that Jews did have a significant presence with the city of Muskogee, but the implications of multiple Jewish merchants existing simultaneously pre-Land Run is significant for its counterpoint to narrow interpretations of Oklahoma history. Unfortunately, the most complete histories of Muskogee Jewish life have come from Henry J. Tobias and Randall M. Falk. Both, however, fail to recognize the numbers of Jews that existed in Muskogee pre-Land Run, and both merely gloss over the relationships these Jews had with their Native neighbors, clients, friends, colleagues, and perhaps even lovers.

Ultimately, Sondheimer died in Muskogee in 1913, celebrated for his contributions to the development of the town, and for his dedication to the fostering of Jewish life. There are many other fascinating facets of Joseph Sondheimers life that are difficult to dig out in the available material on his life. His and the Jewish community's reactions to population explosion, intruders onto sovereign native land, and to the creation of the State of Oklahoma are speculative. Further

research into Muskogee Jewish life should be continued as there still exist many stories untold within the community.

Barney Zimmerman, the Choctaw Agency, and Antlers Oklahoma.

Barney Zimmerman, the second historical actor of this lengthy chapter, was brought to my attention in the *Jews' Indian* by David S. Koffman. In Koffman's book, Barney is used as an example of mercantile interactions that Jews had with Native Americans. Although Barney's interview is the sole reference that Koffman uses, the author does not explore the content of the interview in great detail. Barney Zimmerman, a Jewish immigrant from Russia, arrived on the eastern seaboard at a young age before the civil war. After moving from New York, to Nashville, Ft. Smith Arkansas, Paris Texas, and back to Nashville, Mr. Zimmerman finally arrived in Antlers, Indian territory in 1892. At the ripe age of 38 years old, Barney states that he "...lived in a tent with my wife until I could rent a house or build one."⁵⁵ In fact, Barney didn't have an official store until after he had made money peddling. However, many years it might have taken him to finally establish a storefront is unknown. Zimmerman Explains:

I peddled throughout this country afoot and carried the goods on my back... I finally bought a team and a hack which I used after that... I would put some goods in my hack and pull out. I sold lots of goods that way... I figured that Antlers would someday make a good town, so when I got enough money together, I went down to Paris, Texas, and bought up some dry goods.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Johnson H. Hampton interview of Barney Zimmerman, Works Progress Administration, Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma. December 30th, 1937.

⁵⁶ Ibid

There are many implications one can glean from this part of the interview alone. Perhaps the most striking however is that Zimmerman, at the age of 38, came to Choctaw territory with his wife without the capital required to live in or do business in a permanent structure.

Although the concept of a Jewish peddler selling his goods on foot throughout the country isn't an original occurrence in the American West, it does beg the question as to why, after working for so many years in different places, did the Zimmerman's take a chance on Indian territory. As one might remember a similar question was posed earlier about Joseph Sondheimer when he took a chance in 1867. Although their exact motives and inspiration cannot be known without much greater evidence, David S. Koffman provides us with a more general theory. Koffman claims:

Jews migrated to the West in search of business opportunities; their desire to be counted among the nation's exalted subjects grew out of the ideological and cultural conditions germane to the material circumstances of the West. In this regard, enterprising Jewish merchants considered the presence, not the absence, of Native Americans in the West as opportunities for productive exchange.⁵⁷

Although I am generally opposed to the overgeneralization common in works about American Jewish history, Koffman's observations lend us a theoretical hand in the absence of critical data.

Zimmerman might not have had the capital required to put a roof over his head, but that didn't stop him and his wife from seeking opportunity and belonging in the frontier communities of the Choctaw Nation. As Zimmerman describes, Antlers was "[...]very small then; there were about forty or fifty houses in town and very few white people living here."⁵⁸ Perhaps, like David

⁵⁷ Koffman, David S. *The Jews' Indian*. 1st ed. United States: Rutgers University Press, 2019. P. 83

⁵⁸ Johnson H. Hampton interview of Barney Zimmerman, Works Progress Administration, Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma. December 30th, 1937.

Koffman claims in the same chapter, “Simply doing what Jews often did to make a living—namely, peddling and engaging in small merchant exchange—gave a positive valence to economic growth and helped Jews feel a part of a bigger story of civilizing the American frontier.”⁵⁹ whatever the reason, it is clear that Settling down and lending one’s expertise to communities that benefitted from it was sufficient reason for the Zimmerman’s to leave the comforts of bigger towns and lay their roots in Indian Territory.

Koffman does an excellent job of isolating perhaps the most important part of WPA interview with Barney Zimmerman for display in his book. the full quote, as provided in *Jews’ Indian*, is as follows:

There were very few white people when I came to Antlers and the country was open . . . for there were no white people out in the country and the Indians lived so far apart that there were no houses to be seen along the road. . . I have been in this town ever since I came here, and I have raised my children here in this town; they have attended school with the Indian children. I have traded with the Indians and for years would let them have anything they wanted on credit. I never lost one penny on the Indians, and they are honest and law-abiding people, just as true to their word as men can be there are no bad Indians; I never saw about one among them. The Indians did not bother the white people. They would fight among themselves and maybe kill an Indian once in a while, but they are good people and never bothered white people at all. I have lived a long time, but I never did hear of an Indian having trouble with a white man not even with the Negroes and the best friends I have are

⁵⁹ Koffman, David S. *The Jews' Indian*. 1st ed. United States: Rutgers University Press, 2019. P. 85

full blood Choctaws. I have been here so long that they all know me, and I have treated them the best I know how they have treated me in the same way.⁶⁰

Curiously, Koffman merely uses this quote as an example of the “[...] amicable bonds he [Barney] built with his new Choctaw neighbors.”⁶¹ Considering that Zimmerman had arrived in Antlers in 1892, and the WPA interview he references took place some 40 years later in 1937, these neighbors were anything but new to him and his family. When Zimmerman states that “the best friends I have are full blood Choctaws”⁶² It is difficult to imagine that he was referring to them from the perspective of a new settler. If Zimmerman identifies his closest friends as Choctaws in the present tense in 1937, then he has done much more than formulate “amicable” bonds with his “new” neighbors. To take it a step further, considering the active presence and popularity of the KKK in 1920s Oklahoma, in which multiple chapters existed within the original boundaries of Indian Territory, to be a Jew and consider Choctaw’s your closest friends is a profound statement.

Indeed, this quote is of much greater significance than as an example of friendly relations between merchants and indigenous communities. When Zimmerman explains that “[...]I have raised my children here in this town; they have attended school with the Indian children”⁶³ he is not talking about “amicable” relationships, he is talking about deep and meaningful connections he made not just as a merchant but as a member of a diverse community. What one should note from this account by Zimmerman is that he lived in a time and place dominated by the presence

⁶⁰ Koffman, David S. *The Jews' Indian*. Quoting Barney Zimmerman. 1st ed. United States: Rutgers University Press, 2019. P. 84-85

⁶¹ *Ibid* P. 84

⁶² Johnson H. Hampton interview of Barney Zimmerman, Works Progress Administration, Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma. December 30th, 1937.

⁶³ *Ibid*

of non-Whites. Despite the growing presence of white settlers, or even the presence of other Jewish merchants in Indian territory, Barney claims his best friends were Choctaws, his kids grew up alongside Native children, and that “there are no bad Indians.”⁶⁴ The Zimmerman’s then helped extend the frontier far beyond its proverbial closing in 1889. They lived amongst peoples with much different customs and cultures than their own, and made a living through systems of bartering, credit, and, most importantly, trust.

What the examples of Sondheimer and Zimmerman’s merchantlike journeys reveal to us is a vibrant frontier of Christians, Jews, Native Americans, and Black settlers. It was this frontier mosaic that would mold and shape the development of Oklahoma to and eventually well beyond statehood. Most importantly, it is a story that is contrary to depictions of an Oklahoma made by, and for, White Christians. Perhaps their stories show that Oklahoma wasn’t built but terraformed, socially and physically, to meet the demands of white “American” normativity. Although Zimmerman and Sondheimer participate in the colonization of the American West through their propagation of capitalism over traditional Indigenous economies, the bonds they formed shaped both their individual lives and the communities they joined. Indeed, in a state that has faced difficult questions about its relationship and duty to indigenous communities, their presence as Jews helped carry the frontier past statehood, even if their story isn’t remembered in the historical imagination of the public. Oklahoma City and Tulsa, the subjects of the next chapter, stand in stark contrast to the more individualist experiences of early Jews in the state. Many of the most influential and committed members of the OKC/Tulsa Jewish communities only arrived after 1900, well after the likes of Sondheimer and the Laupheimer brothers. Instead of small

⁶⁴ Ibid

towns, these Jews were immediately exposed to the dramatic aspects of Oklahoma's most populous cities, cities whose first few decades are categorized by chaotic and explosive change.

CHAPTER TWO

Life in the City: Negotiating Belonging in OKC and Tulsa.

Until recently, the History of the American West often focused on Jews in terms of communities with large enough numbers to support the traditional material culture of religious life. Religious texts, clothing, instruments, and traditional services such as a Kosher butcher or *Shochet*, let alone a Rabbi, were generally unavailable in the smaller townships of the American West. As Shari Rabin put quaintly in *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in the nineteenth century*, “Jews negotiated *Kashrut* on the road, in private homes, and in Jewish boardinghouses.”⁶⁵ Indeed the foundations of dietary observance were greatly challenged by the realities of the frontier and markets that catered to White Christians. Visible Jewish communities in OKC and Tulsa were often the only reference that Oklahomans had for Jews in the rest of the state. Cities could support large synagogues, multiple active Jewish organizations, religious clothing, visiting lecturers, and traditional services all of which made Jews visible as Jews to White Christians. Indeed, city-bias combined with Antisemitic conceptions of Jewish reliance on urban centers is certainly a contributing factor to the obscurity of Oklahoma Jewish history in the rest of the state. This does not, however, dismiss the great importance that both Tulsa and OKC had in supporting Jewish life across Oklahoma. The amenities of these two cities created the conditions necessary to support smaller Jewish communities.

Like Jews in smaller towns such as Ardmore and Muskogee, Jews in OKC and Tulsa were deeply involved in civic and private affairs. As relatively visible communities in these cities, their involvement put them on the frontline of Oklahoma politics before and well after

⁶⁵ Rabin, Shari. *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-century America* / Shari Rabin. North American Religions. 2017. P. 82

statehood in 1907. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, Jewish leaders created spaces for Jews to be both Jewish and Oklahoman within the race conscious societies of OKC and Tulsa. By both supporting smaller Jewish communities and participating intimately within multiple levels of civic society, Jews inherently challenged White Christian normativity and White Supremacy. By negotiating identity and belonging and asserting their own diversity as Jews, a frontier was alive and well in the big city.

Oklahoma City

Oklahoma City was founded on April 22nd, 1889, as a part of the Unassigned Lands that witnessed an influx of settlers from the Land Run. From the beginning of the city's history, Jews were intimately invested in its social, political, and economic development. Before statehood, new townships were run by provisional governments until the passing of the Organic Act on May 2nd, 1890. This legislation established OKC as the second of seven official counties leading to OKC's official incorporation as a city soon after on July 15th.⁶⁶ In 1890, during the first territorial legislature, two Jews, Isaac B. Levy and Isaac Jacobs, represented the wider OKC area as delegates. Jews, although sporadic at times, continued to hold positions as representatives of OKC through statehood.⁶⁷

In 1907, the year Oklahoma became a state, OKC had 32,452 residents.⁶⁸ Only 275 of these residents were Jews.⁶⁹ In the very same year Paul Gus, a Jewish attorney and OKC

⁶⁶ Linda D. Wilson, "Oklahoma City," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK025>.

⁶⁷ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 19

⁶⁸ Linda D. Wilson, "Oklahoma City," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK025>.

⁶⁹ Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma* / by Henry J. Tobias. 1st ed. *Newcomers to a New Land*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 13

resident, had already served as city attorney for two years.⁷⁰ In 1910, the population of OKC skyrocketed to a whopping 64,205 residents.⁷¹ The Jewish community however only grew marginally, becoming an even smaller fraction of the total population. In 1910, OKC became the official capitol of the state. Arguably the most well-known Oklahoma Jew, and former assistant secretary of state Leo Meyer, famously helped facilitate the move from Guthrie to OKC. Despite OKC's small Jewish population, Jews continued to be elected in important public offices. by 1910, Seymour C. Heyman, OKC Jew and former leader of the city's Elks Lodge,⁷² was elected as the first president of the OKC chamber of commerce, putting him in an influential position within the city's politics.⁷³ By 1920 Oklahoma boasted a population of 91,295⁷⁴ whilst the Jewish community remained under two thousand. Despite increasingly marginal status, Heyman was elected as President of the Board of education for OKC Public schools in 1922.⁷⁵ By the second decade of the century, Jewish leaders had their fingers on the pulse of city society.

The significance of Seymour Heyman's position in 1922 should not be understated. At this time OKC, along with much of the state, was in a struggle for its sole between agrarian minded Democrats and their wealthier Klan backed party counterparts. In 1923 former socialists and agrarian labor activists, now within the democratic party, backed OKC Mayor Jack Walton

⁷⁰ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 19

⁷¹ Linda D. Wilson, "Oklahoma City," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK025>.

⁷² Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma* / by Henry J. Tobias. 1st ed. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 52

⁷³ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 19

⁷⁴ Linda D. Wilson, "Oklahoma City," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=OK025>.

⁷⁵ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 19

as their candidate for Governor, helping him win the election.⁷⁶ Jack Walton was a strong opponent to the Klan's actions in the state, sometimes taking extreme measures in order to combat their influence throughout the state. But even declaring martial law throughout Oklahoma did not solve the conflict over whiteness.

Considering that the Klan was openly antisemitic in Oklahoma, Jews did not fit the Klan's definition of whiteness and any Jewish person in a position of leadership could have been seen as a target for their abuse or as an enemy to politically undermine. As David Chang points out "Walton opposed the Klan of the 1920s on the grounds of defending religious freedom and even the rights of ethnic minorities like German Americans, but not on the basis of protecting the rights of African Americans."⁷⁷ For all intents and purposes, Walton could have been seen as an ally to Oklahoma Jews. Walton's own white supremacy, however, further blurred the lines that demarcated ideal whiteness in the minds of many Oklahomans. Walton himself expressed that "the supremacy of the white race needs no advocacy"⁷⁸ as a counterpoint to the Klan's obsession with protecting it.

Jews like Seymour Heyman, who was still president of the OKC Public school board of education during Walton's tenure, would have been caught in a particularly awkward position. Possessing a direct influence on the shape of public education in OKC, as a non-white to Klansmen, put him at odds with Klan affiliated or simply antisemitic parents of children enrolled in public school. Because we know that the Klan of 1920s Oklahoma was characterized by wealth and middleclass Protestant Christian values, it is reasonable to assume many of the Klan's children attended public schools and therefore their parents would have been, at least

⁷⁶ Chang, David A. *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929*. 1st ed. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. P. 201

⁷⁷ *Ibid* P. 202

⁷⁸ *Ibid*

ideologically/racially, in direct contestation with Mr. Heyman. Despite the turmoil that Heyman witnessed during this turbulent time in the state's history, he kept his position as president of the board of education for OKC public schools through 1926.⁷⁹

Jews In OKC were also involved in much more than local politics. By 1906, OKC possessed both a reform congregation (B'nai Israel) led the by Rabbi Joseph Blatt, and an Orthodox congregation (Emanuel) led by Rabbi Milton Rosen. OKC was also home to a plethora of organizations that Jews were members of. Although it is relatively indistinct of OKC Jews to be actively engaged in a range of civic pursuits, what made OKC distinct as a metropolitan center for Judaism in the state was its relative tolerance of Jews. Jews were allowed to participate in a range of social organizations that they did not have access to in other parts of the state, such as Tulsa or Ardmore. 1946 Randal Falk observed this about OKC Jews: "From the earliest days until today the Jews of Oklahoma City occupy a unique position in their community. They are admitted, under no quota restrictions, to the country clubs, the city club, the service clubs, and all other civic enterprises."⁸⁰ To this day, country clubs have remained one of the most exclusive private social organizations in the United States, let alone Oklahoma. Although country clubs today no longer officially discriminate against religious and ethnic minorities, social and class-based requirements often bar diverse populations from membership. For country clubs to have allowed Jewish membership early in the state's history signaled OKC as a place where Jews were welcome to become active stakeholders in multiple levels of society.

Jews also possessed their own clubs and organizations that were made by and for Jews in OKC and throughout the rest of the state. OKC served as an important hub from which other

⁷⁹ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 20

⁸⁰ *Ibid* P. 21

smaller communities could receive religious, financial, or social support. Since many Jewish communities in Oklahoma were small and could not afford the fees necessary to employ a full Rabbi, smaller congregations such as Ardmore and Muskogee did not always have the authority and expertise required for basic religious functions. High holidays, weddings, and sacred rights had to be performed by Rabbis that commuted from larger urban centers. Frequently, however, Rabbinical students from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati would also come down to perform certain limited services, particularly for holidays, as full Rabbis were scarce and presumably could not be at every congregation on the same holy days.⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, Randall Falk wrote his thesis for the HUC, implying that Falk perhaps acquired his interest in Oklahoma Jewish history through previously established ties between Oklahoma communities and the school in Ohio. The implications of connections between Hebrew Union College and rural Oklahoma deserves much more time and research than the scope of this thesis allows.

Although the work of rabbinical students in rural towns was important, it should not distract from the important services OKCs Rabbis performed. Rabbis like Joseph Blatt made it their mission to understand and facilitate the cultural and religious survival of smaller Jewish communities in Oklahoma. Blatt, a transplant from the state of Georgia, took up the pulpit of congregation B'nai Israel in 1906. The peculiarities of the Oklahoma frontier, its' vastness, its' diversity, and its' sparse population, gave Blatt a project he would dedicate himself too for a great portion of his life: Helping Oklahomans. On a much smaller scale, The Late Historian Henry J. Tobias, the author of one of the very few secondary works on Oklahoma Jewry, humorously described Blatt's routine as "[...] performed almost in the manner of a circuit rider"⁸²

⁸¹ Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma* / by Henry J. Tobias. 1st ed. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 33-34

⁸² *Ibid*

as for many years Blatt made himself and his services regularly available to communities in Ardmore, Shawnee, Enid, and even Tulsa, the second major metropolitan center of the state.⁸³

Blatt also dedicated himself to more than religious support. One of the most interesting positions Joseph Blatt held was president of the OKC Rotary Club.⁸⁴ Similar to Seymour Heyman, Blatt's Rotary Club presidency allowed him to have direct access to the voices and concerns of OKC residents as a whole. As a well-known Jew, being president of the rotary club ran counter to the White Christian and White Protestant hegemony of the city. As a reward for his efforts to the city and to the state, Blatt even received "[...]the first citizen of OKC" award from the Junior Chamber of Commerce.⁸⁵ If the frontier revolved around diverse groups negotiating their own identities in relation to one another, as Bryan Stone might agree, then Blatt's efforts to support and grow Judaic practices and communities in Oklahoma, whilst also working for the betterment of all OKC residents, extended the frontier well beyond "settlement" and inherently sabotaged the goals of White Christian supremacists to truly make Oklahoma the promised land of the white race.

Tulsa, compared to OKC, shares a lot of basic similarities in size and function. Both were hubs that serviced smaller towns throughout the state, and both possessed relatively large Jewish communities. Although OKC and Tulsa shared many similarities, the Tulsa differed in composition and historical development. Leo Meyer himself lived in both OKC and Tulsa, most likely for the fact both cities contained active Jewish communities and business resources. Tulsa, however, fared much worse in the wake of racism and the resurgence of the KKK. Tulsa, at least

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 21

⁸⁵ Ibid

until the mid 1940s, maintained a troubling relationship with white supremacy and antisemitism that shaped social and political dynamics within the city.

Tulsa

Tulsa, like many large settlements in Oklahoma, originated within the jurisdiction of sovereign Indigenous governments. More specifically, the area of Tulsa was settled by the “Lower Creek” element of the Mvskoke people in 1833. Eventually, after the Civil war particularly, much of the tribe dedicated their living to the raising of cattle. One of the great facilitators of the tribes ranching enterprises was famous Muskogee rancher George Perryman. Perryman, who came to own one of the biggest cattle ranches in Oklahoma, became Tulsa’s first postmaster, where he served the community from its first post office: one of his original ranch houses.⁸⁶ Although it is not confirmed, some believe it was Perryman who named Tulsa.

Tulsa was officially incorporated as a city on January 18, 1898. Similar to how OKC was the seat of Oklahoma county, As the seat of Tulsa County, Tulsa exploded in population as rail lines brought in goods, services, and people to facilitate its growing needs. As an example of the Ludacris growth Tulsa experienced, between 1907 and 1920, Tulsa’s population grew from just 7,298 to a staggering 72,075.⁸⁷ Population growth of this intensity had profound effects on the region and the state as it quickly became the second largest city in Oklahoma, a title it still holds today. It is difficult to say when exactly the first Jews came to the Tulsa area. Jewish traders had been operating in an around the Muskogee Nation since 1867. It is not unlikely that traveling merchants like Joseph Sondheimer came to the Tulsa area to trade for cash for animal products

⁸⁶ Carl E. Gregory, “Tulsa,” The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=TU003>.

⁸⁷ Ibid

and pecans with the Mvskoke community there. Possibilities aside, the first occurrences of formal Jewish religious life in Tulsa occurs, according to Tobias, around 1903 with the formation of an Orthodox Minyan, or prayer quorum requiring ten Jewish men.⁸⁸

Unlike OKC, in which the first congregation observed Reform Judaism, Tobias recognizes that “[...]Orthodox Jews led the way in Tulsa” and incredibly, in 1905 one of the most important aspects of Jewish kosher observance, a ritual butcher or *Shochet*, was brought into Tulsa to service its community.⁸⁹ The establishment of a kosher butcher early within the city’s history hints at both the importance of dietary laws to religious observance to the Tulsa community, and also that Tulsa possessed the means by which to attract and sustain the practice. Despite the early religious activity, a synagogue was not constructed until 1917 for the B’nai Emunah Orthodox congregation, and a reform congregation, congregation Israel, was not formed until 1914.⁹⁰ Curiously, Both Tobias and Falk view the Orthodox flavor of the Tulsa community as negatively impacting their ability to integrate within Tulsa, however, Tulsa’s own connections to prejudice, white supremacy, and the Ku Klux Klan, provided more than enough trouble for Jews.

Tulsa, in contrast to OKC, can appear openly hostile to the existence of a Jewish community. Prejudice, however, was not even across all interactions. In fact, many incongruencies to the treatment of Tulsa Jews existed. Because Tulsa Jews were the primary subject of his rabbinical thesis, and because he also lived there, we have more intimate details about the prejudice faced by Jews in Tulsa than we do for OKC. To start, Falk recognizes that in

⁸⁸ Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma* / by Henry J. Tobias. 1st ed. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 34

⁸⁹ *Ibid* P. 35-36

⁹⁰ *Ibid*

contrast to OKC, “The Country Clubs of Tulsa have never opened their membership to Jews.”⁹¹ The City Club of Tulsa, a similar social club to that of the OKC counterpart, was a social club and like country clubs facilitated the informal social and business interactions of active Tulsans. The club’s inception included three Tulsa Jews named Abe Durand, Embye Kaye, and Samuel Goodman. According to Falk, once it became clear that leadership no longer intended to accept further Jewish membership, all three resigned.⁹²

Jews were active members of several civic oriented organizations. The Rotary club, Kiwanis club, and Lions’ clubs all, at one point, counted Jews amongst their membership. Falk implicates antisemitism as the reason behind the lack of Jews in these organizations over time.⁹³ However, this did not mean Jews were completely restricted. Many Jews occupied important positions within the Tulsa government. Claude Rosenstein, for example, was not only a previous president of the Tulsa Kiwanis organization, but also spent over a decade as legal counsel for the Tulsa Board of Education.⁹⁴ The case of Saul Yager is perhaps the best example of the strange political situation Jews faced in Tulsa.

Tulsa Jews often faced a strange race politics that both accepted and rejected Jews. Saul Yager, a Jewish lawyer, was elected judge to the Common Court of Pleas for Tulsa in 1924. However, Falk claims that, despite being well known as a Jew, the KKK apparently supported his ticket for the seat, where he allegedly beat his Democratic opponent by twice the votes.⁹⁵ Indeed, it is no secret that the KKK was antisemitic, and considered Jews unfit for the title of white. But the Tulsa community seemed unsure of what to do with its Jewish neighbors. To

⁹¹ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946. P. 38

⁹² *Ibid*

⁹³ *Ibid*

⁹⁴ *Ibid*

⁹⁵ *Ibid* P. 35

revisit the introduction, Klan advertisements sometimes shared literal space, on the same page in fact, with content for or at least on the behalf of Jews.⁹⁶ indeed, when the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre ravaged the Greenwood district, taking the innocent lives of hundreds of African American Tulsans, the positionality of Jews between non-white and white must have felt razor thin. The Klan's relative absence in the events of the Greenwood massacre, meaning it was orchestrated by Klan affiliated civilians, along with the Klan's actual rise in popularity shortly after, would not have encouraged much hope for a more inclusive Tulsa society.

When whites began to displace the native creeks, destroyed African American lives, and resisted the inclusion of Jews into society, white supremacists were trying to put the frontier mosaic of Oklahoma in their rearview mirror. To many, the diversity and rural life of the Oklahoma frontier was a fairy tale about the inevitability of White Christian dominance. The white pioneer could not be stopped and would not be denied. Despite the racial difficulties of the first half of the twentieth century, the examples of OKC and Tulsa provided hope and action for the survival of Judaism in Oklahoma. If nothing else, each city served as a hub that offered belonging and support for its co-religionists across the state. Ardmore, home of the oldest Jewish congregation in the state, occupies middle ground between the examples of post-civil war Indian Territory and early 20th century Oklahoma City. Ardmore, a transit hub for southern Oklahoma, was one of few Jewish communities outside of OKC and Tulsa that not only grew its

⁹⁶ The Morning Tulsa Daily World (Tulsa, Okla.), Vol. 15, No. 314, Ed. 1, Thursday, August 11, 1921, newspaper, August 11, 1921; Tulsa, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc77739/>: accessed March 18, 2024) & The Morning Tulsa Daily World (Tulsa, Okla.), Vol. 16, No. 355, Ed. 1, Thursday, September 21, 1922, newspaper, September 21, 1922; Tulsa, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc78225/>: accessed March 19, 2024)

community, but also maintained both its influence and identity well into the second half of the 20th century.

It should also be said that the Jewish communities in OKC and Tulsa are the heart and soul of Oklahoma Judaism today, with multiple organizations from both cities regularly funding the study of Judaic history at public and private higher-education institutions in the state. The Schusterman family of Tulsa, for example, have made research projects like this Thesis possible through their commitments to Jewish causes and their generous funding. However, many of these individuals, families, and institutions would not exist until after the timeline of this thesis. The communities of both cities have more of their story to tell. The brief analysis of the first several decades of the 20th century that this paper offers of their history is a drop in the proverbial bucket of Jewish history in Indian Territory and Oklahoma. For example, An entire book could be written on the history of Jewish philanthropy in Tulsa alone. Doing so, however, would dramatically expand the scope of this thesis. Fortunately for us, more can always be written.

In stark contrast to the continuous presence of OKC and Tulsa Jewish communities, the Ardmore Jewish community would lose nearly all of its population and its influence by the first years of the 21st century. Today only a small handful of Jews live in Ardmore, with their beloved temple both empty and in disrepair. Before the start of the congregation's decline, however, Ardmore contained a vibrant and dedicated community of central and eastern European Jews that believed in their own frontier identity as both Oklahomans and Jews.

CHAPTER THREE

Ardmore: A History of Congregation Emeth.

The history of small-town Jews is one most Oklahomans are not familiar with. Tiny Jewish communities whose populations never reached numerical significance often leave few impressions upon the public psyche of Oklahomans. Ardmore, however, contained a close, dedicated, and small Jewish society that not only shaped their city, but also affected the rest of the state. Westheimer, Neustadt, and Daube, names that some Oklahomans might recognize from the sides of buildings, the names of military installations, or the titles of awards, first found community and belonging in Ardmore. In contrast to the nearly nonexistent Jewish population of the city today, Ardmore once housed the first official religious community of Jews in Oklahoma. This congregation called itself Emeth. Their synagogue, Temple Emeth, stands as a testament to the dedication of its members. Temple Emeth's founding, in fact, serves as the theoretical stopping point in our analysis of Oklahoma Jewish history. At one time, Ardmore was home to a vibrant multilingual Jewish community. In the face of declining population and overwhelming minority status within the city, Congregation Emeth maintained Jewish life and Identity within the city well beyond the 1950s. Indeed, despite the dilapidated state of Temple Emeth today, the structure still serves as a reminder of Ardmore Jews and the frontier mosaic of Oklahoma.

Although populations change and the more visible examples of their impacts fade from memory, it is important to remember these communities and the spaces they used. No peoples should be forgotten as we continue to tell and grow the history of Oklahoma. Through historical narrative exposition, this chapter provides a chronological account of Temple Emeth's history and, in doing so, leave readers with a curated glimpse into the history of Ardmore Jews and their

beloved temple. Although the timeline of this thesis technically stops at the founding of congregation Emeth's first synagogue built by Jews for Jews, this is not the end of Jewish history in Oklahoma. I also provide a narrative sketch of the decline of congregation Emeth, leading to its dissolution in 2004, as the epilogue and conclusion of this Thesis. Hopefully, by providing a small glimpse into the future of Oklahoma Jewish history, readers will experience some modicum of closure for this thesis, and perhaps even find a place to pick up from in their own research.

In 1885, just four years before the famous Oklahoma Land Run, Sam Daube first arrived from Bowie, Texas, in what would become his longtime home: Ardmore, Indian Territory. Ardmore. A south-central town just shy of the Texas border, was a hub for transit and trade due in no small part to the Santa Fe railway. With advancements in rail lines, coupled with the town's proximity to Dallas, Ardmore quickly grew its fortunes as well as its population. Oil, cotton, and farming attracted anyone who was looking for new social and economic opportunities on the "frontier." Some of these people included his brother Dave Daube, as well as fellow German Jews and future Oklahomans Max and Simon Westheimer. Whether the Westheimer's and the Daubes were "Cousins"⁹⁷ or just "Fellow Townsman"⁹⁸ back in their birth country of Germany, is unclear. Together they established the Westheimer and Daube department store, and when more Jewish families joined them, formed the earliest Jewish congregation in the state of Oklahoma in 1890.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946.

⁹⁸ Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma* / by Henry J. Tobias. 1st ed. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 13

⁹⁹ Amy Hill Shevitz, "Jews," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=JE009>.

As the 19th century progressed, transnational migration demographics to the United States changed dramatically. Indeed, by the 1880s Eastern European Jews arrived in great numbers at the port cities of the American Northeast.¹⁰⁰ Tensions between assimilated German Jews and new Eastern European Jews sparked plans that changed the trajectory of Jewish immigration to the United States, resulting in what was called “the Galveston Plan.” Indeed, as Scholar Russell Cobb explains, “A New York Banker named Jacob Schiff worried that the waves of immigrants from Eastern Europe would lead to an anti-Semitic backlash, as had happened periodically in Europe”¹⁰¹ Schiff, with the help of investors, attempted to shift Jews’ point of entry west.

Schiff’s goal was to avoid anti-Semitic backlash by moving thousands of immigrants’ port of entry to the city of Galveston, Texas. As a Historian of Texas Jewry, Brian Edward Stone Recognized, “...Jacob Schiff, the project’s founder and financier, as well as one of the nation’s wealthiest and most influential Jews...went so far as to describe the entire Trans-Mississippi West as ‘the Galveston Territory’”¹⁰² in order to save Russian Jewry, to Schiff, Jews would have to take part in the Americanization of the West. Here Jews could potentially blend into the developing communities of the West where the frontier exposed all to cultural differences even between “whites.” As immigrants taking a chance in a new home, “Schiff expected that immigrants would help build communities in the American hinterland because they would have “the pioneer spirit.”¹⁰³ Although the plan was ultimately short lived lasting less than a decade, “Between 1907 and 1914, the coastal Texas city served as the portal through which some ten thousand hand-selected eastern European Jews entered the United States and dispersed

¹⁰⁰ Stone, Bryan Edward. *The Chosen Folks*. 1st ed. Jewish Life, History, and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. P. 81

¹⁰¹ Cobb, Russell. *The Great Oklahoma Swindle : Race, Religion, and Lies in America's Weirdest State / Russell Cobb*. 2020. P. 89

¹⁰² Stone, Bryan Edward. *The Chosen Folks*. 1st ed. Jewish Life, History, and Culture. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. P. 82

¹⁰³ Ibid P. 83

throughout the Midwest and West”¹⁰⁴ this event dramatically changed the demographic of Jewry in the West, including Texas, and Oklahoma. Eastern European Jews differed from their Central and Western European co-religionists in their language use, their dress, and their observance of Jewish religious and cultural customs.

From Galveston, Jewish immigrants could take the Santa Fe Railroad to destinations farther west, east, and north, where some decided to make their final stop in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Soon after the collapse of the Galveston movement, repeated discoveries of rich oil deposits changed the fortunes of towns and cities alike and attracted even more prospective Oklahomans to the state. Indeed, by the 1920s, as Russell Cobb poignantly states, “Southern Oklahoma was in the midst of its first oil boom, land was cheap, and the future seemed bright”¹⁰⁵ Ardmore became a place with great potential for social and economic growth. Relative religious tolerance coupled with plentiful economic opportunities made the town suitable for the establishment of a thriving Jewish community. Ardmore Jews were “[...] scrap metal dealers and tailors. Dry goods merchants and dressmakers. Farmers and oil men”¹⁰⁶

As a consequence of immigration and economic transformation, Ardmore’s Jewish community produced some of the least and most well-known contributions to Oklahoma history. Evidence suggests that Ardmore not only had Jewish life, it had Yiddish life. Yiddish, the first language of many Ashkenazi Jews, was nearly wiped out as a result of the Holocaust. But before the Second World War, Yiddish was likely alive and well in Ardmore. When Jewish immigrants came from the East or through Galveston, many brought Yiddish with them. Russell Cobb went

¹⁰⁴ Ibid P. 81-82

¹⁰⁵ Cobb, Russell. *The Great Oklahoma Swindle : Race, Religion, and Lies in America's Weirdest State / Russell Cobb*. 2020. P. 89

¹⁰⁶ Ibid P. 90

so far as to claim that Ardmore was a “[...]once distinctly Yiddish-Flavored Town.”¹⁰⁷ For instance, Bill Krohn, one of the more obscure figures of Oklahoma history, Spoke Yiddish, and was even allegedly responsible for the naming of the Scholem Aleichem Oil Field, located between Duncan and Ardmore.¹⁰⁸ As Cobb recounts what he cautioned as “the perhaps apocryphal story[.]” Krohn, a writer on Oil news “[...]witnessed oil spouting straight into the air. ‘Scholem Aleichem’ he shouted to all the roughnecks, who had no idea what the expression meant. The name stuck [...].”¹⁰⁹

In stark contrast, a more well-known contribution to Oklahoma history to this day is the Neustadt International prize for Literature. Walter Neustadt, the creator of the Internationally recognized award, was a member of the Ardmore Jewish Community before he decided to fund what is now considered “the American Nobel Prize.”¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, despite this fact, many Americans do not know Walter Neustadt was an Ardmore Jew, and many Oklahomans don’t know the prestigious prize came from within its borders. In terms of cultural support, the work of Neustadt to create highly competitive national prize speaks volumes of the extraordinary talent and influence the community could have.

The Westheimer’s and Daubes, the first Jews to call Ardmore home, made a significant amount of money in their business interests in the city and the rest of Carter County. Indeed, both families, and more specifically Max Westheimer and Sam Daube, had amassed a great amount of capital from a variety of business ventures including their own stores, agriculture products like cotton and cattle,¹¹¹ and most famously of all: oil. By the 1920s, the farm estates of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid P. 87

¹⁰⁸ Ibid P. 91

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

¹¹⁰ Ibid P. 92

¹¹¹ Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma / by Henry J. Tobias*. 1st ed. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 19

Westheimer and Daube were producing incredible amount of oil. Some of these individual wells could produce hundreds of barrels a day, and when combined created a staggering amount of profit for the Jewish family.¹¹² Truly the early and extended efforts of these families provided for the foundations of growth. Henry Tobias even goes so far as to describe their early efforts as “forming a nucleus that which helped promote the creation of a [Jewish] community.”¹¹³ Both Families have since contributed millions of dollars with the wealth they accumulated to not only support Jewish causes, but also helped develop public and private ventures that benefitted all Oklahomans. One of the most visible and lasting dedications of the Westheimer’s being the Max Westheimer Airfield in Norman Oklahoma. The Airfield, which houses the University of Oklahoma’s flight school, once also housed a naval training program during the second world war and is now open for public aviation business.

Congregation Emeth, as the Ardmore Jewish community called itself, was originally without an official structure to call its own. According to an Ardmore city directory from 1907, Congregation Emeth held its services in the Pennington building,¹¹⁴ which was originally a two-story grocery store. By 1912 the congregation had acquired its first dedicated structure in the form of the First Christian Church located on “A” street.¹¹⁵ It was here that the congregation of Emeth held services and events for almost 40 years. It wasn’t until 1952, however, that Temple Emeth, the principal structure of the community, was officially erected.

¹¹² Elam, Richard. *The Ardmore Daily Press and Sunday Ardmoreite* (Ardmore, Okla.), Vol. 27, No. 67, Ed. 1 Sunday, September 4, 1921, newspaper, September 4, 1921; Ardmore, Oklahoma. (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc146668/>; accessed April 8, 2024)

¹¹³ Tobias, Henry J. *The Jews in Oklahoma / by Henry J. Tobias*. 1st ed. Newcomers to a New Land. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980. P. 13

¹¹⁴ Ardmore City Directory, 1907, text; (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1627806/m1/4/?q=Emeth>: accessed December 13, 2023), The Gateway to Oklahoma History, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Ardmore Public Library.

¹¹⁵ Shrine Rodeo, 1970, text, 1970; (<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1629922/>: accessed December 13, 2023), The Gateway to Oklahoma History, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Ardmore Public Library. P.47

The Ardmore Jewish congregation Emeth eventually needed a permanent structure that would help carry its religious life into the future. In 1952, Temple Emeth was erected and dedicated after years of planning and budgeting. With the intention to serve the community for decades, Temple Emeth became the focal point of Jewish life in Ardmore from 1952 onward. The construction of the sight itself was a homegrown process. The Temple's architect, Ludwig Isengerg, was an Ardmore Jew whose family Torah not only survived Nazi authorities when he and his family escaped Germany but also served as the Congregations' official Torah until Temple Emeth's closure in the early 2000s.¹¹⁶

The Temples first dedication was performed in the fall of 1952, with the keynote speaker being nonother than Rabbi Joseph Levinson of Oklahoma City's largest congregation: B'nai Israel. The Dedication, with the leading service performed by Levinson, suggests that the temples founding was not only important for Ardmore Jews but also for Oklahoma Jewry at large. Soon after the construction of the Temple, the congregation hired its first permanent rabbi, Hungarian political refugee Albert Belton. Belton served the community for the better part of a decade before abruptly stepping down. For reasons that are unclear, Belton left his position in 1959 and moved to New York.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Cobb, Russell. *The Great Oklahoma Swindle: Race, Religion, and Lies in America's Weirdest State* / Russell Cobb. 2020. P. 93

¹¹⁷ "ISJL - Oklahoma Ardmore Encyclopedia." n.d. Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. <https://www.isjl.org/oklahoma-ardmore-encyclopedia.html>.

Epilogue

The loss of their rabbi only a few years after the temple's construction was a difficult blow for a community that, for all intents and purposes, was on the rise. Rabbis were notoriously difficult to come by in the American west, and even in the 1950s rabbis who wanted to serve a small community in rural Oklahoma were seemingly few. After Belton's move, Temple Emeth was forced to revert to the same practice that characterized both their earlier experiences and the experiences of many other small Jewish communities: hiring the services of visiting Rabbis from large centers and Rabbinical Students from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.^{118 119} To some Ardmorites this might have seemed like a sad backwards sliding instead of a new era of Jewish community. Despite the loss, it was actually far from the end of permanent religious leadership. Ludwig Isenberg, the chief architect of the Temple itself, became Temple Emeth's Lay Rabbi some time shortly after Belton's departure. Apart from being an involved member of the Jewish community, Isenberg was, apparently, the only member of congregation Emeth that could still read Hebrew proficiently.¹²⁰

During the duration of his tenure as Lay Rabbi, Isenberg witnessed both the height of the congregation's history, as well as its slow march into obscurity. By 1962, Temple Emeth counted 36 families in its congregation, the highest number in its history, and by 1968 the Jewish community as a whole numbered 175.¹²¹ It is safe to assume this number, as the community's population apex, began to decline by the 1970s. As the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Falk, Randall M. *A History of the Jews in Oklahoma: With Special Emphasis on the Tulsa Jewish Community* / by Randall M. Falk. 1946.

¹²⁰ "ISJL - Oklahoma Ardmore Encyclopedia." n.d. Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. <https://www.isjl.org/oklahoma-ardmore-encyclopedia.html>.

¹²¹ Ibid

Southern Jewish Life's Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities claims, the congregation shrank to 26 by 1976, and declined to just around 20 regular members by the late 80s.¹²² The Temple's Last B'nei Mitzvah, the religious and cultural coming of age ceremony for young Jews, as well as its last wedding, took place in the late 80s and early 90s. Fittingly, the last wedding was that of Mitchell Isenberg, the son of the Temple's dedicated Lay Rabbi.¹²³

Even with population decline, the wedding of Mitchell Isenberg and the last B'nai Mitzveh suggest that the temple was still a fixture, however small, of the local community. In a 1986 edition of the Wynnewood Gazette, an article titled "Scouts Visit Temple" explains that "The Wynnewood Neighborhood Girl Scouts celebrated Girl Scout Sabbath, March 7, at the Temple in Ardmore."¹²⁴ Indeed, with a tour led by Ludwig Isenberg, five different Girl Scout Troops¹²⁵ were able to experience a cultural exchange uncommon and unheard of to most Oklahomans today. Isenberg himself clearly remained an active and influential member of the Ardmore community as whole. As the ISJL encyclopedia points out, "He designed many buildings in the city, as well as an annual Christmas ornament commissioned by the Ardmore Main Street Authority."¹²⁶ Of course, all things must come to an end, and despite its former relevance in the community, Temple Emeth would not survive the transition into the 21st century.

The majority of Ardmore's Jewish youth slowly moved to bigger cities in and outside of Oklahoma. Following the well-known trend of youth throughout the 20th century, as populations

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ Ibid

¹²⁴ Golden, Larry D. The Wynnewood Gazette (Wynnewood, Okla.), Vol. 82, No. 51, Ed. 1 Thursday, March 27, 1986, newspaper, March 27, 1986; Wynnewood, Oklahoma.

(<https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2034043/m1/5/?q=Ludwig+Isenberg+>; accessed December 13, 2023), The Gateway to Oklahoma History, <https://gateway.okhistory.org>; crediting Oklahoma Historical Society.

¹²⁵ Ibid

¹²⁶ "ISJL - Oklahoma Ardmore Encyclopedia." n.d. Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life. <https://www.isjl.org/oklahoma-ardmore-encyclopedia.html>.

move from rural towns to larger metropolitan centers, Temple Emeth lost the community it sourced members from. The Temple eventually had no future generations to serve and provide space for. It is only fitting then, that the last Service to ever take place at Temple Emeth was the funeral of its beloved Lay Rabbi, Ludwig Isenberg, in 2003.¹²⁷ The Temple would shut its doors for good sometime in 2004.

Temple Emeth held an important place as a space for Jewish life within southern Oklahoma, and especially as a space for community in Ardmore. Today, the structure is abandoned, dilapidated, and continues to decay with every passing season. The Goddard Center, a nonprofit arts organization based out of Ardmore, acquired the property as a donation in 2010.¹²⁸ Although the ISJL Encyclopedia claims the Goddard Center has plans to turn the site into an arts center for the community,¹²⁹ there has been no update, and seemingly no progress made towards the structure's renewal, replacement, or preservation. This is partially due to expense. Temple Emeth still contains asbestos, a material that can contribute to mesothelioma, and one Russell Cobb recognizes as "an expensive material to remove."¹³⁰ Removal of the asbestos would be an expensive first step in what could be a lengthy and complex restoration process.

As the home of Oklahoma's oldest Jewish congregation, Temple Emeth serves as a focal point in not just the history the city, the state, or even the region, but also as an important landmark to Jewish history in the American West. From its first peddlers and dry goods stores to its fostering of the wealthy and influential Neustadt, Daube, and Westheimer families, Ardmore served Oklahoma Jewry from its infancy to its closure. Temple Emeth Can still serve both

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Cobb, Russell. *The Great Oklahoma Swindle : Race, Religion, and Lies in America's Weirdest State / Russell Cobb*. 2020. P. 93

Oklahoma and its Jewish communities today. Indeed, in a state that has a difficult time recognizing contributions of Okies (Oklahomans) that are neither white nor Christian to its history, Temple Emeth stands as a testament to a past less remembered: A past colored not only by African American and Indigenous communities, or the Boomers and Sooners of the 1889 Land Run, but also by Jews looking for freedom, belonging, and opportunity on the Oklahoma frontier.

The works of Sondheimer, Heyman, Blatt, Meyer, Isaac, Westheimer, and Isenberg carry the soul of early Jewish history within the state to this day. Their stories are by no means the only ones that exist or even possess the greatest implications. Evidence suggests that Jewish women within the state carried Judaism on their backs and were often the real spiritual pioneers of small Jewish communities. Women like Mrs. Fist, the only name I was able to find in reference to her, was largely responsible for the establishment of Jewish education in Muskogee. Finding stories of Oklahoma's Jews, and especially of Jewish women, remains a difficult task within the state's archives. Stories like that of Mrs. Fist are scattered throughout archival records and often require cross referencing multiple primary sources in order to confirm identities. For those that wish to expand on the information provided by this thesis, more attention should be placed on the congregational data that exists at Oklahoma synagogues and in the scattered national registers of Jewish men's and women's organizations. Books should be written about Jewish women in Oklahoma, but the archival silence on their lives, let alone their full names, create great difficulties for researchers to overcome.

By surviving difficulties inherent to the frontier, growing cities, rural towns, economic upheaval, nativism, prejudice, and the KKK, Jews carved out spaces for themselves wherever they could. Jews were certainly white under the letter of state and federal law. Their whiteness,

however, did not simply pass by the antisemitism and reactionary racial politics of the rapidly changing socio-political landscape of 19th and 20th century Oklahoma uncontested. Oklahoma's Jews, from Sondheimer to Isenberg, were forced to negotiate their own identities as immigrants, migrants, businessmen, artisans, Americans, frontiersmen, and ultimately as Oklahomans wherever they settled in the state. Jews navigated the meaning of community by meeting the diverse peoples of the frontier where they stood, sharing space in small villages and large cities alike. Throughout the stories of these communities, each person, in their own way, strove to maintain their complex identities as both Jews and Okies', extending and preserving Oklahoma's frontier mosaic.

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