

Austin, Texas: A river runs through it

By Carol Goodman Kaufman

From the earliest days of the Spanish missionaries, to the Texas Revolution of 1836, to "Houston" being the first word uttered on the face of the moon, Texans have taken great pride in their heritage. But, for all the emphasis on the state's storied past, I found almost nothing indicating any Jewish historical presence at either the Bullock State History Museum or the State Capitol, and only hints of the Tribe at the LBJ Presidential Library.

It's not as if we weren't there. Austin's history began in the 1830s when Germans, Swedes, and Mexicans arrived in Central Texas and established themselves on the banks of the Colorado River. The first of our family in Spanish Texas were Sephardic Jews and *conversos* arrived in Austin as early as the 1840s, a mere ten years after the first settlers and well before Austin was established. First named Waterloo, the town was later re-named for Stephen Austin, an impresario for the Mexican government tasked with bringing settlers to the area. In 1839, Austin became the capital of the independent Republic of Texas, where it remained. After the Civil War Texas permanently re-joined the United States.

Although not particularly welcome (when have we ever been?), the Jews contributed to the developing republic. Jews fought in the Texas Revolution of 1836, at both Goliad and the Battle of San Jacinto, the 18-minute confrontation that defeated Mexican President/General Santa Anna. Among them was Dr. Albert Levy, a surgeon during the conflict who later joined the Texas navy.

The most well-known among the earliest Austin Jews were Phineas de Cordova, scion of a Sephardic family of the Netherlands, and his wife Jemima. De Cordova formed a land agency and a newspaper publishing business with his brother Jacob, and came to Austin where he published the *Southwestern American*. He became politically active, and served in the Texas Senate for three terms during the Civil War years.

Other notable Jewish families in Austin during this period included the family of Henry Hirshfeld, who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Hirshfeld and de Cordova were among a small group of Jews who organized the city's first congregation, Temple Beth Israel, in 1879. The synagogue was built in downtown Austin in 1884, on whose site now sits the Federal courthouse.

Still other early Texas settlers were members of the Simon family, whose patriarch Alex invested in the Gulf, Colorado and Sante Fe Railroad and founded and helped build the B'nai Abraham synagogue. His son James financed the building of the historic Simon Theater in Brenham.

Later Jewish immigrants came from central and eastern Europe after the Civil War. Today, the majority of Jewish Texans are of Ashkenazi descent.

Austin's Jewish population, for generations quite small, has in the past fifteen years grown fairly quickly, now checking in about 18,000. In fact, Jewish growth in Austin has been so significant that two new Reform congregations have sprung up, supplementing the existing Conservative and Orthodox *minyans*, and the University hosts both a Chabad House and a Hillel.

Local Jews have contributed to the development of the state's cultural and political life. These included Michael Levy, who founded *Texas Monthly* magazine. Austin elected its first Jewish mayor, Jeff Friedman, in 1975, and on the first night of this past Hanukkah they elected local lawyer Steve Adler.

The high technology boom of the 1990s caused a huge uptick in the number of new Jewish families coming to Austin, necessitating an infrastructure to serve them. Dell Computers' founder, Michael Dell, became Austin's first major Jewish philanthropist, and it was his largesse that made possible the Dell Jewish Community Center Campus in northwest Austin, which houses the Federation, its JCC, Congregation Agudas Achim, the Austin Jewish Academy, and its Early Childhood Program. And, Jewish names appear on various plaques around town, such as the Albert and Ethel Herzstein Hall of Special Exhibitions at the



The interior of the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Brenham.

Bullock Museum.

A recent development has been the move of the Orthodox Congregation B'nai Abraham from Brenham to Austin. The synagogue had not been used for half a century, so Brenham community member, eighty-six year old Leon Toubin, arranged to move Texas' oldest orthodox synagogue 90 miles west to the Dell Community Campus. Community members felt that the move would give new life to the 121-year-old white wooden building.

An unfortunate aspect of the change is that the *schul* will lose its listing on the National Register of Historic Places and its status as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark.

Since its founding in 1980, the Texas Jewish Historical Society has grown to over 650 members and has sponsored and encouraged research as well as provided a forum for scholars and students of Texas Jewish history. In addition to publishing books and its quarterly magazine, the Society has supported films and videos. It also sponsors regular lectures and an annual tour focusing on locations integral to Jewish history. A permanent archive of source materials, documents, family, community and organizational histories is located at Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas.

The flagship campus of the University also houses the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Institute for Israel Studies.

The only evidence of Jews I could detect at the LBJ Presidential Library was the taped

recording of a conversation with then-United Nations Ambassador Arthur Goldberg. Ironically, virtually every historian featured on the many video presentations about LBJ's public service was Jewish.

As much as Texans love their history, they are also known for loving things to be large. I was reminded of that reputation when coming upon UT's Darrell K. Royal football stadium. This enormous arena holds over 100,000 fans. Yep, Texas likes things big.

Speaking of football, an Austinite has advised me, "Football in Texas isn't a life or death matter." Pause. "It's more important." In fact, the game is so much a part of the culture here that the Chabad House's website is jewishlonghorns.com.

Austin offers myriad things to do and see, and many of the sites are within walking distance of downtown hotels. For the art lover there is the Blanton Museum of Art, home to over 18,000 works of European, modern and contemporary American and Latin

American art, and large collection of prints and drawings. The Harry Ransom Center is the nation's largest university-owned collection, and features a Gutenberg bible as well as works by all manner of artists.

I recommend the free guided tour through the beautiful pink granite building. Opened in 1888, it is the fourth to house the legislature, and it is filled with beautifully carved wood, etched glass, and marble inlay. Most of the desks in both chambers are original, walnut in the Senate and oak in the House.

Reflecting the six countries that have laid claim to the territory, the edifice displays the coats of arms of Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the Confederacy, and the United States. And, echoing the state's reputation for loving everything B*I*G, the capitol's dome, at 308 feet, is 20 feet higher than that of the U.S. Capitol's dome in Washington, DC. And, unlike the compact footprint of Boston's Statehouse, the Texas Capitol sits on 51 acres.

The LBJ Presidential Library provides an excellent presentation of the public service career of our 36th president. The many interactive exhibits, video presentations, and even telephones on which one can listen to Johnson's conversations, give an in-depth look at his life in politics. Off limits to us were the 45 million documents stored in the archives.

The Bullock Texas State History Museum is housed in a artfully designed red granite building that explores on each floor a different segment of

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Texas history. Several films are screened daily, including one on La Belle, French explorer La Salle's ship that sank off the waters of Texas in the 17th century. Truly special is the restoration work of the ship being done right on the museum floor.

Austin also offers a wonderful array of natural wonders. First up has to be the expansive National Historic Register-listed Zilker Metropolitan Park, 358 acres of beauty in south Austin that is home to a botanical garden, hike and bike trails, the Lady Bird Lake (named for the First Lady), and numerous outdoor concerts and festivals.

The park's jewel in the crown is the Barton Springs Pool a three-acre pond fed by an underground natural spring. Its year-round 68-70 degree temperatures have invited intrepid bathers since the 17th century.

Southwest of town is another botanical wonderland. The Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center is a public garden "dedicated to creating a more sustainable earth through research and education," reflecting the former First Lady's love of, and desire to preserve, native plants.

The area from downtown to the University campus is mostly flat and easily walkable. The city offers free, guided walking tours of two different historic districts, as well as maps for self-guided tours. Some of the buildings, such as the Millett Opera House, now home to the Austin Club, and the Old Bakery look as if they could serve as sets for an old Western movie.