

Orthodox Women in the WILD WEST

If keeping mitzvot in a small Jewish community is a challenge today, imagine how much more of a struggle it would be if you had to paper the walls of your wood cabin with newspapers to keep out the cold and carry water home from the creek for cooking and washing.

This was the reality for the hundreds of religious women who settled with their families in gold-mining towns in the American West in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Arriving from Western and Eastern Europe, these strictly traditional women and their families sought to make their lives in the West. In this article, Professor Jeanne Abrams shares little-known stories of some of the strong, dynamic women who helped shape Jewish life on the Western frontier.

Jews encountered unprecedented opportunities and acceptance in the early American West. Lured by the promise of success, many chose to simply melt into the larger society, leaving traditional observance behind.

Many others did not.

A significant number of early Jewish settlers were astonishingly successful in transplanting traditional Judaism to the Western frontier, with Jewish women playing a central role in the process. Adapting to the challenging physical environment, these women built Jewish homes even in remote outposts, and helped to found shuls, religious schools and *tzedakah* organizations.

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One of the first Jewish women to enter the burgeoning region following the California Gold Rush of 1849 was Mary Goldsmith Prag.* In 1852, at the age of five, Mary arrived in San Francisco from Poland, traveling by steamship with her family by way of the Isthmus of Panama. Her father, Isaac Goldsmith, made a living in the New World as a *shochet*, a ritual slaughterer of kosher meat.

Soon after the family arrived, Mary's father became active in Sherith Israel Congregation, then a traditional Jewish synagogue that had been established in 1851 in the infant town of San Francisco. Just two months after their arrival, the Goldsmith family joined with other *frum* Jews to celebrate the High Holidays at Sherith Israel. Mary later recalled:

The first Rosh Hashanah after our arrival, Mother not being able to go, Father took sister and me with him to the evening service of Sherith Israel. The men occupied the main floor, while the women were seated in the gallery. All synagogues had a similar arrangement at the time [referring to the practice of separate seating].

Mary's memories of her "early days" in San Francisco reveal that reli-

gion and synagogue worship were important facets in the lives of the new arrivals, and that many of the early frontier immigrants were observant

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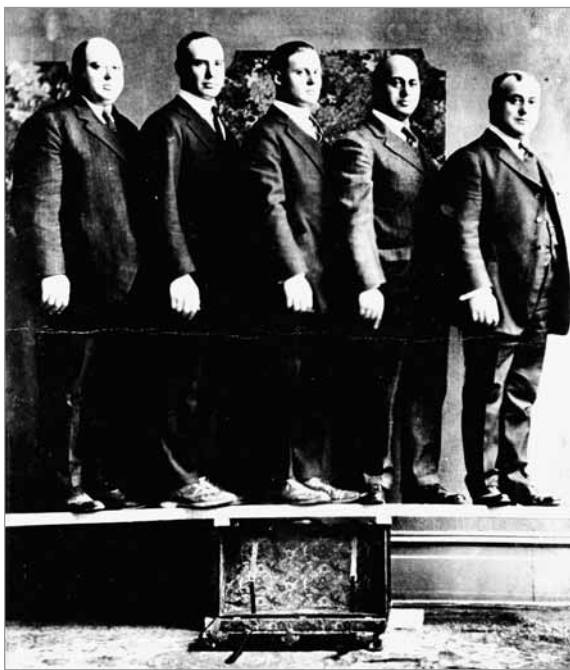
Jews. As she commented about the congregants who gathered at the Rosh Hashanah services in San Francisco in


**Upon their arrival in America, many Jewish women with names beginning with an M sound took on the common English name Mary.*

1852: “Away from home and friends, they clung more closely together and were more devoted to the faith of their fathers.”

Mary later became a respected teacher in religious and public schools, a high school vice-principal and the first Jewish female member of the San Francisco Board of Education. In the 1920s, her daughter Florence Prag Kahn became the first Jewish congresswoman in the United States.

Western Jewish women served as the guardians of Jewish life within their homes, and extended their acts of *chesed* outward. They founded numerous Jewish benevolent societies and institutions, including Jewish



 The Shwayder brothers stand on one of their suitcases to advertise the strength of “Samson”ite Luggage. In 1910, the brothers founded the Denver Shwayder Trunk Factory, which evolved into the world-famous Samsonite Luggage Corporation. The brothers were the sons of Denver immigrants Rachel and Isaac Shwayder and the grandsons of Miriam and Abraham Kubeski. Photos courtesy of Beck Archives, Special Collections, Penrose Library, University of Denver

orphanages, hospitals and homes for the aged.

Bavarian-born Nanette Conrad Blochman, whose Yiddish name was Yettel, is an exceptional example of an early Western woman who remained faithful to Jewish observances. Born in 1830, she immigrated to America with

her parents as a young woman. The family first settled in New York City before moving to San Francisco. In the mid-1850s, when she was in her mid-twenties, Nanette married Emanuel Blochman, a Jewish pioneer and scholar who had arrived in California from Alsace-Lorraine in 1851.

Fueled by the Gold Rush of 1849, San Francisco was a burgeoning metropolis in the mid-nineteenth century, and the site of the region’s largest Jewish population. An industrious businesswoman who operated a series of millinery shops, Nanette never let her work take precedence over her religious commitment. Her eldest son, Lazar, born in 1856, recalled in his

memoir that “mother was a strict adherent to the Jewish faith and so kept her [millinery] business closed every Saturday as well as [on] Jewish holidays. Her Jewish customers knew this, but she lost much of the transient trade because of the day.” Despite this, “[Nanette] established a reputation as a fancy milliner and had a wide scope of customers.” She was often the main provider for the family, while her husband instituted a Torah school for children in San Francisco in 1864, and at various times tried his hand at dairy farming, wine making and matzah baking (though none of the ventures were very profitable). Emanuel was active in many local Jewish philanthropic organizations and the family belonged to San Francisco’s traditional Congregation Ohabai Shalom. Nanette’s strict adherence to halachah did not go unnoticed in the larger community. In the early 1880s a popular Western

Jewish journalist lauded her as “a noble example of a pious woman who conscientiously observed the tenets of old Israel regarding the dietary laws” and concluded that “such women are certainly rare in this age and country.”

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, Denver was also the



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site of a growing observant Jewish community. Many of Denver’s Jews arrived from the failed Russian agricultural colony in Cotopaxi, Colorado, which had been unsuccessfully farmed by a group of sixty-three Orthodox Jews. Other *frum* Jews migrated to Colorado for economic opportunities or in search of health, since by the turn of the century Colorado had acquired a reputation as the “world’s sanatorium” for those seeking a cure for tuberculosis. Denver’s west side, comprised mostly of Eastern European immigrants, soon became a traditional Jewish enclave filled with numerous small shuls as well as kosher bakeries, butcher shops and grocery stores.

In the 1880s, Miriam Kubeski, her husband Abraham and their children emigrated from England to Central City, Colorado, a silver boom mining town about thirty miles west of Denver. Born Miriam Rachofsky in Suwalk, Poland, she left her family’s small farm at the age of sixteen and married Abraham Kubeski, who was studying for *semichah*. The couple lived in Poland with their children,



 A kosher picnic sponsored by the Denver section of the National Council of Jewish Women circa 1895. Note the word “kosher” printed in Hebrew on the sign.


two girls and a boy. But economic hardships and pogroms soon propelled the Kubeskis to search for a better life in Manchester, England, where Abraham found a position as a Hebrew teacher and rabbi. Miriam, who gave birth to three more sons there, launched her career as a midwife, often earning as much as a pound for each delivery. While the family was still in England, the eldest Kubeski daughter, Rachel, married Isaac Shwayder, a young Torah scholar from Poland.

Before long news came of the success of Miriam’s uncle, Alexander Rittmaster, in the rugged mountains of Colorado. Her brother, Abraham Rachofsky, emigrated as well. Soon Abraham, now a prosperous dry goods merchant in Central City, sent for his sister and her family. In 1879, Isaac too settled in Colorado ahead of his family, where he worked with Abraham as a peddler. Abraham formed a minyan in a storefront and even acquired a *Sefer Torah*, while Isaac served as the unofficial rabbi for a number of years, though a shul was never built.

Isaac was not reunited with his wife and children for two years. Family lore relates that one Shabbat during that period he received a rare letter from his loved ones in England, yet was able to restrain himself from opening it until

after sundown so as not to desecrate the holy day. When the extended family finally moved to Central City, they were overjoyed to finally join him, but the absence of a real Jewish community in the mining camp was a disappointment. The Kubeskis had to make adjustments, becoming temporary vegetarians until they moved to Denver because the kosher meat shipped to them often arrived spoiled.



 Miriam Kubeski, who went by the name Mary Kobey in America, poses with her grandchildren in Aspen, Colorado. Miriam, originally from Poland, was an observant Jewish midwife in Denver at the turn of the twentieth century whose reputation spread far beyond the Jewish community.

Once the family relocated to Denver in 1888, Miriam, who went by the name Mary Kobey in America, became a popular and respected midwife. Her husband Abraham helped establish the Agudas Achim shul, and earned a modest living as a rabbi and *sofer*. In 1901, when the ordered matzahs from Manischewitz failed to arrive, he and the local Jewish blacksmith constructed an enormous oven at the back of the shul. Abraham and the *shames* (caretaker) then supervised the baking of matzahs for the entire community. In her charming memoir, *The Tale of a Little Trunk* (1977), Miriam’s granddaughter recalled Shabbat visits to the Kubeski household, where her grandparents would be “dressed in their Sabbath clothes in the sitting room, both engrossed in reading from the Torah. Grandma would be reading what was called the *Teitch Hummish*, a Yiddish version of the Bible, and Grandpa the *Siddur* or the Hebrew Bible.” The *yamim tovim* were celebrated with special enthusiasm, and Miriam would serve her family’s favorite dishes, *kishka* and *tzimmes*. On Sukkot the family decorated their sukkah with colorful ripe fruits and vegetables.

In her role as midwife, Miriam earned the nickname “Denver’s Angel of Mercy” for her selfless concern for poor new mothers in the immigrant Jewish community. Indeed, *gemilut chesed* appears to have permeated her life. She volunteered her services at no charge to those who could not afford to pay, and was frequently seen collecting money and clothing for baby layettes from merchants in the area and bringing her delicious homemade chicken soup to new mothers. Her granddaughter dubbed her “the Pied Piper of West Colfax,” referring to the main street that ran through Denver’s Eastern European immigrant enclave. She recalled that wherever Miriam went, wearing her trademark snow white cap, a spotless apron and a black bag prepared for a birth, she was trailed by a group of children—many of whom she had delivered—who affectionately regarded her as a surrogate grandmother.

Miriam’s reputation soon spread far beyond the Jewish community. On one occasion, Dr. Henry Buchtel, one of early Denver’s leading obstetricians,

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An advertisement for Nanette Conrad Blochman's millinery in San Francisco, circa 1850s. Born in Bavaria, Nanette was an industrious businesswoman who closed her store on Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

introduced her at a local medical convention as “the most famous midwife in Denver.” Miriam passed away in 1921, leaving many descendants who would make a significant impact on the city. She and her husband were founders of Denver’s Jewish Free Loan Society, and the Shwayder name has been at the forefront of philanthropy in both the Denver Jewish and general communities for nearly a century.

Miriam’s daughter, Rachel Shwayder, was the real “boss” of the family, a strong-minded matriarch who guided the household. Isaac opened a grocery store in Denver, and Rachel, like so many

immigrant women, had to supplement the family’s modest income. She did so by taking in boarders. In 1910, the couple’s sons founded the Denver Shwayder Trunk Factory, which evolved into the world-famous Samsonite Luggage Corporation.

The Shwayders managed to keep Judaism in the forefront of their lives. Their daughter Hannah Shwayder Berry recalled Passover at her parents’ table surrounded by the ten Shwayder children, where, to usher in the holiday, “Mama, her face all flushed from the heat of the kitchen, lighted [*sic*] the candles, covered her eyes with her hands, and chanted the ancient blessing.” In preparation for the family Seder, Rachel brought out her Passover dishes and pots and spent days preparing the traditional foods on her blue enamel stove, making gefilte fish (the hand-ground product of a feisty carp that had been swimming in a large tub in the family’s backyard for several days), *kneidelach*, borscht and hand-grated horseradish.

The stories of Mary Prag, Nanette Blochman, Miriam Kubeski and Rachel Shwayder provide but a glimpse of the important role Jewish women played in sustaining Jewish life in Western cities and towns at the turn of the nineteenth century. Through their efforts, the seeds of Jewish tradition that they planted and nurtured are now firmly rooted in Jewish communities throughout the American West. ■

Readers interested in a comprehensive treatment of the topic should read Professor Abrams’ book *Jewish Women Pioneering the Frontier Trail: A History in the American West* (New York, 2006).



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