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The Palimpsest

Volume 71 | Number 4

Article 2

10-1-1990

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Recommended Citation

Bell, Michael J. "To Light Out for the Territories Ahead of the Rest." *The Palimpsest* 71 (1990), 146-153.
Available at: https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol71/iss4/2

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# To Light Out for the Territories Ahead of the Rest

by Michael J. Bell

**Editor's note: This text was initially presented by the author as the banquet address of the annual Congress of Historical Organizations in Des Moines, June 9, 1990.**

THIS TITLE comes from the last paragraph of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck, you remember, has spent the last third of the book pretending to be Tom Sawyer, while Tom, pretending to be his older brother, Sid Sawyer, has had the two of them engaged in an absurd and fantastical scheme to free Jim, a runaway slave, whom Tom knows is already free. Angry that Tom has been playing games, disgusted with himself for becoming involved in the kind of civilization that Tom's game playing represents, Huck determines to run to the Indian Territory and be done with civilized ways forever. "So there ain't nothing more to write about and I am rotten glad of it," Huck says and continues, "because if I'd 'a' knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't 'a' tackled it. . . . But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

I chose this title not because I want to suggest that any of us ought to be done with civilized ways, but rather because I wanted to remind all of us of the true nature of the pioneer experience. Pioneers go places civilized people shun. And they tend to go there, wherever "there" is, because the one thing they can be sure of is that civilization is not there waiting to tell them how things ought to be done. I also wanted to remind everyone that the territories are where you find them. Every place, any place, at any time, can be civilization to one person and the territories to another. Certainly, the Indians knew they were civilized, even if Huck did not. Just as certainly none of us has to be reminded that too much of America believes that Iowa's rich civilization is dull and bland, full of Jello molds, corn, and nothing else. Finally, I want to argue that the study of history can be a territory, too, and that, like Huck, those of us who stand poised "to dive into the decade" of the 1990s have the opportunity to tell an old story in a new and different way, to draw, if you will permit me to characterize Huck's tale, a new map of Iowa and use it to tell an uncivilized version of what it has meant to be an Iowan, a middle westerner, and in my own community's case, to be Jewish in the Hawkeye State.

To accomplish this I have to invite you out to the territories with me to see some of the sights I have seen in the past year and to tell you my uncivilized version of the story of their creation. My territory is Jewish life and heritage in Iowa from the state's beginnings to the present day. Since October of 1989, with generous support from the State Historical Society of Iowa and the Jewish Federation of Greater Des Moines, other researchers and I have been exploring the what's, the how's, and especially the why's of Iowa's Jewish community. I have been answering those raised eyebrow questions that begin, "Jews in Iowa, really? How interesting." and really mean "Jews came to Iowa? Where did they live? What kind of life did they have? You mean they're still there? Why?" I should warn you from the start, however, that the vistas I will be describing have all been observed before. Accordingly, what I will be offering you is not novel sights but different views. In particular, I want to challenge you to see three traditional historical maps — the map of settlement, the map of community, and the map of power — in somewhat different ways.

Traditionally, settlement charts a story of

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incremental growth. At its beginning there is only a vast, unoccupied, and hostile plain, then a few brave souls arrive and struggle out a foothold, to be followed by more and more settlers until their numbers reach a critical mass and, in our local case, Iowa is born and finally matures as a collection of farms and towns. In the Jewish community, this story is the story of intrepid peddlers, who became small-town shopkeepers, whose children in their turn became city merchants, and whose children in their turn became lawyers, doctors, teachers, and everything else under the sun that modern children become. Traditionally, settlement is also a story of famous names and famous places, of firsts and most importants. In the case of the Jewish community of Iowa, it is a story of Alexander Levi, the first naturalized citizen; of Moses Bloom, who rose from humble clothier to be a power in the Democratic party of Iowa; of families such as Younkers, Davidson, Levitt, Rosenfield, Braverman, Buxbaum, and so many more; of Jewish cemeteries and Hebrew Aid Societies; of temples, synagogues, and finally of Jewish Welfare Federations working to link the many small towns of the state into a greater community.

Moreover, settlement, especially Midwest settlement, is a nineteenth-century story. Most of us cannot imagine settlement occurring in a land filled with people. For us, settlement is a process of creation, a making of something out of nothing. Our minds are used to conjuring up images of virgin land, of empty spaces and wide open prairies, of a past time when America was a blank slate ready to be written upon. And our sense of these places is that they are on the edge of society, out there away from the refinements of the city and the force of civilization. Accordingly, we cannot imagine a narrative of settlement if a place is filled already with people. If there is no frontier to be conquered, then there can be no settlement. As a result, as it does for most of Iowa, the settlement tale of Iowa's Jewish community ceases with the emergence of dominant urban centers and, in particular, with the establishment of the large and prosperous communities in Des Moines, the Quad Cities, and Sioux City around 1900. Once these and the other major cities of the state are in place, then people may come and go but settlement must be finished.

Now, this conventional description is not wrong. It is what history generally means to most of us, and generally it is true. In the case of the Iowa Jewish community, it is a story easily told and one whose causes and consequences are easy to document. Eighty percent of the pioneer Jewish settlers were German. Most immigrated to the United States after the European revolutions of 1848 brought forth a rising anti-Semitism as Jews were incorrectly perceived as sympathetic to the revolutionaries' intentions. The Germany they left, though divided, was nonetheless emerging as an economic and social force on the continent, one that had been transformed by Enlightenment thinking and was well on its way toward becoming the center of both European and Jewish intellectual life. As well, most of these first settlers were prepared for the possibilities of the Iowa frontier. Their Germany was alive with a powerful spirit of capitalist expansion and individual opportunity. Many had come from the emerging middle class, had experience in business, the capital required to move themselves into the economic life of the state, and the drive needed to take advantage of the coming expansion of the Middle West.

*Some five hundred to one thousand Jews were settled on Iowa farms between 1905 and 1920.*

Moreover, most were reform Jews. This is not the place to go too deeply into a discussion of the distinctions between the various forms of Jewish religious practice. Suffice for our purposes to say that reform Judaism represents an attempt, not unlike that of the authors of the American Bill of Rights, to separate the practice of religion from the practice of politics, that is, to distinguish between an individual's religious beliefs and her or his political allegiance to the state. In Europe this distinction had arisen as a purely practical matter. In exchange for citizenship first in the Napoleonic Empire and later in many of the states created after its fall, large numbers of European Jews willingly surrendered their distinctive claim to be a nation within a nation and substituted in its place the claim that Jews were loyal subjects of the country in which they lived and practitioners of religion that bore no national claims.

This particular combination of religious belief and ethnicity gave this first generation great advantages. At its simplest, it allowed them to come to Iowa. Central to European reform Judaism was the notion of private choice. Individuals were free to move beyond the "rules" of traditional law if they believed that those rules were arbitrary and not divine. Likewise, their Germanness allowed them to mingle freely with the large Catholic and Protestant German migrations that were also filling up Iowa with settlers and to become full participants in the American economic dream. Not surprisingly, as the traditional narrative of settlement suggests it should, their numbers grew in proportion to the state's growth. By 1878 there were about one thousand Jews in Iowa, about 1 percent of the state's population. They were comfortable, integrated into their communities, respected by their fellow citizens, holders of public office. By 1900 their number had risen to around three thousand, with most now settled in Des Moines, Sioux City, and Davenport as the older, powerful river cities gave way to the new economic realities of the state.

BUT FOR ALL the grandeur of their story, it is not complete. Its problems can be represented by some simple demographic facts. By 1907 Iowa's Jewish population had doubled in size to six thousand, and by the entry of America into the First World War it had nearly tripled. More important, the causes for this population leap were external to the state. By and large those new immigrants came to Iowa because they were literally sent here. The chief agents of this delivery were three: the Jewish Agricultural Society, the Industrial Removal Office, and the Galveston Project of the Baron de Hirsch Fund.

I will deal with the Jewish Agricultural Society first, since the idea of Jewish farmers may be a strange concept for many of you. The Iowa Jewish Heritage Project is still compiling its figures, but what the rough estimates show is that some five hundred to one thousand Jews were settled on Iowa farms in the period between 1905 and 1920. These people came as farmers and many stayed farmers until the depression drove them off the farms and either into the cities or out of the state entirely. Moreover, these Jewish farmers of Iowa were not alone. As the records of the various agricultural societies demonstrate, somewhere between fifty thousand and seventy-five thousand Jewish families and individuals were settled on farms in the United States and Canada during the life of the Jewish Agricultural Society.

The Industrial Removal Office (IRO), which

*"In the tenement . . . my children would one after another fall victim to all the slum diseases. . . . Here my children will have air, light."*

began as a part of the agricultural society's mission and became its own separate agency, operated in a similar fashion. Its task was to find homes outside of the major eastern cities for those immigrants who could not find work and who were uninterested in attempting farming. In its case we know that in the period from 1905 until 1923 it settled approximately one thousand Jewish individuals in Iowa. Here, too, we have only begun to examine the complete correspondence produced between the IRO and its Iowa correspondents, but those letters tell a story of great courage on the part of those coming west and great fortitude on the part of those waiting to receive them.

Let me give you a few examples: "Gentlemen: Yours of the 20th on hand in reply wil say I tank you very much for sending me hear as I worked my self up purty good. I am runing a shoe shop of my owne and keep employed two more men. I can youse one more. If you have a good shoemaker send him down here and I wil try my best for him. I wil try and pay him back what you al done for me. He can work for me as long as he likes and when he wil be tried in work he can open a shop for him self. Please send me a single man and send him on the name of A. Miller as I have changed my name. My old name was very hard to spel so I piked out a easier one."

Industrial Removal Office, 10/16/08: "Send Coat maker at once."

IRO response to shoemaker: "Have first class coatmaker will send if you telegraph satisfactory by noon today. Otherwise will send elsewhere."

These letters also tell of the pride and joy of those who made the long journey: "I have ben in New York seventeen years and this will be the first time my wife will be able to look upon something she can call home. Oy yes, I made a fair living in New York; that is worked six months and walked around another six, even saved a few hundred and then in the tenement where with the foul air and the germs of all diseases and the crowding and the absence of light my children would one after another fall victim to all the slum diseases and my few hundred dollars would go to the doctor. And at the end of my seventeen years what is my "tachlis" [finish]? I live in four rooms in Lewis St. on the fourth floor and pay $13 a month. Here my children will have air, light. . . ."

Finally, Iowa's cities received hundreds of people as a result of what is known as the Galveston Project sponsored by the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Conceived again as another way to end the overcrowding of the eastern cities, this project negotiated with several shipping companies to land their immigrant cargoes not in New York, Philadelphia, or Boston, but instead in Galveston, Texas, where those individuals and communities could make their way through the heartland of America. Again, though the figures are incomplete, it appears that almost half of the Sioux City community who migrated to the United States in the period from 1904 to 1914 arrived in Iowa this way.

WITHOUT COMMENTING on this first uncivilized narrative yet, let me now compound it with another. Implicit in the narrative of settlement is a narrative of community. Traditionally, this story in Iowa and in much of the Midwest is one of isolated small towns turned inward upon themselves because they have no choice. It is a story of turning the smallness of the settlement, and then the town, and finally

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sometimes even the city, from a disadvantage to an advantage. In this traditional narrative, the key is independence. Communities survive and prosper because they are socially self-sufficient. Their schools, no matter how small, do the job as well or better than larger schools might. Their shopping, their services, the entirety of their social fabric work to make them good places to live and raise families, not because these towns have a lot to offer but because they offer more with less than larger social units might offer with twice the resources. Moreover, this story of the struggle to create community through the determined independence of a few remains very powerful today as Iowa's small towns struggle against the demographic tide that threatens to make them no longer viable. Today as Iowa continues to lose population, many small communities still struggle to go it alone whatever the cost.

However, here too, despite the eloquence of this tale, there is more story to be told. Let me back up to my narrative of Iowa's Jewish community. Unlike the previous generation, most of the newcomers who arrived after 1900 were Eastern European in origin and Orthodox in religious practice. Accordingly, they brought with them a whole new set of expectations and needs. Yiddish was their primary language; strict adherence to Talmudic law was their watchword; and *Kashrut* was their covenant. Their inclusion into American life in places like Iowa, therefore, was by no means guaranteed, and the fact that it occurred as smoothly as it did is one of the great stories waiting to be told. In a sense, these newcomers represented a challenge of enormous proportions. Their orthodoxy would not bend as easily as had that of their reform-minded German brethren and the combination of their language, customs, and religious differences could have led easily to an open war between the two communities as each claimed to hold the truth of Judaism in opposition to the other.

What was needed was a way of overcoming the differences of religion and ethnicity. And that way was found through the creation of extra-religious societies that could sidestep the deep religious differences and work toward the common goal of accommodating both the older community and the newcomers to American life. What is truly remarkable is the sheer number of organizations that developed in this period to aid in the creation of a unified Jewish community. In Des Moines alone, over fifty distinct social organizations ranging from men's clubs to political organizations to youth groups to women's societies were created in the period from 1905 to 1925. Moreover, most of these were replicated in some form in the other larger cities and towns of the state with Jewish populations. What is equally remarkable is the concerted effort within these organizations to extend both their membership and their networks of responsibility well beyond the largest centers of population. Repeatedly, we have discovered in our researches a systematic and concerted attempt on the part of the leadership in cities like Sioux City, Des Moines, and then the Quad Cities to distribute power and responsibility across the state.

THIS PATTERN of statewide definition of community is matched by an equally interesting body of data that we have been developing about the nature of Jewish social life in small communities across the state. Again, let me outline

*The miles did not matter, and community was not measured by the boundaries of the hometown.*

two brief examples. The first is a recurring narrative of closing up the shop or the store and traveling to the larger cities for the High Holidays. In this story we have been told repeatedly of how at Rosh Hashanah or Passover, whole families would head for Waterloo or Cedar Rapids or Davenport or Sioux City or Des Moines where they would be put up with a family and stay until the observances were completed. The second narrative describes a visiting circuit in the small towns. In this story, the narrator describes how her family would spend the Sundays from April through October going on a small-town tour, gathering at the homes of the different Jewish families in each community in order that all the families might have a Jewish social life apart from the ordinary social life of each small town. "We would wait for the spring thaw and for the mud to dry," she said, "and then we could start going from town to town to see everyone again."

What is immediately suggested by these stories is that the miles did not matter, and that community was not measured by the boundaries of the hometown. There is a bad joke about an Iowa rural paper route. Perhaps you have heard it: the route is four houses and 175 miles long. Those who tell it say that the joke is in all that distance, but the real interest is elsewhere. The distance may be funny, but the better point for Iowans is that someone wanted the paper and someone else would ride 175 miles to give it to them. Admittedly this pattern of visits could be read as a small-town problem, as a solution that heightens the isolation of Jews in Iowa life. In the absence of a local community, the only choice for small-town Jews was to reach out to the neighboring towns in the hope of building what could not be found at home.

But imagine otherwise for a moment. Imagine, in fact, that this phenomenon is much more common than we have reported previously and that similar stories could be told about other religious communities, both Catholic and Protestant, throughout the state. I say imagine because it is not something we have ever looked for. Nonetheless, if it is the case, then it leads us to the conclusion that the social communities of small-town life were wider and broader than we have heretofore argued.

Further, let me suggest, by way of negative evidence, one reason we may have lost sight of this phenomenon. The baby boom of the 1950s skewed not only the real population of the United States but also our sense of its impact on social life. It suggested that local populations would grow large enough that they could cease to be connected to other communities and begin to function on their own. But the baby boom was an illusion and we need to return to the older model of cooperation. We need to recognize, as did those of earlier generations when Iowa's small towns were really small, that survival — whether of a small Jewish community or of any small community — cannot be a singular burden. Communities, we need to remember, are as much the people working together as they are the places where we live.

LET ME BRIEFLY ADDRESS the third traditional story, the narrative of power. Traditionally, history has been defined as *his*. Men do the work of culture building. They found, they order, and they control the passage from unstructured life to finished community. It is men, in this traditional version, who clear the land, who found the town, who are the first and do the first. In

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the case of the Jewish community of Iowa, this map of history has meant that the story we have told has been of those males who "founded" congregations, who "built" buildings, and who "led" communities, rather than of those women who created social life. There have been exceptions to this history, especially when those exceptional women, Julia Bloom Mayer, for example, were charged with responsibility for social services, but even here our history has focused on these foremothers because of their work in institutionalizing giving and caring.

SINCE BEGINNING this study of Iowa's Jewish life and heritage, however, we have realized that the story is much more likely to be *hers* than *his*. Let me amplify. As the Iowa Jewish Heritage Project has visited communities around the state we have been struck by the wealth of materials relating to the work of women and the poverty of materials relating to the work of men. Almost everywhere, we have scanty records of men's activities — some board minutes, records of fundraising campaigns — filed side by side with much more detailed descriptions of parties, festivals, community celebrations, school plays, and other activities all organized by women. This observation is not intended to diminish the work of men, or to devalue the buildings they have built, or to dismiss their command of the practical. Rather it is to face you with an irony that we have had to face, and to suggest that this irony may well allow us a richer insight into the history of Jewish life and heritage than if we had found equally full records of men's and women's activities.

We think the disparity between men's and women's records has to do with two things, first, the traditional measures of accomplishment and, second, and more important, with the traditional measures of significance. Accomplishments are usually concrete. They have substance. We point to the new school, or the new courthouse, or the budget surplus, or the paid-off mortgage. Likewise, significance is usually apparent. Significant moments announce their importance. They say: Pay attention, something important is happening here; this date, this action will live in history. Yet, the very concreteness of the buildings and the visibility of the moment made the papers that traced their development into new courthouses and significant dates unimportant. Men did not save the paper because they could point to the new thing, and ordinary history was designed to call attention to the out-of-the-ordinary moments men made.

Women's work was traditionally seen as just social, as somehow concerned with the little things and the unnoticed, ordinary fabric of social life. Neither significant nor accomplished, this women's work merely defined the calendar of living, the everyday, day-to-day activities that moved the community from week to week, from festival to holiday, from Bar/Bat Mitzvah to wedding, from Harvest Dance to Spring Fling. And what better proof of this unimportance was there than the detailed, careful records that the women kept to mark their events and to serve as guides to the other women who would manage them next. If these events had the substance of history they would not need their paper trail. Because their paper trail was so lovingly kept, they were not history.

History, however, is built on pieces of

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paper, on pictures of events, on records of the occasion, and here is the irony doubled. Not only will the records of the women of the Jewish community make it possible for us to tell their story with more detail than that of the men, they will also require us to tell the entire story of Iowa's Jewish life and heritage in a different and perhaps better way. Our conclusion is that our history will have no choice. It will have to make the social hour as important as the building fund, and treat the work of the Sisterhood and the Hadassah with the same interest and seriousness as historians have heretofore given to that of the men's club and the temple board. It will also have the opportunity to explore the history of Iowa Jewish life from the other side, to describe how that life sustained itself from day to day in the ordinary and expected events, which most of us do not notice but without which there would be no anchors to our lives.

LET ME NOW conclude. My sense is that the territories of the 1990s are not where we have traditionally looked for them—in the nineteenth century, in the self-sufficiency of our towns, in the monuments and monumental actions of men — but rather are in the uncivilized history I have mapped out here. My sense is, further, that if we begin to explore these new territories and tell the stories they display, a new, much-needed and long-overdue portrait of Iowa will emerge. None of you needs me to tell you that Iowa does not always get the best press. Except for every four years when national politicians need us to start them on the way to the White House, we seem to disappear from view. We're just bland, uniform Iowa, out there where everything is the same and everyone lives the same life.

Of course, that map of Iowa has never been real. The problem is not that Iowa is not diverse, but that history has not been diverse. Too often, we have allowed the conventional approach to the history of Iowa to civilize us to the point where we can no longer see who we are. We are not bland and uniform, not all Jello and white bread. We are African-American and German, Irish and Jewish, Polish, Italian, Asian, Arab. More important, we have learned if not to honor, at least to live with our diversity. Iowa is not perfect. It is not heaven, and it is not free of strife. But it is a place where many different ethnic, racial, and religious groups have fought out a consensus that allows each community to value itself without disparaging the other. By telling the story of Iowa's Jews, the Iowa Jewish Heritage Project makes a small step toward refiguring the map of Iowa. By challenging ourselves today to light out for new territories, we hold out the hope that, when we are finished with this decade, twenty-first-century Iowa will show us to ourselves as we really are and always have been: Ahead of the rest. □

NOTE ON SOURCES

The following sources constitute a selected bibliography of Iowa Jewish history: Simon Glazer, *The Jews of Iowa* (Des Moines, 1904); Jack Wolfe, *A Century of Iowa Jewry* (Des Moines, 1941); Frank Rosenthal, *The Jews of Des Moines: The First Century* (Des Moines, 1957); Oscar Fleishaker, "The Illinois-Iowa Jewish Community on the Banks of the Mississippi River" (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University, 1957); Susan Marks Conner, ed., *I Remember When . . . : Personal Recollections and Vignettes of the Sioux City Jewish Community, 1869–1964* (Sioux City, 1985).