

Finding Aid to William Sherman's Jewish Settlement in North Dakota Collection

Sherman, William C. (William Charles), 1927-
Jewish Settlement in North Dakota Collection, 1940s-2002
.8 linear ft.
Collection number: Mss 334

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OVERVIEW

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Citation: [Identification of item]. William C. Sherman, Jewish Settlement in North Dakota Collection, MS 334, Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo

BIOGRAPHY

William C. Sherman was born in July 8, 1927 at Detroit, Michigan. He attended school in Oregon, Hankinson, N.D. and Lidgerwood, N.D., and graduated from St. John's University, Collegeville, Minn. He attended St. John's School of Theology and graduated in 1955. He served parishes in Verona, Grand Forks, and Enderlin, N.D., and also the Newman Center at North Dakota State University. In 1965 he received a master's degree in sociology from the University of North Dakota and also further study at North Dakota State University from 1966 to 1968. He began teaching at NDSU in 1970 in the area of rural sociology. He retired from NDSU as professor emeritus. He now lives in Grand Forks, N.D.

Father Sherman has done extensive research and writing on the ethnic dimensions of the Northern Great Plains. Among his major works are *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* (1983); *Plains Folk*, co-edited with Playford Thorson (1988). *Scattered Steeples: Historical Essays Concerning the Diocese of Fargo*, co-edited with Jerry Lamb and Jerry Ruff (1988 and 2006); *African-Americans in North Dakota*, with Thomas Newgard (1994); *Prairie peddlers: the Syrian-Lebanese in North Dakota*, with Paul Whitney and John Guerrero (2002); *Valerian Paczek: priest, soldier, quiet hero*, with John Guerrero (2004), and *Wagons North: Minnesota to Oregon*, with John Guerrero (2009).

HISTORY

The major immigration of Jews into North Dakota came in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. There were already some German Jews in the upper Midwest, especially in Minneapolis-St. Paul, but most of the newcomers were Polish or Russian Jews. Russia, at that time, extended west to the borders of Germany and Austro-Hungary. Poland at that time did not exist as an independent country having been divided among the Russians, the Germans, and the Austrians. But this Polish region in western Russia, together with parts of Ukraine, Lithuania, Bessarabia, Moldavia, and White Russia made up a large region known as the "Jewish Pale." Generally Jews inside the Russian empire were required to live within this western part of the empire and were forbidden to own land. Hence, the Jews of the region had no farming knowledge or skill. Most of them were small tradesmen, moneylenders, gem merchants, millers, blacksmiths, and so on.

In the late nineteenth century the Jews in the Russian empire came under heightened persecution from their Russian neighbors, often with at least passive acquiescence of the police and other government officials. Many of these Jews saw only a dark future for them in Russia and decided to immigrate to America. They also went to Canada, Argentina, South Africa, and other places, but far the greatest number came to the United States. The earlier German Jews, well settled and well integrated into the American economy, had already experienced a degree of anti-Semitism and they feared this would be greatly exacerbated by the newcomers because they were coming in such large numbers, and because many of them came out of a crude peasant culture and would not easily fit into the American society of the day. For this reason, many Jewish relief organizations encouraged the Russian Jews to move out west. Another reason for this was that the Jewish leadership, both in Europe and in America, regretted the fact that Jews had not been able to hold or work land for many centuries, and thought it would be a great thing to get at least some Jews back on the land.

It is for these reasons that a number of the east European Jews was told to go west and take up farming. Those with a little money could purchase land quite cheaply, but the majority was advised to take up homesteads which were virtually free to anyone who stayed on the land for five years and built at least some kind of structure thereon.

The immigrant Jews formed six "colonies" in North Dakota, and tried to farm. The first of these colonies was Painted Woods, about thirty miles north of Bismarck, which received its first settlers in June 1882. A second colony grew up in Ramsey County near the village of Garske in northeast North Dakota. The first

comers were there by 1885. Soon after 1900 Jewish people began to take up land in the Wing-Regan area, thirty to fifty miles northeast of Bismarck. At about the same time, around 1900, a group of settlers took up land near the towns of Ashley and Wishek in south central North Dakota. Still another colony developed in the Bowman County area in the far southwest corner of the state. Yet another group went to the area around Flasher, North Dakota, about sixty miles southwest of Bismarck. There were other smaller groups here and there and also some isolated Jews.

The lack of agricultural know-how, lack of capital and crop losses due to hard winters, hail, drought, infestations, and poor prices drove almost all of these Jewish farmers off the land within a very short time. Some stayed long enough to gain title to their homesteads, then sold them and used the nest egg of capital to start businesses in the towns. Others entered business through the peddler route. This is practically gone today, but in the early days, Jewish men could make a living hiking from rural farm to rural farm, selling needles and thread, patent medicines, spices, gewgaws, and so on. Many of these then graduated into operating stores in the towns. Another problem with farming is that even neighboring farms were usually at least a mile apart. The east European Jews were used to the conviviality of town life, and found the adjustment very hard.

(History by Graef Gannon, processor of this collection)

SCOPE AND CONTENT

One of Father William Sherman's chief interests was to compile documentation about the early settlers of what became North Dakota, their particular ethnic roots, and information about their history and culture. One of ethnic groups studied by Father Sherman was people of Jewish origin and background. In doing this he collected clippings from leading state newspapers. He also did considerable research into legal documents, especially those dealing with the registered owners of specified tracts of land. He also gathered lists of Jewish settlers drawn up by survivors and descendants of the original settlers, as well as lists of names and other information from non-Jews who were interested in the topic. A few of the early settlers or their descendants wrote down their memories of the early days and occasionally these were published in book form or in journal articles. Father Sherman sometimes attended historical conferences where he networked with other historians and sociologists, obtaining names of people who might help in his research. On occasion he presented a paper himself. He was well aware of a handful of Jewish "colonies" around the state, and, armed with that knowledge, perused old land title documents for the relevant areas, often making his own plat maps and filling in with shading those pieces of land owned by Jews. Father Sherman always sought memoirs or informants, but when these were unavailable or could only provide incomplete information, he went by Jewish names in the land records.

Father Sherman had organized these materials to a certain extent. The collection has been organized into four series: General overview, Named collections, Topical and Jewish settlements.

The **General Overview Series** deals with the Jewish settlements in general and specific topics. The **Named Collections Series** is for specific individuals who gathered the material or who are the subjects of the material. The **Topical Series** deals with special topics, such as small town merchants, or isolated rural

Jews. The **Jewish Settlements Series** covers Jews living in particular geographic areas, such as Fargo and Painted Woods.

Even though the file titles in the series are helpful, there is a great deal of duplication within the collection. Anyone wishing to cover the material as completely as possible would be well-advised to at least scan through all the folders. An example of this is that there is a named file for Toba (Mrs. Sam) Geller, but her name appears in a large number of the files. Fargo based Toba Geller spent many years seeking out and preserving the early Jewish history of this region. The scope of her work cannot be understood only from the file bearing her name. There are references within the papers to other significant collections, such as at the State Historical Society of North Dakota, the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest. A significant deposit of the Geller papers appears to be housed by the latter.

The collection does not deal exclusively with Jewish efforts at farming, although that is one of the main themes. A good basic overview of this topic can be found in the paper Father Sherman presented at the Seventeenth Annual Northern Great Plains History Conference at Bemidji, Minnesota in 1982. For someone not already familiar with the early Jewish settlements in North Dakota, this paper is a fine introduction to the rest of the materials. It can be found in folder three. Finally, Father Sherman often jotted down notes on letter sized white paper. There are a great number of these. Some clearly relate to a certain area; others may have references to more than one place or topic.

BOX AND FOLDER LIST

Box/Folder	Content
1/1	Finding aid
General Overview Series	
1/2	Jews in North Dakota in general, one of two
1/3	Jews in North Dakota in general, two of two
1/4	Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest
1/5	Anti-Semitism
Named Collections Series	
1/6	Oscar Cohen correspondence
1/7	Toba (Mrs. Sam) Geller archive
1/8	Alfred A. Thal archive
Topical Series	
1/9	Urban Jews

- 1/10 Pioneer Jewish entrepreneurs
- 1/11 Small town merchants
- 1/12 Rural isolated Jews

Jewish Settlements Series

- 2/1 Jewish homesteaders in general and by counties, master lists
- 2/2 Ashley-Wishek, N.D.
- 2/3 Bowman Country, N.D.
- 2/4 Canadian Prairies
- 2/5 Fargo, N.D.
- 2/6 Flasher and Morton County
- 2/7 Garske-Devil's Lake, N.D.
- 2/8 Grand Forks, N.D.
- 2/9 Painted Woods-Wilton, N.D.
- 2/10 Williston-Alexander, Minot, N.D.
- 2/11 Wing-Regan, N.D.