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# Review of Frances Dinkelspiel's Towers of Gold: How One Jewish Immigrant Named Isaias Hellman Created California

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# Review of Frances Dinkelspiel's Towers of Gold: How One Jewish Immigrant Named Isaias Hellman Created California

## Comments

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business cycles is warranted and would represent a valuable contribution in the field of economic and business history. Sadly, there is a dearth of recent scholarship in this field. Let us hope that contemporary scholars will follow Roberts' worthy example and add to our understanding of past economic downturns.

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*Towers of Gold: How One Jewish Immigrant Named Isaias Hellman Created California.* By Frances Dinkelspiel. New York: St. Martin's Press. 2009. 376 Pages.

Isaias Hellman was a civic leader, financier and real estate developer who played an important role in the development of the American West. He was the best-known banker on the west coast and was involved in most major advances of his time. This is a long-overdue comprehensive biography.

Isaias Wolf Hellman was sixteen-years old when he immigrated to the United States from Germany and lived to become one of the wealthiest people in the western US. The Hellmans, brothers and cousins, came to California in the 1850s. Isaias was not the first of the family to arrive. While his cousins may have come with the gold rush hordes, when Isaias and his brother Herman came in 1859, they went to Los Angeles to work for them. They owned a shop which sold books and stationery in a town then better known for its services for off-duty cowboys. By 1865, Isaias had his own store. Soon after that, he became a banker. He sold his dry goods store in 1868 to focus on finance and started buying local real estate. In 1871, he joined with several other prominent city leaders to create Farmers and Merchants Bank of Los Angeles, which quickly became the most important bank in the southern half of California.

Isaias Hellman invested heavily in real estate and provided mortgages through the bank. Probably because of this, he actively promoted the infrastructure that the rapidly growing Los Angeles area needed. In 1872, as

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president of the congregation of B'nai B'rith, he dedicated the cornerstone of the city's first synagogue. In 1880, Isaias and his partners donated 110 acres to the Methodists to build the University of Southern California. The main campus of the university is still on this land today. They also extended one of their trolley lines to the new campus. The University of California also sought Hellman's involvement. He served as a regent for 40 years. Hellman's interests in transportation also included ownership of commercial steam boats and a tumultuous partnership with Henry Huntington in the Pacific Electric Railway. Their distinctive red trolley cars followed routes designed to bring commuters to the business districts on weekdays and to beaches and other recreational areas on weekends. In 1895, Hellman sold \$5 million worth of bonds to the public to electrify and expand San Francisco's horse-drawn trollies.

At the turn of the century, oil was discovered on Hellman's land, and Farmers and Merchants Bank was making loans to oil refineries, storage facilities, and other oil-related companies. He purchased controlling interest in the California Wine Association, which bottled and sought to improve the quality and reputation of southern California wine. The Association eventually controlled 80 percent of the state's wine production.

In the 1890s, Hellman moved to the bigger western stage, San Francisco, by raising \$2.5 million in additional capital for Nevada Bank. This bank had been built by the silver kings on the profits from Virginia City, Nevada, silver mines, but was now struggling. Hellman brought the bank back and merged it with Wells Fargo and Company Bank in 1905. He served as president of both banks while retaining control of Farmers and Merchants Bank of Los Angeles. He also started Union Bank and Trust in San Francisco.

His move north precipitated an interest in the beautiful Lake Tahoe area. Hellman purchased at least 70 acres, including two miles of lakefront land, and resold most of it in parcels. He built a mansion on a two acre lakefront property. Part of that property became a one-acre state park.

Farmers and Merchants Bank, still under the direction of Hellman in 1886, provided funding for the purchase of the *Los Angeles Times* by Otis Chandler, who became one of LA's leading citizens. Hellman also loaned funds to Joseph Sartori to start what became the Security Trust and Savings Bank, which would soon surpass Farmers and Merchants bank in size.

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Hellman, by then, was influential in many banks and other financial institutions in California.

It is amazing that it has taken so long for a comprehensive biography to be written on Hellman. His importance was recognized by Ira Cross in his 1927 definitive four volume history of California banking, Wells Fargo Bank has consistently acknowledged his key role in its own history, and Hellman is mentioned for his civic prominence in *California Jews* (Ava Kahn and Marc Dollinger, 2003). Noted California historian Robert Cleland began a book on Hellman, but died in 1957 without completing the project. An officer of Farmers and Merchants Bank took up the project, which became more of a short history of the bank. The Huntington Library published it as *Isaias W. Hellman and the Farmers and Merchants Bank* (Robert Glass Cleland and Frank Putnam, 1980).

Fortunately, a great-great-granddaughter, Frances Dinkelspiel, is a journalist and quite competent researcher. She has produced a very readable, well-researched book which covers all aspects of I.W. Hellman's business and personal life. This book should become part of any collection on western history.

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