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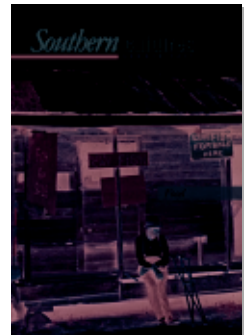
Feeding the Jewish Soul in the Delta Diaspora

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Feeding the Jewish Soul in the Delta Diaspora

by Marcie Cohen Ferris



Mention “The Delta” and vivid images come to mind of a dramatic, flat landscape etched by rows of cotton and bounded by the Mississippi River. Less visible, but nonetheless present, are the adapted folklore and foodways of a transplanted culture, for feeding the Jewish soul, both spiritually and physically, has challenged Delta Jews from their first arrival in the region through today. Photograph courtesy of the author.



ention “The Delta” and vivid images come to mind of a dramatic, flat landscape etched by rows of cotton and bounded by the Mississippi River. One imagines catfish, juke joints, barbecue, and pick-up trucks in a world inhabited by white planters, poor white sharecroppers, and black blues musicians. Although the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta is largely populated by black and white working-class laborers and upper-class white landowners, the region is also shaped by a small group of Jewish southerners, now numbering no more than three hundred, whose families first arrived in the Delta in the late nineteenth century as peddlers and fledgling merchants.¹ Between the Mississippi River levee and Highway 61, amidst the shotgun houses, cotton fields, and Baptist churches of the Delta, are a handful of synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, Jewish-owned clothing stores, and businesses that were central to the economies of small Delta towns prior to the coming of discount stores like Wal-Mart. Less visible but nonetheless present are the adapted folklore and foodways of a transplanted culture, for feeding the Jewish soul, both spiritually and physically, has challenged Delta Jews from their first arrival in the region through today.

In the town of Blytheville in the Arkansas Delta, my family’s Jewish identity separated us from our white and black Gentile neighbors. Contrary to popular belief, this division was more respectful than mean-spirited. Biblical identification of Jews as the “chosen people” carries weight in the South; because of our distant lineage to Moses, Jewish families had a special status in the Delta. Although there were violent incidents of antisemitism such as the 1960s temple bombings in Jackson and Meridian, Mississippi, most antisemitic expressions were far more benign actions such as exclusion from debutante parties, garden clubs, country clubs, and occasional comments about Jewish tightfistedness. My family attended synagogue—known to non-Jewish locals as “the Jewish church”—and offered up prayers to a deity, which helped to secure our acceptance in town. More than Judaism, it was the fact that we had not *always* lived in the community that separated us from the Gentiles. Because generations of history did not intimately link “our people” with “their people,” our place in the local hierarchy of white society was never clear.²

My Jewish ancestors arrived in the Delta in the early 1920s. We lived within the Delta world of cotton planting, fall ginning, church socials, and football and the Jewish world of weekly Sabbath services, visiting rabbis, and preparation for the Passover seder in the spring and the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the fall. We ate *between* these two worlds in a complicated culinary negotiation of regional, ethnic, and religious identity. Within Jewish homes in the Delta, African American cooks and domestic workers set bountiful tables and prepared the cuisine for which the region is famous. Their meals featured elegant dinners of standing rib roast, as well as down-home southern Gentile meals of

barbecue and fried catfish. Less familiar dishes served at Jewish tables in the Delta included matzah balls, kugels (dairy casserole), tortes, and tzimmes (baked sweetened vegetables and fruits), foods that tied Jewish worlds to central and eastern Europe.

Food writer Craig Claiborne was “initiated into the joys” of Jewish foods in the home of Sadie Wolf, who lived across the street from the Claiborne family in Indianola, Mississippi. Claiborne recalls visiting the Wolfs’ home one Passover when daughter Anita had eaten her fill of traditional holiday foods. “If somebody feeds me one more matzah ball I’m going to kill them,” protested Wolf. As Claiborne recalls in his memoir, it was the “talent and palate” of African American cooks who blended “soul food”—a mix of African and American Indian flavors—with creole cuisine that made the southern kitchen unique. Although separated by a gulf of race and class, African Americans and Jews in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta were brought together by a culinary exchange that has existed since the late nineteenth century.³

Throughout the nation food strongly defines ethnic and regional identity. But in the South, and especially in the Delta, a region scarred by war, slavery, and the aftermath of Reconstruction and segregation, food is especially important. Historian David Blight suggests that the South was conquered during the Civil War, and afterwards the slow process of rebuilding and “re-imagining” the South began. Blight contends that while the South is no richer in history and memory than any other region, more of its collective energy is devoted to defining the past through literature, storytelling, and monument-making.⁴ We should add food tra-



Southern Jews enjoy a culinary combination of southern and Jewish foods—from grits and barbecue to traditional Jewish dishes like rugelach, shown here. Photograph courtesy of the author.

ditions to this list, because southerners also use food to define the history of their region. For generations, southerners, including southern Jews, have struggled to understand their experience through memory-making, and much of that struggle takes place at the dinner table. In this tradition Delta Jews connect to family and regional history at every meal, Oneg Shabbat, and Sisterhood luncheon.

Food historian Joan Nathan argues that because of their “wandering history” Jews always adapted their lifestyles and foodways to local cultures. Apart from matzah (the Passover unleavened bread), haroset (the Passover apple and nut spread), and cholent (a traditional slow-cooked Sabbath stew), she argues that there are no specifically Jewish foods; rather, foods are associated with Jewish countries of origin. Since more than two-thirds of American Jews trace their roots to eastern Europe, Polish and Russian foods such as rye bread, borscht, and herring in sour cream became known as Jewish foods in America.⁵ Eastern European Jews were not the only Jews to learn to “make do or do without” while adjusting their tastes to regional food traditions and local ingredients. Earlier waves of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews left many culinary traditions in the Old World, but not all. After arriving in the South, Jewish immigrants revived their memories of stewed fish dishes flavored with lemon, olive oil, and almonds, bean soups, roasted goose, duck, chicken, kugels, challahs, kuchens (coffee cake), and tortes. Jewish women gave these recipes to African American cooks, who integrated these dishes into the culinary tradition of the South.

From the handful of Conservative and Orthodox Jews in the Delta, who closely adhere to the Jewish dietary rules, or *kasbrut*, to the most liberal Reform Jews,



The Delta evokes cotton fields, poor sharecroppers, and juke joints. But a closer look also reveals a good number of southern Jews, negotiating their southern and Jewish identities. “Saturday afternoon in a Negro beer and juke joint, Clarksdale, Mississippi, November 1939,” photographed by Marion Post Walcott, from the collections of the Library of Congress.

who do not recognize these culinary restrictions, eating is inseparable from religion. Anthropologists, folklorists, and food historians agree that food is invested with symbolic meaning and that any food-related activity—from a simple meal at home to the most elaborate public celebration—is an act of communication.⁶ In Judaism, food is both communication and communion. This concept is central to understanding the power of food in ethnic and regional communities like the Delta.

For observant Jews, eating is an act of divine law dictated from the Bible and expanded in the Talmud, the ancient rabbinic commentaries related to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. As Blu Greenberg, an orthodox *rebbetzin* (wife of a rabbi) and an authority on the precepts of traditional Jewish life, explains, “Kashrut is not simply a set of rules about permitted and forbidden foods; kashrut is a way of life.”⁷ This way of life determines which foods are prohibited, how certain foods should be prepared, and how animals should be slaughtered. For example, Jews are allowed to eat meat only from animals that chew their cud and have cloven hooves, fish that have both fins and scales, and no combinations of dairy and meat dishes. Even this rudimentary explanation of kashrut hints at the predicament of Jews in the Delta, who are surrounded by a cuisine that celebrates *treyfe* (nonkosher) foods like pork, catfish, shrimp, crawfish, and wild game such as rabbit, squirrel, and deer. (Catfish is not kosher because it has no scales and is a nocturnal scavenger.)

Less observant Jews in the Delta ignore kashrut and eat Jewish foods like bagel and lox on Sunday morning as their only expression of Jewishness, a practice referred to as “kitchen Judaism.”⁸ For Delta Jews who position themselves between these two poles of observance, daily choices about food either connect them to or distance them from their Jewish identity. Thus, one encounters Jews who enjoy a pork barbecue sandwich at restaurants but avoid serving or eating pork at home. Some Jewish families keep separate dishes at home for serving nonkosher foods like shrimp and pork barbecue so that the “regular” dishes are not tainted by these forbidden foods—a “southernism” of kashrut that requires separate sets of dishes for meat and dairy items.

Sylvia Klumok Goodman and her sister Ann Klumok Bennett grew up in the Delta town of Moorhead, Mississippi, where their African American cook, Evalina Smith, prepared Jewish foods under the tutelage of their mother, Fannie Klumok. Smith created her own names for these foreign-sounding dishes. Gefilte fish was “filthy fish,” chremslach (fried Passover fritter) became “himself,” and haroset was “roses.” “She might not have pronounced all these dishes correctly,” said Sylvia, “but she could cook them as well as any Jewish *yenta* from the old country, actually better.”⁹

The world of Delta families like the Klumoks, who lived “Jewishly” in a world dominated by the Mississippi River, cotton, churches, and the blues, reveals a



Russian-born Morris Grundfest started out as a pack peddler in the Delta, but went on to open his own store and eventually raised cotton. Grundfest's store in Cary, Mississippi (above), and, directly across the street, the Grundfest & Klaus Cotton Gin. Photographs courtesy of the author.

unique expression of American Judaism. Although they were far removed from Jewish butcher shops, bakeries, grocery stores, and even synagogues, Delta Jews frequently drove to Greenville, Greenwood, Clarksdale, Vicksburg, and Blytheville to socialize and worship. Regular trips were made to Memphis to buy kosher meat and “kosher-style” and Jewish foods like bagels, rye bread, pastrami, and corn beef.¹⁰

Jewish foodways in small towns throughout the Delta illustrate how “country Jewish” life was distinctive from that of “city Jews” in Memphis, where it was possible to socialize almost exclusively with other Jews. Strong Jewish social ties in the Delta created a sense of Jewish community through monthly dinner clubs, Sisterhood and B’nai B’rith activities, deli lunches, seders, Jewish golf tournaments, dances, and youth activities that reinforced Jewish identity. Foodways of Delta Jews reveal a regional Jewish culture shaped by a deep sense of place, isolation, kinship ties, agricultural occupations, the influence of white and black Protestant cultures, and a long history of racial and class divisions.

“COTTON HAS BEEN GOOD TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE”

Morris Grundfest was born in Russia in 1869. He came to New York in the late 1890s, married Mollie Bernstein, and after the birth of their two children, the couple came to the Mississippi Delta. They were drawn by family already settled in the South and their belief that the South was an “open place” that presented opportunity with its many farms and plantations. Like so many southern Jewish immigrants, Morris Grundfest began as a pack peddler, walking between farms and plantations to sell goods to white and black families. Eventually, the Grundfests opened M. Grundfest’s, a dry goods store in the nearby town of Cary. Later, stepping outside the retail sphere, Morris Grundfest purchased two hundred and twenty acres of Delta farmland and established himself as both a shopkeeper and a cotton planter.¹¹

Betty Grundfest Lamensdorf, the great granddaughter of Mollie and Morris, and her husband, Ben, farm the original acreage known as “the Grundfest place.” “People are surprised you’re Jewish and a farmer,” said Ben Lamensdorf, who has raised cotton in the Delta for over forty years, “but we were farming a long time ago in Israel. We just went from sheep herders to raising cotton. Cotton has been good to the Jewish people who came to the Mississippi Delta.”¹²

Morris’s son Ike raised cotton in the Delta, ran his father’s store after his death in 1925, and married June Flanagan, an Episcopalian. Their store was open six days each week, except for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when Ike Grundfest closed it for half a day. Betty and her sister, Ann Grundfest Gerache, worked in the store after school and on Saturdays, the busiest shopping day of the week. “The labor would come in on Saturday to receive their pay, and then they’d buy



Ann Grundfest Gerache, pictured here with her husband Joe Gerache, grew up in a Jewish household in which “southern country food” was prepared by an African American cook. Courtesy of the author.

their week’s groceries. They usually ran about fifteen dollars,” said Betty. “That would hold you for a whole week. And then, when everyone had gotten their groceries and visited and everything, we’d take the people and their groceries back to their houses.”¹³

Despite the racial and class divisions that separated them, African Americans in the Delta found that Jews like the Grundfests were fair employers and shopkeepers. African Americans could try on clothes and shoes in Jewish-owned stores, and they were often employed as sales clerks. The Grundfests also provided transportation and housing for the black laborers who worked for them, an arrangement shaped by long-held Delta rules of race and class. “We knew that there was something different about them [Jewish southerners],” said writer Cliff Taulbert, an African American who grew up in nearby Glen Allan. “You didn’t really expect them to do the same types of things that you’d expect a white person to do. And I guess, in our minds, we divided the two—there were white people in Glen Allan and there were Jewish people in Glen Allan. They may have felt they were white, but we never did.”¹⁴

Some white gentile southerners may have questioned the racial status of their Jewish neighbors as well. Historian Leonard Rogoff argues that although southern Jews were accepted as white, their “precise racial place was not fixed,” especially after Reconstruction with the arrival of thousands of eastern European Jews whose “swarthy” complexions concerned white southerners. The newly arrived Jews quickly realized that skin color in the South determined where they fell in the socioeconomic order. Jews in the Delta were accepted as white, and many

joined local White Citizens' Councils during the 1950s and 1960s. Journalist Jack Nelson argues that the few resident Jews who became members of the councils did so either out of fear of antisemitism or because they too were "hard-rock segregationists."¹⁵

With their own racial identity questioned in a region plagued by nativism and growing antisemitism, Jews bridged the chasm between white and black cultures in their roles as merchants, cotton brokers, and music agents. A less visible but equally compelling source of identity was associated with food—at the Jewish dinner table, in the synagogue kitchen, and in Jewish-owned grocery stores and dry goods stores throughout the Delta. Here Jews encountered white and black Gentile neighbors, customers, domestic workers, cooks, and caterers, and southern and Jewish foods mixed. At times, the food choices emphasized Jews' "southernness," and at other times, the selections emphasized their "otherness."

With income from farming and their store, the Grundfests could afford to hire African Americans as cooks and domestic workers. Having full-time household help in the Delta—even with the meager salaries African American women were paid weekly—was often only possible for families where the wife worked in the family store and could not do the housework herself. In their Delta home, June Flanagan Grundfest supervised the work of African American employees, including Alice Watson, the family's cook, and Edna Davis, the housekeeper and the children's nurse.

Ann Grundfest Gerache described the family's daily meals as "southern country food." The Grundfest home was next door to the family store, and any ingredients Alice Watson needed were either found in the store or grown in the family's garden. "Mother didn't like to cook," said Ann. "She loved to garden. She did not like being inside cooking, because you worked half a day for every meal, and then it was gone in thirty minutes." Not allowed the luxury of "likes and dislikes," and limited to few options for work, African American cooks like Watson prepared three meals a day for white families like the Grundfests every day except Sunday. Watson worked a "double day," caring for the Grundfests during the day and beginning another round of labor with her own family when she returned home at night.¹⁶

In addition to her vegetable and flower gardens, June Grundfest raised squabs and chickens and tended a strawberry patch, plum and pear trees, and a fig tree from which she made delicious jams and jellies. The foods that Ann and Betty associate with their mother are a southern and Jewish mix of homemade jams and pickles, salted pecans, and blintzes, topped with June's homemade strawberry jelly, which their father, Ike, ate each Sunday evening. "If she put salted pecans on the table," said Ann, "it meant a celebration."¹⁷ The pecans were grown locally on the place and were buttered, salted, toasted in the oven, and then put away for "company" and special occasions.



June Grundfest would not have approved of her daughters, Ann and Betty, helping the family's cook with her work. But the girls could often be found hanging out in the kitchen anyway. Betty Lamensdorf, one of June's daughters, along with a collection of her recipes. Photographs courtesy of the author.

As Hortense Powdermaker observed in her sociological studies of Indianola in the 1930s, black domestic workers like Alice Watson were “the chief liaison agent between the races.” The Grundfest girls were not allowed to help with the cooking, work considered inappropriate for well-to-do southern white women and girls, but after school they would slip into Watson’s kitchen at the Grundfest home, where they sat on the kitchen counter and visited with Watson while she cooked. On occasion, Watson slipped the girls a forbidden cigarette. Ann and Betty recalled the cooking of “Ma Mary,” who lived nearby and weighed cotton that the laborers picked in their cotton sacks during the fall harvest. “Ann and I used to walk down there and eat,” said Betty. “She’d go out into her garden and pick the butter beans, peas, and okra. We’d sit at this little table and she’d bring the bread in a skillet from the wood-heated oven. That was the best food. It just stuck in my memory how good it tasted.” Powdermaker collected a similar story from one of her female informants in the 1930s who said that the “happiest memory of her childhood” was when the family’s black cook took her home, “across the tracks,” to play with her children and eat turnip greens.¹⁸ The narrative confirmed Powdermaker’s belief that whites long cared for by black workers sentimentalized those relationships in their memories of nurturance and caring, often centered at the table.

The ample meals at the Grundfest table included several meats, bowls of fresh vegetables, rice and gravy, hot biscuits and cornbread, preserves, and two or three desserts. Ann found oppressive the amount of food and the ritual associated with their meals. “I’m not going to put all this food on my table,” she brashly told her mother when she married. “We’re going to have one meat, two vegetables, and I don’t know if I’m going to have dessert.”¹⁹ In the Delta in the 1950s, Ann’s declaration was considered a radical act.

Holidays were divided between June’s Episcopal family in Blanton, Mississippi, where they celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas, and Ike’s Jewish family in Greenville and Clarksdale, where they visited on Sunday afternoons and at Passover and High Holy Days to attend religious services. The Grundfests belonged to temples in both Greenville and Vicksburg, which were fifty miles and thirty-seven miles respectively from Cary. At Christmas, June’s aunt, Elizabeth Darden, oversaw an elegant dinner prepared by three African American cooks who were expected to work on the holiday. The feast included a turkey and all the trimmings, a coconut cake and ambrosia for dessert. Ike’s sisters, Kate Grundfest Sebulsky and Hattie Grundfest Brownstein, worked in “ladies’ ready-to-wear.” During market trips to Memphis and St. Louis they bought kosher salamis, pastramis, and rye bread, treats that were served with home-made chopped liver when the family visited on Sundays.²⁰

Beyond June’s Sunday evening blintzes and the aunts’ deli foods, Jewish foods were rarely eaten by the Grundfest family until they began to participate in the



Even as Jewish southerners adapted some of their eating patterns to life in the Delta, culinary traditions passed down by older Jewish relatives endured. The author's grandmother, Luba Tooter Cohen, who came to the United States from Odessa in 1912.

local community Passover seder, which was organized by Jewish families in the Rolling Fork area in the 1950s. Gefilte fish was bought in Jackson, and other dishes for the seder were prepared by Jewish women in Rolling Fork, Cary, and Anguilla. June always contributed a 1950s-style congealed salad. The dessert was individual “sham tarts,” a Delta version of the German-Jewish shaum torte, a meringue served with fresh strawberries and whipped cream. Ann Gerache continues to serve the same dessert at family seders, where it has become known as “Mamaw’s Slip and Slide Cake” because of its tendency to melt and slip on warm spring seder evenings.²¹

LIVING JEWISHLY IN A GENTILE WORLD OF CATFISH AND PORK BARBECUE

Food traditions in the Grundfest family tell us much about the defining issue faced by Jews in the Delta since the late nineteenth century: the tension between the pull of assimilation as Jews began to make the Delta their home and the religious imperative to follow Jewish laws and foodways that by definition serve to set Jews apart from their Gentile neighbors. This tension touched all Jews in the Delta, regardless of their expression of Judaism and level of observance.

In the 1950s writer David Cohn, a native of Greenville, where his eastern European immigrant parents had opened a dry goods store, wrote that the Jews of

the Delta had conformed so completely to the way of life of their Gentile neighbors that “they had not even clung to the many items of cookery gathered by their forebears during their peregrinations through Russia, Rumania, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and the Baltic States.” Cohn underestimated the tenacity of food and the strength of food memories even in situations of great duress. In the Mississippi Delta Jews preserved food memories passed down by Jewish grandmothers and African American cooks alike. Despite intermarriage, a deep attachment to the South, and the strong influence of the white and black Protestant world in which they lived, Delta Jews preserved Jewish foodways in “the most southern place on earth.”²²

As with Ike Grundfest and June Flanagan, there was a high rate of intermarriage among Jewish families in the Delta because of the limited number of potential Jewish mates for young adults who chose to remain in the region. When Ike and June married in the 1930s, they had a tacit understanding that they would respect both their Jewish and Episcopal religious upbringings and would not influence their children’s decisions about religion. “We observed everything,” their daughter Ann explained.²³ For Ike, this amounted to little or no participation in formal Jewish life, but he was conscious of his Jewish identity. Being with his Jewish sisters on Sunday afternoons and enjoying the deli foods they served him and his family was Ike’s weekly expression of Jewishness.

When Ann Grundfest married her first husband, Robert Emmich, a Vicksburg Jew, in the early 1950s, they agreed that a decision had to be made about their children’s religion. “You can’t have Christmas *and* Hanukkah,” Robert told Ann. “You have to decide how you want to raise your children, and you must do one or the other.”²⁴ They chose Judaism for their children, and with this choice came Jewish food. Ann learned to prepare Jewish foods rarely seen in her childhood home as she turned to Jewish cookbooks, in-laws, Sisterhood friends, and the rabbi for advice and their recipes.

Families like the Emmichs encouraged their high-school-age children to attend regional Jewish summer camps, like the Henry S. Jacobs camp in Utica, Mississippi, and supported the creation of Jewish youth organizations like the Mississippi Federation of Temple Youth, which later became the Southern Federation of Temple Youth or SOFTY. Jacobs Camp and similar programs across the nation were evidence of a revitalization of Jewish education beginning in the 1970s. An attempt to counter rising rates of intermarriage and assimilation, Jewish summer camps, adult education weekends, and retreats emphasized spirituality, ritual, and a sense of community in nontraditional settings outside the synagogue. Jewish parents in the Delta pushed their college-age children to enroll at a college or university with a significant Jewish population like the University of Alabama or the University of Texas. When Ann Grundfest joined a Jewish sorority at the University of Alabama, her “preference” for Judaism was set. “I remember one Shabbos



In 1889 Jewish residents of Port Gibson, Mississippi, set about raising money for their own synagogue, in part to dispel misconceptions that “we Jews care for nothing but business.” Temple Gemiluth Chessed was dedicated in 1892. Photograph by Bill Aron, courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life.

dinner, the hostess, a mother of one of my sorority sisters, had a whole baked fish with a creole sauce over it,” she recalled. “It was the first time I’d ever seen anything like that.” Ann was used to fried chicken or roast beef at special dinners. If fish was eaten, it was either shrimp prepared in a creole fashion, such as jambalaya or étouffée, or fried fish such as catfish or crappie (a local white fish) served often at outdoor fish fries. From the colonial era to the present, Jewish families of central European and Sephardic descent frequently served baked or stewed fish dishes with a sauce for Sabbath meals.²⁵

Whether or not one found Jewish life at college, what mattered most in the Delta was having a religion and a place to pray. Denomination was less important than demonstrating one's attachment to a religious community and a belief in God. "The South is not known as the Bible Belt for nothing," explained David Orlansky, a native of Greenville. "People probably take religion more seriously here than many other areas. It's important for people to belong to something, not necessarily to any particular church or religious affiliation, but just to be affiliated with something." Gene Dattel, raised in the Mississippi Delta communities of Sunflower and Ruleville, observed that "100 percent of Jews belonged to congregations in the Delta."²⁶ Their smaller numbers required a visible demonstration of religious commitment.

This concern was raised when in May of 1889 a small group of Jewish men in Port Gibson, thirty miles south of Vicksburg, sought financial support from congregations around the country to help them build a synagogue. "Our Christian fellow citizens often ask why the Israelites have no church," they explained. "They think we Jews care for nothing but business. For our children's sake, and in order to command the proper respect, we must have a Temple."²⁷ In 1892 Temple Gemiluth Chessed was dedicated in Port Gibson. Its Moorish architectural style is unique in the state. Jews throughout the Delta organized congregations during this same period. Vicksburg's Anshe Chesed Congregation was founded in 1841, Greenville's Congregation B'nai Israel, now Hebrew Union Congregation, was founded in 1880, Greenwood's Ahavath Rayim in 1893, and Clarkdale's Temple Beth Israel was founded in 1896.

An article published in 1870 in *The Israelite* by Rabbi Max Lilienthal, who officiated at the dedication of Vicksburg's Anshe Chesed Synagogue, described the gala affair attended by both Jewish and Gentile citizens from the city, as well as guests from Natchez, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Mobile, Montgomery, and Jackson. Lilienthal, a German-ordained rabbi, was a distinguished leader of Reform Judaism in both New York and Cincinnati and traveled to officiate at many American congregations throughout the nineteenth century. Notable figures such as the governor of Mississippi, the mayor of Vicksburg, and most of Vicksburg's clergy also attended. "With true genuine southern hospitality and Jewish sociability no effort was spared to make me feel quite at home," wrote Lilienthal. "I have attended at many a consecration of larger temples in larger cities and congregations, but I have found nowhere more sincere enthusiasm, more deep felt interest in our holy cause, than among our good brethren of Vicksburg."²⁸

Yeager's Brass Band from New Orleans, plus a midnight banquet aboard the steamboat, the *Frank Pargond*, convinced Lilienthal that a congregation in the Delta was unique. They understood that the two unspoken rules in the Delta were to demonstrate your respect for "the Lord" and to show everyone a good time, which meant foot-stomping music, free-flowing alcohol, and abundant



The dedication of the Anshe Chesed Synagogue in Vicksburg attracted visitors from across Mississippi and beyond. Northern-based Rabbi Max Lilienthal, who officiated, recalled, "I have found nowhere more sincere enthusiasm, more deep felt interest in our holy cause, than among our good brethren of Vicksburg." Historical marker in front of the synagogue, courtesy of the author.

food. Although the ball lasted until three o'clock in the morning, the new synagogue was filled at nine o'clock by all "the Israelites living or staying in Vicksburg."²⁹ Vicksburg's Jewish merchants honored the occasion by closing their businesses from Friday noon until the following Monday morning, an unprecedented act in an agricultural community where retailers did most of their business on Saturdays.

The prosperity that made possible the new synagogues, as well as the lavish parties attending their openings, had its basis in the cotton economy, which affected everyone in the Delta, including Jewish merchants, their families, and rabbis. In 1874 Rabbi Aaron Norden of Natchez received a letter from temple officers informing him that his promised annual salary of \$2,500 would have to be reduced to \$2,000 due to a poor cotton season. The letter declared that the proposed salary of \$2,500 was made "when the prospects for a good crop were very flattering and indications for a good business season was then thought more than likely to follow such a crop." Rabbi Norden replied to the Temple officers: "I have assurances from several of the members, and from appearances in general, [that] commercial affairs in this community are much more flourishing this year than they were last year."³⁰ The rabbi informed his congregants that he knew as much about the financial circumstances of the cotton economy in Natchez as they did.

In Jackson and Canton, Mississippi, the Wiener family paid close attention to the cotton market. Every year at the Passover seder, the family appointed one member to record seder "statistics" on the inside covers of the family *haggadahs* (the small book of prayers and songs used at the Passover seder). The names of seder guests, those who were away at college, illnesses, and recent births and deaths were recorded, along with a description of the seder highlights and praise

for tasty dishes, such as “Sally’s matzo balls, Thelma’s Haroses, and Tinka’s ice cream and meringues.” A summary of local as well as national and international events, including the market price of cotton and soybeans, was also a part of each haggadah entry. At the April 12, 1912, seder, a participant recorded, “July cotton closed today: 11.06; low for season, 8.66. Last year of Boll Weevil and Vardaman.” (James K. Vardaman, elected governor of Mississippi in 1904, ran a campaign steeped in racism.) From the late 1890s to the present, each entry also included the weather, flood conditions on the Mississippi River, whether the azaleas had bloomed early or late, and the market price of cotton and soybeans. “If there was too much rain or it was too cold, it could be devastating for cotton,” said Kathryn Loeb Wiener, who came from a family of cotton factors in Montgomery, Alabama. “Cotton was currency, cotton was still king.”³¹

Practicing Judaism in an overwhelmingly gentile world like the Delta was challenging, and for most Jews in the region, it meant adjusting religious practices to live in a farming society that conformed to both a southern and Protestant time table. For Jewish merchants like those in Vicksburg in the 1870s, this meant keeping their stores open on Saturdays—the Sabbath and holiest day of the Jewish calendar. In the 1940s and 1950s, Jewish retailers were overwhelmed with business from both white and black families that began early on Saturday morning and continued late into the evening. “This street on Saturday night when I was growing up,” said Joe Erber of Greenwood’s downtown, “‘till one thirty, two o’clock in the morning would be packed with people. The Mississippi Delta was an agricultural-based economy, . . . and the farmers all paid off on Saturdays.”³²



Jews in the Delta adapted their religious practices in response to the realities of life in the southern United States. Temple Beth Israel in Clarksdale even changed the time of the Friday evening service so the congregation could also attend football games. Photograph by Bill Aron, courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life.

Jewish merchants did what they had to do to make a living, and those who kept their stores open on the Sabbath hoped that God might understand the business cycles of the Delta.

Many stores were owned by Jewish families who were either close friends or relatives, and children of these merchants spent Saturday visiting from store to store and assisting with sales and other chores. “You ran from aunt to uncle, because our father had a brother who had a store a few doors down,” said Shirley Fleischer Solomon, describing the scene in Shaw, Mississippi, where her parents had a small dry goods store.³³ This scene of family togetherness was repeated throughout the Delta on Sabbath mornings and was a common experience shared by Delta Jews.

Although most opened their stores on Saturdays, Jews in Greenwood observed the Sabbath by going to Friday evening services at Orthodox Congregation Ahavath Rayim. “We’ve tried to honor our forefathers, our ancestors,” explained Joe Erber, whose grandfather was a charter member of the congregation. “We’ve never been perfect. We’ve done the best we can with what we’ve got.” Erber, a postal worker and part-time police officer, continues to serve as a lay leader at the synagogue. Harold and Lucille Hart of Eudora, Arkansas, located across the river from Greenville, also tried to do their best “Jewishly.” With little access to Jewish institutional life, the Harts’ religion focused on the basic tenets of Judaism. “You don’t have to know a whole lot about tradition in order to get to heaven,” said Mr. Hart. “Just live right.”³⁴ In Clarksdale, Temple Beth Israel changed the time of their Friday night services to six o’clock to allow the congregation to attend services as well as the local football games. In the Delta, football was a religion.

Such examples of Jewish “self-sufficiency” allowed the isolated Jews of the Delta to maintain their religious beliefs without adhering to the letter of the law. Jews faced special challenges in the Delta regarding their burial practices. Local Protestant funeral directors knew little about Jewish ritual, and usually one or two Sisterhood and Brotherhood members constituted the *hevra kaddisha*, or burial society, that stepped in on such occasions. Abe Barkovitz drove seventy miles from Hayti, Missouri, to attend Temple Israel in Blytheville each week and depended on a visiting student rabbi to instruct him in preparing a Jewish body for burial. “The Rabbi did a prayer, ‘Excuse us, Oh Lord, for we know not what we do,’” said Barkovitz. “And then we would proceed with the directions that he had brought with him.”³⁵

Congregants frequently led services because hiring a permanent rabbi or even securing the services of a visiting student rabbi from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati was too expensive for small Jewish communities. Assuming this responsibility forced congregants to assume leadership roles and become personally active in Judaism in ways they would never have done had there been a rabbi to lead the congregation. “I think some of us come more since we don’t have a



Maintaining communities and religious practices involved a lot of traveling—visiting Jewish friends and family, attending synagogue, and buying Jewish foods could all require a long drive. Highway 61, a main Delta thoroughfare, courtesy of the author.

rabbi,” said Marion Metzger about attendance at Vicksburg’s Congregation Anshe Chesed. “I didn’t mean that because we didn’t like the rabbi, because whoever happens to be saying the service, we all try to support them.”³⁶ In Vicksburg a rabbi is hired only for the High Holy Days season and stays in a local bed and breakfast for that twelve-day period. During other times of the year, three or four congregants take turns reading the services. In a modernization of the worship service, an organist and her daughter from the Baptist church provide the music. (American Reform congregations have had organs since 1841 at Congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston.) Thelma Havard and Sophie Smith, African American housekeepers who work for Anshe Chesed, unlock the temple, put out the books, the wine, the candles, and prepare the sanctuary for the Sabbath.

Isolated Jews in small Delta communities made lengthy road trips to the nearest synagogue for services and religious school, to purchase Jewish foods, and to visit Jewish family and friends. Traveling thirty to seventy miles each week was a common fact of life for Delta Jews. “We grew up, and my parents grew up, traveling somewhere to go to Sunday school or temple,” said Leanne Lipnick Silverblatt of Indianola. “You know you have to do it, and you just do it.” Food and

visiting eased the burden of such trips, which could mean enjoying bagels and lox, strudel, and pound cake with family or, just as likely, stopping at the Dixie Pig, a favorite barbecue restaurant in Blytheville, or a café like the Resthaven in Clarksdale, owned by the Chamouns, a Lebanese family known regionally for their kibbe, stuffed grape leaves, and baklava. “We do not ride on the High Holiday, so our family, as well as a number of other families from small Delta towns, would spend the High Holy Days in Greenwood with our relatives,” says Ann Klumok Bennett, who grew up in Moorhead. With Jewish food supplies brought in from Memphis and Birmingham, “meals were very festive with many family members and close friends participating.”³⁷

Obtaining Jewish food supplies in the Delta was one of the biggest challenges of being far from a center of Jewish population. Jewish women in the Delta never traveled without an ice cooler in the trunk of their cars to keep their foods fresh. No traveler went to Jackson, Memphis, St. Louis, Birmingham, New Orleans, and especially to New York, without promising to return with bagels, lox, corned beef, and dark loaves of pumpernickel. Women charged relatives and friends traveling outside the region with this task, and returning empty-handed required a good explanation. Cecile Gudelsky remembered her grandfather bringing Jewish foods with him on the train when he returned from St. Louis to Paragould, Arkansas. He sat with friends on the way to St. Louis, but on the return trip he sat alone because the smell of salami and pastrami was too much for his companions.³⁸

Delicatessens and kosher butcher shops like the Old Tyme Delicatessen in Jackson and Rosen’s, Segal’s, and Halpern’s in Memphis were known in the Delta by word of mouth as well as through advertisements in Jewish newspapers like the *Hebrew Watchman* and the *Jewish Spectator*. Advertisements guaranteeing “prompt attention given out-of-town orders” encouraged Delta Jews to mail-order foods that would be delivered by bus and train. Gilbert Halpern, the son of Thelma and Louis Halpern, who opened their Memphis delicatessen in 1946, remembered their busy mail-order business at Passover time.³⁹ After the restaurant closed at the end of the day, the building turned into a packing business at night. Gilbert personally delivered food supplies to families in the Delta and Arkansas, and he remembered the warm reunions when those same families visited his deli in Memphis.

Preparing for Passover posed challenging logistics for Jewish homemakers in the Delta. In Shaw, Bess Seligman did the trips to Memphis. “I was the ‘delivery boy,’” said Seligman. “I went to Memphis and took everybody’s order and brought back the meat and the perishable foods. The matzah, the flour, the potato starch, and all that, we would ship by bus or by train, because we couldn’t put it all in a car.” In Moorhead, Fannie Klumok ordered her kosher meats and other Passover foods from Rosen’s Delicatessen in Memphis. The primary

Passover order arrived several days before Passover. “Each day as she assessed our needs,” said Sylvia Klumok Goodman, mother “called Rosen’s and they would send us the current day’s request by Greyhound bus.” Fannie Klumok hired two African American men and three additional African American women to help with the Passover cleaning and preparations. “Nonkosher and non-Passover foods were either given to the black workers or stored at a gentile’s house until after Passover,” said Sylvia.⁴⁰ Passover was the one week a year when the Klumok family observed the dietary laws of kashrut.

Because she worked at the family’s store in Indianola and could not be home to oversee the kosher-keeping skills of her domestic workers, Fannie Klumok outlawed any dairy products in the home for that week. Relying on African American cooks to prepare daily southern fare was acceptable to her, but their involvement in Jewish tradition and dietary laws was another matter. Race and class shaped the Klumoks’ daily decisions, including preparations for a southern Jewish Passover. “We had kosher meats and no dairy on Passover as my mother was afraid that our cook and maid wouldn’t be able to keep the dishes separate. I never knew that you could eat matzah with butter until I went to college and learned that dairy wasn’t prohibited during Passover.”⁴¹ Fifty Jews and Gentile friends attended the Klumok seder, for which Fannie annually prepared three hundred pieces of gefilte fish made from a mixture of locally available carp and buffalo fish.



Jewish foods were often hard to obtain in the rural South, but delicatessens and kosher butcher shops could be found in cities like Jackson and Memphis. Newspaper advertisement for a Jewish delicatessen in Memphis, courtesy of the author.

In Chatham, Mississippi, Rabbi Fred Davidow described his Lithuanian great-grandmother Sarah Stein and her oldest child, Fannie Stein Schwartz, his maternal grandmother, as an “island of kashrut” in the Delta. Stein and Schwartz kept kosher themselves but did not prepare kosher food for their families. Davidow explained that the problem of obtaining meat for Stein was “solved not by importing kosher meat, but by importing *shobets* (Jewish butchers).” Her husband, V. A. Stein, made sure his wife could keep kosher by paying for a shohet’s passage from Europe to Mississippi. When it became difficult to keep shohets in Chatham, V. A. Stein went to Cincinnati to confer with an Orthodox rabbi about his dilemma. The rabbi gave him permission to slaughter poultry only for his wife, and he returned home with a *halif* (a kosher butcher’s knife) and the rabbi’s instructions on kosher slaughtering.⁴²

Sarah Stein and her daughter Fannie created their own interpretation of kashrut. Allowing no pork or shellfish in the home, observing kashrut during the week of Passover, and ignoring *treyf* eaten outside the home enabled the Stein women to make peace with their religion while accepting the fact that they lived in a Gentile world of catfish and pork barbecue.

In Ruleville, Flo Silverblatt Selber’s mother, Eva, tried to keep kosher by salting the family’s meat to remove any traces of blood and keeping a kosher home during the week of Passover.⁴³ Eva Silverblatt taught her African American cook Georgia Lee to make strudel, blintzes, kreplach (noodle dumplings filled with



Bill and Pearl Borowsky were one of the few Jewish families in the Delta who kept a completely kosher home, with none of the exceptions that other families permitted due to the conditions of Jewish life in the South. The Borowskys were founding members of Blytheville’s Temple Israel, pictured here, courtesy of the author.

meat or vegetables), stuffed cabbage, mandelbread (sweet bread), and matzah kugel. Lee and Silverblatt also prepared turnip greens, black-eyed peas (flavored with kosher salami), and fried chicken for the family's Sunday noon dinner. Eva Silverblatt drew the line on certain nonkosher southern dishes like ham and bacon, and other foods associated with poor whites and blacks, such as biscuits with white gravy flavored with bacon fat. These foods were forbidden according to Eva's personal rules of kashrut.

Fannie Klumok maintained a similar system of kashrut at her home in Moorhead. Evalina Smith, her African American cook, prepared two batches of vegetables at every meal, one without pork for Fannie and one with pork for her husband, Sol, and their four children. Kosher pots and pans and glass plates were set aside for visiting Orthodox salesmen and the rabbi. When Fannie's father visited, the pork mysteriously disappeared from everybody's food.⁴⁴

Evalina Smith prepared the Sunday noon meal at the Klumok home, at which there might be ten to twenty-five guests, including salesmen and visiting relatives. Her menu illustrates the family's complete acceptance and celebration of Delta cuisine. Smith made homemade rolls to go with the shrimp cocktail, followed by a green salad, fried and broiled chicken, roast beef, tomato sandwiches, butter beans, fried corn or corn on the cob (sometimes both), crowder peas, lady peas, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes with marshmallows, and asparagus or cauliflower with béchamel sauce and melted cheddar cheese. She also served two desserts, such as rice pudding, homemade ice cream, strawberry shortcake, and fresh watermelon when it was in season.⁴⁵

Sol Klumok picked up Smith at 6:00 a.m. and drove her home each night at about 8:30. She received fourteen dollars a week in salary. Sylvia Klumok explained the system of "deputy motherhood" that occurred each day at the Klumok home. Evalina Smith "ordered us around and was the boss of the house while my mother was working at our store in Indianola," said Sylvia. "She always had black gospel music or blues playing in the kitchen. Sometimes she'd grab my hand, and we'd dance together."⁴⁶

Pearl and William "Bill" Borowsky of Manila, Arkansas, who had immigrated from Russia and Poland, were among a small number of families in the Delta who kept an absolutely kosher home with no allowances for family preferences or for the difficulties of obtaining kosher supplies. The Borowskys' daily food "would have to be described as Jewish," said their daughter Fruma Borowsky Kane. "There was very little southern influence." In the 1920s Bill Borowsky came to visit an uncle who owned the Tiger-Levine Store, a local dry goods business in Manila.⁴⁷ Bill met Pearl while traveling through Oklahoma City as a young salesman. They married, returned to Manila, and eventually bought the business, which they operated for the rest of their lives.

As observant Jews, the Borowskys followed Orthodox practices as much as



Unlike many southern Jewish women, the author's mother, Huddy Horowitz Cohen, did most of the cooking herself. But Cohen, born in Connecticut, did rely on her African American housekeeper, Richie Lee King, to prepare southern specialties such as fried chicken. Huddy Cohen in her kitchen, courtesy of the author.

possible given the restrictions of life in Manila, where even a *minyan* (the ten men necessary for worship according to Jewish law) was impossible. The family's kosher meat and other food supplies were delivered from Memphis, St. Louis, and Chicago. Founding members of Temple Israel in Blytheville in the late 1940s, the Borowskys were active participants in the Sisterhood and Brotherhood. Huddy Cohen of Blytheville recalled a "close call" with Pearl that illustrated her commitment to Jewish law. After driving together to the funeral of an old friend in Helena, Cohen realized that they might not make it back to Manila before the Sabbath began at sunset. "Won't God forgive you if we're just a few minutes late?" asked Cohen. "After all, we were doing a mitzvah." "No, I have to be home," replied Borowsky. "That's the law."⁴⁸ They arrived just in time for Pearl to light her Sabbath candles.

"Mother cooked from her head and her heart," said Fruma Kane.⁴⁹ She was

known for elegant kosher holiday meals that she prepared at home, since the family did not travel on the Sabbath and on other holidays. Pearl prepared all her family's meals, including traditional European delicacies such as sweet and sour tongue, candied fruit peel (which required seven days of preparation), and lighter-than-air sponge cakes and angel food cakes. She allowed her African American housekeeper to assist only with washing and chopping vegetables so that kashrut was never breached. Although both shared experiences of marginalization, African American and Jewish women were not equal players. Judaism did nothing to erase the long-standing racial division between white and black women, and at times, particularly during the Jewish holidays and concerning matters of kashrut, Judaism reinforced the division.

In less observant southern Jewish homes, Jewish women cooked the family's meals instead of hiring African American cooks due to cost, personal preference, or sometimes regional experience. In my home in Blytheville, a division of labor in the kitchen existed that was based on state of origin. My mother, Huddy Horowitz Cohen, a native of Connecticut, prepared Jewish holiday dishes and the family's daily meals, which rarely featured anything southern because of her Connecticut upbringing. "I thought it was my job to do the cooking," says Cohen. "I was at home, and could handle it, but I did need help with the cleaning."¹⁰ Cohen left one aspect of cooking—southern food—to "an expert," and that expert was Richie Lee King, an African American housekeeper born in Arkansas who worked for my family from 1955 to the early 1980s. King did the household cleaning, and on special occasions she prepared southern specialties like fried chicken, cornbread, vegetable stew, and sweet potato pie and also helped serve at the family's annual Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur dinners.

Alfred and Rebecca Fendler, natives of Krakow, Poland, came to Manila in 1910 and opened a cleaning and pressing business. "They could not keep kosher in a town like Manila, but they did their best," said Oscar Fendler, their son, who practiced law in Blytheville for over sixty years. "We never had any pork in our home during all of the time Dad and Mother lived." Rebecca Fendler slaughtered her own chickens, salted beef that she bought from the local butcher, and prepared European-inspired dishes such as gedempte (well-stewed) meat, goulash, tongue, roast goose, liver, blintzes, knish, latkes (potato or matzah meal pancakes), and borscht. Unlike Pearl Borowsky, Rebecca Fendler included southern foods in the family's diet, foods such as locally caught perch and crappie, fried chicken, homemade fruit preserves, but no catfish. "That food was not considered proper," said Oscar Fendler.¹¹ Catfish was treyf and before it was farm-raised was considered a "trash" fish eaten primarily by African Americans.

As Rebecca Fendler's decision about catfish reveals, the foods Jews chose to eat positioned them in Delta society, and these choices were not limited to the broader categories of "southern" and "Jewish." There were subcategories. Delta

Jews could eat southern food, but it was important to eat only those foods associated with their own race and class, including foods prepared by African American cooks, who understood what was appropriate fare in a white home. Fried chicken was appropriate, chitterlings (“chitlins”) were not.

A similar hierarchy existed for the Jewish foods a Delta Jewish woman would serve to her family and her gentile guests. Foods associated with higher class, German-Jewish tastes—roast chicken, tortes, sponge cakes, and *kuchens*—were acceptable to serve for family and Gentile company. Heavier foods of eastern European cuisine—*kugels*, *kiskha*, *tzimmes*, and *cholents*—were more questionable. Some Delta Jews avoided foods associated with Jews from the *shtetl*, the small villages of eastern Europe. Although outwardly accepted by the white society around them, Delta Jews were mindful of their “otherness” and vigilantly strove to maintain status in the community, even at the dinner table.

Because of their small numbers and the lengthy drives between home and synagogue, Jews in the Delta often gathered together at holiday time for community seders, Rosh Hashanah dinners, Yom Kippur break-the-fasts, and Hanukkah *latke* parties. Depending on the number of participants, these events might be held in private homes, at the synagogue, in a Jewish social club like Vicksburg’s B.B. (B’nai B’rith) Literary Association, the Olympia Club in Greenville, or at a local restaurant. Jennifer Stollman observes that the annual Sisterhood-sponsored “deli lunch,” still held in Greenville, not only raises money for the synagogue and brings members together but helps to “demystify” the Jewish community to the hundreds of Gentiles who come to purchase cornbeef sandwiches.⁵²

The minutes of Jewish women’s groups in the Delta reveal the importance of these food events and social activities for small congregations. Throughout the 1950s the Annie Weinberg chapter of B’nai B’rith women in Blytheville sponsored a constant round of congregational pot luck suppers, community seders, Oneg Shabbats, Hanukkah suppers, dinners for the rabbi, and meals associated with Sisterhood and Brotherhood meetings. Jewish women participated in the chapter’s activities from Blytheville, a center for buying and selling cotton, as well as the nearby Arkansas communities of Osceola, Manila, Luxora, and Joiner, and Hayti and Caruthersville in Missouri. The organizational minutes’ frequent mention of the “kitchen fund” and needed kitchen supplies like refrigerators and steam tables, donations of serving dishes, and redecoration of the recreation hall suggests that significant money and time were dedicated to these activities.⁵³

The B’nai B’rith Literary Association, or “B.B. Club,” as it was known in Vicksburg, was organized in the 1880s by the Jewish community. Architect William Stanton designed its elegant building standing at the corner of Clay and Walnut Streets, which was completed in 1887. The club included a banquet hall for five hundred guests, which was frequently filled to capacity for balls, banquets, lectures, and wedding receptions. In the 1890s the club’s eighty members reflected



Organized in the 1880s, Vicksburg's B. B. Club (B'nai B'rith Literary Association) held community events such as balls, lectures, and wedding receptions. It has recently been restored and remains a popular venue.

Photograph courtesy of the author.

the size and affluence of Vicksburg's Jewish community at that time. "The club and club house is known all over this part of the Mississippi valley as the center of the most lavish, yet refined, hospitality, while its cuisine under the direction of its accomplished caterers, past and present, is no less celebrated," wrote the authors of *Picturesque Vicksburg* in 1891.⁵⁴ Local Jewish grocers and butchers like D. J. Shlenker, Sol Fried, and A.A. Ehrman supplied the club's caterers with food and drink for all occasions. Due to the decline in congregational membership, the building was sold in 1967 to the Vicksburg Police Department. Recently, this historic property was purchased by Laurence Leyens, the mayor of Vicksburg and a descendant of an early Vicksburg Jewish family. Leyens has restored the B.B. Club to its 1890s grandeur, and it is once again a popular location for community social functions.

Living in small communities where there were few other Jews—in some cases only a single family—Delta Jews developed networks to sustain their social and spiritual worlds. From formal dances at the B.B. Club in Vicksburg in the 1950s where Jewish youth were entertained by the music of the Red Tops, a popular African American band, to monthly dinner clubs and Sunday afternoon family visits, the dispersed Delta Jewish community gathered for friendship and courtship. The active calendar of Jewish social life reflected the lifestyle of the Gentile community in the Delta where both blacks and whites are known for their hospitality, high standards of entertaining, and love of a good time. Delta people have a sense of space and distance that distinguishes them from people in the city, and they willingly travel an hour or more on lonely Delta roads to attend a good party. Harry Ball describes the social life of Washington County in the Delta from the 1880s to the early decades of the twentieth century in his diary. Ball recalls a "full-dress ball" at the Jewish social club in Greenville, which was attended by two hundred people, "the largest public ball we have ever had."⁵⁵



Delta Jews' biggest social event is the Delta Jewish Open Golf Tournament, which begins each year with a social gathering at the Hebrew Union Temple in Greenville. Photograph by Bill Aron, courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute for Southern Jewish Life.

Decades later during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, such hospitality was not extended to Jewish “freedom riders” from the Midwest and Northeast who threatened the Jewish community’s tenuous position in the racially charged, violent state of Mississippi.

Folklorist Carolyn Lipson-Walker argues that the experience of Jews in the South was defined by mobility, and larger towns like Greenville, Vicksburg, Clarksdale, and Blytheville served as “magnets” for Jews who lived in the smaller towns. Lipson-Walker suggests that unlike Jewish ghettos and neighborhoods in the Northeast, in the South there is a “temporary recurring community” that Jews re-create each time they gather for a social function, a meal, or holiday worship. Today Delta Jews view their parents’ generation in the 1940s and 1950s and their ancestors as models of Delta Jewish sociability. “People from Clarksdale, Greenwood, Greenville, Vicksburg, they would get together once or twice a month for dances and so forth,” said Earl Solomon Jr. “And they still talk about all the parties they used to have.” Leanne Lipnick Silverblatt of Indianola remembers the Young People’s Jewish League, or the YPJL as it was called by her parents, which sponsored a monthly supper club. “They met every month or so to eat—Jewish couples from all over the Delta belonged,” said Silverblatt.¹⁶

The biggest Jewish social event in the Delta now takes place each year in October. Begun fifteen years ago as a fundraiser for the Henry S. Jacobs Camp in Utica, the Delta Jewish Open Golf Tournament draws over one hundred participants from communities throughout the Delta and from other parts of Mississippi. “The fact that they’re so scattered, there’s a real bond among them,” said Macy Hart, former director of Jacobs Camp. “Here’s a chance for them to come together, have some fun, do something for a good cause that they created to

begin with.” After the sun has set and the Sabbath is officially concluded, the festivities begin with a Saturday evening social hour at Greenville’s Hebrew Union Temple and hors d’oeuvres prepared by the congregation. Fred Miller, whose family were long-time members of a small synagogue in Rolling Fork that has now closed, operates the grill for the dinner. The tournament begins Sunday morning with a blessing, “*labdik ner shel* golf balls,” said by congregant Barry Piltz. (The Hebrew phrase means “to light the candle,” or in this version “to light [or drive] the golf balls.”) After the blessing, Piltz blows the tournament’s opening *shofar* (ram’s horn).⁵⁷ More food and partying follow a full day of golfing and visiting.

As Jewish population has diminished in the Delta, social functions have become even more important in sustaining Jewish life in the region. Delta Jews were hit particularly hard by the decline in the overall population of the Delta. This decline is associated with the arrival of the boll weevil in the early 1900s, the mechanization of cotton picking in the 1940s, the “great migration” of black laborers out of the Delta to industrial cities like Chicago, and the movement after World War II of veterans and young adults from their rural communities to cities like Memphis and Chicago. These changes, accompanied by the decline of downtown business districts and the growth of regional discount stores like Wal-Mart, pushed third and fourth generation Jews out of their small mercantile businesses in the Delta and into professions located in cities.

In the 1930s there were over two dozen Jewish-owned businesses in Blytheville.⁵⁸ Today there are no Jewish-owned businesses downtown. Temple Israel held its last service in the fall of 2004. Congregants donated the sanctuary’s stained glass windows and a Torah to Congregation Beth Sholom in Memphis, a vital synagogue of 325 families, where several Blytheville residents now worship.

Jews who remain in Delta communities — older adults and sons and daughters who work with family businesses and farms — are bound together by kinship and the challenge of maintaining Judaism in their region. While their Judaism is different from that of Jews outside the South, for Delta Jews it is the “real thing” despite their different ritual practices, accents, and food traditions. Judaism in the South is not defined by “faith, theological principles, or affiliation only,” says Carolyn Lipson-Walker, who argues that in the South “the criterion for who and what is Jewish is more visceral than rational.” Lipson-Walker believes that southern Judaism is a mix of “loyalties, historical memories, beliefs, and cultural expressions,” and chief among those cultural expressions is food.⁵⁹ Although Delta Jews share the same religious heritage as urban Jews in the Northeast, they are bound to their gentile Delta neighbors by fried chicken, cornbread, and field peas.

Eli Evans, the unofficial dean of the Jewish South, grew up in Durham, North Carolina, where his father, E. J. “Mutt” Evans was the first Jewish mayor in the



Eli Evans, pictured here, has written of the ambivalence of southern Jewish identity: “I am not certain what it means to be both a Jew and a Southerner—to have inherited the Jewish longing for homeland while being raised with the Southerner’s sense of home.” A brunch of bagel and grits provides appropriate food for thought. Photograph by Gretchen Haien, courtesy of the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, copyright 1994.

1950s. Eli Evans became the first Jewish student-body president at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1958. In his personal biography of growing up Jewish in the South, *The Provincials*, Evans writes about the complicated negotiation of regional and religious identity:

I am not certain what it means to be both a Jew and a Southerner—to have inherited the Jewish longing for a homeland while being raised with the Southerner’s sense of home. The conflict is deep in me—the Jew’s involvement in history, his deep roots in the drama of man’s struggle to understand deity and creation. But I respond to the Southerner’s commitment to place, his loyalty to the land, to his own tortured history, to the strange bond beyond color that Southern blacks and whites discover when they come to know one another.⁶⁰

Evans's words eloquently capture the spirit of Jewish life in the Delta. Delta Jews value their own expression of religion and ethnicity, yet their world is defined by the region's rules of race, class, intermarriage, strong family ties, social activities, deep sense of place, intimate ties to Gentile white and black neighbors, and the agricultural economy. They are also defined by a sense of Jewish self-sufficiency and by the inventiveness required to obtain Jewish foods, supplies, and educational and cultural resources for their Jewish community. The rich cultural world of the Delta that is expressed in the region's music and food is an equally important part of the region's Jewish life. Delta Jews are southerners, and this allegiance to region profoundly influences their Judaism. "I love the South. I can't imagine living anywhere besides the South," said Fred Miller of Anguilla. "We believe in our Jewish heritage for sure, but I think that there's no one who was born in this area who doesn't feel a real kinship with the South—and with the history of the South. Right or wrong, we are and were part of it."⁶¹

NOTES

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1. Interview with Stuart Rockoff, director, history department, Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, Mississippi, 3 September 2003.

2. See David Goldfield's theory of social "place" in "A Sense of Place: Jews, Blacks, and White Gentiles in the American South," *Southern Cultures* 3,1(1997): 58.

3. Craig Claiborne, *A Feast Made for Laughter* (Double Day and Co., Inc., 1982) 47, 31.

4. David W. Blight, "Southerners Don't Lie; They Just Remember Big," *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 348–49; W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "No Deed but Memory," *Ibid.*, 2, 7.

5. Joan Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 3, 4.

6. See Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (1969; Waveland Press, Inc., 1998), 15; Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology* (1975; Routledge, 1999), 231–51; Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (Routledge, 1997), 28; Sidney W. Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Beacon Press, 1996), 7. See also Susan Kalcik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, ed. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 37–65.

7. Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (Simon and Schuster, 1983), 95.

8. Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* (Hill and Wang, 1994), 171, 293–94; see also Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's article, "Kitchen Judaism," *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880–1950*, ed. Susan Braunstein and Jenna Weissman Joselit (The Jewish Museum, 1990), 77, for a discussion of the term "kitchen Judaism."

9. Sylvia Klumok Goodman, email to the author, 4 June 2001.

10. “Kosher-style,” explains historian Jenna Joselit, was an American invention that allowed Jews to ignore the rigor of the Jewish dietary laws by choosing which rules of kashrut they wished to observe and which they chose to ignore. Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America*, 173–74.
11. Betty G. Lamensdorf, interview with Marcie C. Ferris, Cary, Mississippi, 28 June 2001; Betty G. Lamensdorf, telephone conversation with Marcie C. Ferris, Cary, Mississippi, 21 October 2003.
12. Ben Lamensdorf, Cary, Mississippi, *Delta Jews*, dir. Mike DeWitt, 1999, Mike DeWitt Productions.
13. Betty G. Lamensdorf, interview.
14. Cliff Taulbert, *Delta Jews*, dir. DeWitt.
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