

JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN THE RURAL UPPER MIDWEST, 1880-1910



Jewish homesteading family in Bowman County, North Dakota, 1910. Photograph provided by Renell Silver.

Sophie Friedman
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Introduction

In the early 1880s, a family of German Jews left their “picturesque village of Berg in the Mosel Valley,” a quiet region “where life was pleasant and peaceful,” and came to the United States.¹ Solomon Thal’s brothers had immigrated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin a few years earlier and “sent home glowing reports of conditions in America.” Hoping to make their fortune, Solomon and his wife, Sarah, along with their fourteen-month-old daughter, Elsie, set out to join them. Upon their arrival, Solomon’s brother, Sam Thal, advised the young family to go to Dakota Territory where he already owned a large farm. Solomon, “anxious to get started,” departed immediately; six weeks later, Sarah and Elsie followed. The journey was neither short nor easy. Sarah and her small child took one train from Milwaukee to St. Paul, Minnesota, another from St. Paul to Grand Forks, Dakota Territory, and yet another from Grand Forks to the town of Larimore. Unable to speak English, Sarah could not make her needs known and “went to bed without supper.” Upon reaching Larimore, Sarah met her husband and Sol Mendelson, the manager of Sam’s farm. The group loaded their provisions into a wagon and “drove off into the unbroken prairies.” Toward nightfall, the team “drove into a buffalo hole and upset the wagon.” The horses broke loose from the reigns and Solomon “was obliged to follow them home as they hurried across the prairie.” After getting lost three times Sarah, Elsie, Solomon, and Sol finally reached the little settlement of Harrisburg well after midnight.

This trying voyage was just the beginning of the Thal’s difficulties. In the spring of 1883 Solomon, Sarah, and Elsie left Harrisburg to homestead land in Dodds Township. That September Sarah gave birth to her second baby, Jacob. As she went into labor, “the weather

¹ The next three paragraphs refer to Sarah Thal, “Early Days: The Story of Sarah Thal, Wife of a Jewish Pioneer Farmer, Nelson County, North Dakota 1880-1990, ed. Martha Thal, *The Western States Jewish History* 39 no. 1 (Fall 2006): 74-81. Due to the anecdotal narrative, frequent notes seemed distracting. Additionally, because of the short length of the source all information and quotes should be easy to locate.

turned cold and the wind...found its way through every crack in that poorly built house.” Sarah was moved into the living room and placed next to the stove, her sheets pinned around it to keep her warm. With the help of an attendant, an English woman she could not understand, Sarah fortunately “lived through the first child birth in the prairies.” Yet less than two weeks later, while she was still at home recovering, Sarah suddenly smelled smoke. She went outside to see what was burning and discovered that the stove pipe had set the roof on fire. Using water, milk, and slop, her husband “managed to put the fire out before it destroyed the building,” but the damage was serious enough that they couldn’t stay there. The growing family packed up their belongings and moved once again, this time to Sam Thal’s timber claim at Stump Lake.

Their trials didn’t stop there. Over the next few years, the Thals experienced extreme physical and emotional challenges. In 1884 baby Jacob fell very ill. The closest doctor was in Larimore and, due to a “terrific storm” that left ten feet of snow, reaching him was impossible. On the fourth day of his sickness, he died unattended, an offense for which Sarah “never forgave the prairies.” Two years later Sarah herself became ill. As she grew worse, a doctor was called from the neighboring town of Lakota. Once again, however, a blizzard came and Dr. Jackson didn’t arrive until six days later. Luckily, Sarah survived. Unfortunately, however, these medical misfortunes were followed by several bad harvests. The Thals experienced numerous crop failures. They were forced to sell their backup wheat supply and borrow money from a family member until the next good harvest arrived.

The immense hardship of the Thal family compels one to wonder what, besides their family’s encouragement, drove Solomon and Sarah to engage so unreservedly in such a lifestyle. Certainly many European Jews immigrated to the United States in the late 19th century, but the choice to farm in the largely uninhabited, physically harsh Dakota Territory seems unusual.

When one thinks of turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants, one thinks of New York and Chicago, of the garment industry and tenement buildings. Common images include the Lower East Side, or perhaps another slum in which Jews lived and worked in a tight-knit, traditional, and religiously-observant community. What does not come to mind is a family of farmers claiming a homestead in the Dakota Territory. As it turns out, however, Solomon and Sarah Thal were not entirely alone in their decision. Between 1880 and 1930, and especially before 1910, a small but significant group of Jewish immigrants settled in the rural Upper Midwest. The majority of these settlers, unlike the Thals, were from Russia and Eastern Europe. Most of them did not settle immediately on the prairie. Rather, as the classic Jewish immigrant story goes, they came first to a major urban center in hopes of living out the American dream. Yet many of them were disappointed by the conditions with which they were met and after several months or years, they decided to migrate once again. The Upper Midwestern countryside held the appeal of social and economic freedom that Jews were unable to find in the Old Country American cities. Settlement in this area was made possible in part by the Homestead Act, which offered cheap, easily-attainable land. The support of Jewish institutions (philanthropic associations, synagogues, utopian societies, and individuals), however, was key in providing financial and logistical aid to interested Jews, especially those living in Midwestern cities.²

Unlike the Thals, who stayed on their homestead in the Dakota Territory until at least 1930 despite inhospitable conditions,³ most Jewish pioneers gave up after less than a decade.⁴

² J. Sanford Rikoon, "Jewish Farm Settlements in America's Heartland," in *Rachel Calof's Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, ed. J. Sanford Rikoon, trans. Jacob Calof and Molly Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 105-110.

³ The 1930 United States Federal Census lists a Sarah Thal, born 1856 in Germany, along with a Solomon Thal, born around 1847, also in Germany, currently living in Lakota, North Dakota. All of the information lined up, so it seems extremely safe to say that these names are referring to Sarah and Solomon Thal and that they remained in the area in which they originally settled in 1930. Year: 1930, Census Place, Lakota, Nelson, North Dakota, Roll: 1739, Page: 4A, Enumeration District, 14; Image: 918.0, FHL microfilm: 2341473, accessed through ancestry.com.

Historians of Jewish settlement in the rural Upper Midwest conclude that a combination of internal and external factors led to the widespread abandonment of Jewish farms and homesteads.⁵ Physical challenges, such as the blizzards, lack of easily-accessible medical services, fires, and poor farming conditions reported by Sarah Thal, certainly contributed to settlers' decisions to leave.⁶ But there were also challenges that Jewish settlers faced specifically as Jews. In their state of often extreme isolation – between 1882 and 1910 only about 1,000 Jews filed homestead claims in the Dakota territory and the vast majority of them were not neighbors⁷– Jewish settlers in the rural Upper Midwest did not have access to the formal cultural frameworks or social support networks that they were accustomed to having in their traditional close-knit communities. Because they were a religious and ethnic minority in the area and because they valued their cultural distinctiveness so highly, they worried that if they remained in the rural Upper Midwest they would eventually lose their “Jewishness.”⁸

The existence of both significant physical challenges and strong cultural objectives, and the conflict between the two, raises the following questions: To what degree did Jewish settlers in the rural Upper Midwest assimilate to American culture? To what degree did they succeed in maintaining their Jewishness? Did assimilation necessarily require the abandonment of traditional religious and cultural practices? In exploring closely several oral histories, it becomes clear that in the face of considerable material constraints, Jewish settlers both maintained certain aspects of their Jewishness and adopted various qualities of the rural Upper Midwestern lifestyle.

Historiography and Settlement Patterns

⁴ Linda Mack Schloff, *“And Prairie Dogs Weren’t Kosher”*: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest since 1855 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1996): 49.

⁵ Rikoon, “Jewish Farm Settlement in America’s Heartland,” 128.

⁶ Ibid., 125, and Schloff, *“And Prairie Dogs Weren’t Kosher”*: Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest since 1855, 49.

⁷ Schloff, *“And Prairie Dogs Weren’t Kosher,”* 47-48.

⁸ Rikoon, “Jewish Farm Settlement,” 127-128.

In order to fully understand this argument, it is necessary to place the topic more completely in its historiographic context. Jewish immigration, settlement, and community formation in the United States has been a topic of study among historians for over a century. While scholars have researched a wide range of time periods and places – from colonial Jews to post-Holocaust resettlement – the most work by far has been done on the surge of Eastern European Jews to American cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While this well-developed literature has proven very important in understanding certain historical trends, it by no means addresses the full range of turn-of-the-century Jewish experience in the United States.

In the middle of the 20th century, historians began to take notice of this very fact and started asking themselves what was being left out of the conversation. One of the historical realities that had gone almost completely unexamined was the fact of non-urban Jewish settlement. Scholars recognized that while most Jewish immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th century did indeed settle (and remain, at least for a significant amount of time) in large city centers, this was not a universal occurrence. Surely some Jews settled in smaller cities, in towns, and even in rural areas throughout the United States. The question of the Jewish-American farmer was first addressed in 1943 with Gabriel Davidson's *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society*, an overview of various Jewish agricultural settlements throughout the United States.⁹ The earliest historian to approach the particular topic of Jewish settlers in the rural Upper Midwest was W. Gunther Plaut, a well-known Minneapolis rabbi and scholar. In his 1959 book *The Jews in Minnesota*, Plaut included chapters on the Jewish agricultural utopias at Painted

⁹ Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers and the Story of the Jewish Agricultural Society* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943).

Woods and Devil's Lake in the Dakota Territory.¹⁰ In 1965, both Plaut and historian Lois Fields Schwartz published articles that focused specifically on these colonies.¹¹ These initial works were generally descriptive rather than argument-driven.

A few more studies on Jewish settlement in the rural Upper Midwest sprouted up throughout the next few decades,¹² but not much progress was made until J. Sanford Rikoon's 1995 analytical article, "Jewish Farm Settlements in America's Heartland." Using Devil's Lake settler Rachel Calof as his lens, Rikoon sought to answer two questions: 1. Why certain settlers saw Heartland farming as an appropriate economic and social alternative to the general pattern of urban settlement and 2. Why the vast majority of these settlers discontinued Heartland farming after such a short period of time.¹³ He concluded that "it was on the level of symbol that most would-be farmers conceived of their future lives in rural [Upper Midwestern] areas."¹⁴ Due to prohibitions against Jewish rural land ownership in the Old World, most immigrants had not been farmers for many generations.¹⁵ The majority of them came from the Pale of Settlement, "a region of western Russia designated in 1791 as the area in which all Jews had to reside."¹⁶ To them, therefore, the agrarian lifestyle represented the ideals of personal independence and freedom. Additionally, some immigrants found that their experiences in American cities did not live up to their expectations. For these individuals, the farm symbolized "escape from factory

¹⁰ Gunther Plaut, *The Jews in Minnesota: The First Seventy-five Years* (New York: American Jewish Historical Society, 1959).

¹¹ Gunther Plaut, "Jewish Colonies at Painted Woods and Devil's Lake," *North Dakota History* 32 no. 1 (January 1965): 59-57, and Lois Fields Schwartz, "Early Jewish Agricultural Colonies in North Dakota," *North Dakota History* 32 no.4 (October 1965): 217-232.

¹² Examples include Abraham R. Levy, "Central North Dakota's Jewish Farmers in 1903," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 11 no. 1 (1978), and Uri D. Herscher, *Jewish Agricultural Utopias in America, 1880-1910* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981).

¹³ Rikoon, "American Jewish Settlement," 105, 125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129n6.

bosses, crowded apartments, and urban anti-Semitism.”¹⁷ Rikoon also noted the important role of Jewish business leaders, philanthropic agencies, and congregations in providing a romantic, assimilationist ideology as well as necessary monetary assistance. Without them, Rikoon argues, there would have been far fewer rural settlers.¹⁸

As for the generally short-lived nature of the settlements, Rikoon deduced that to preserve their “Jewishness,” settlers moved to areas in which they were less isolated from one another and therefore could more easily maintain their particular cultural heritage.¹⁹ He conceded that the harsh physical conditions of the northern prairie certainly played a role in abandonment, but argued that Jewish settlers’ difficulties went beyond the crop failures, blizzards, and fires that affected pioneers of all ethnicities. Based on statistics on farm longevity and tenure, “the Jewish farm experience makes a rather miserable showing against other ethnic groups in the Midwest.”²⁰ Rikoon attributed this reality to a lack of agricultural experience, poor plot choice, and low capital.²¹ Yet although these external conditions challenged the physical survival of settlers, it was their threat to Jewish religious and cultural viability that truly jeopardized the existence of Jewish settlements. The nature of the homesteading experience, Rikoon argued, was not compatible with the maintenance of a traditional Jewish lifestyle.

The biggest challenge was that of isolation.²² Although situations certainly varied and some settlements had more Jews than others, the vast majority of communities in the area included only a few Jewish families who were often located miles apart. The plat map below, courtesy of Renell Silver, shows a section of Bowman County in what is now southwestern North Dakota.

¹⁷ Rikoon, “American Jewish Settlement,” 109.

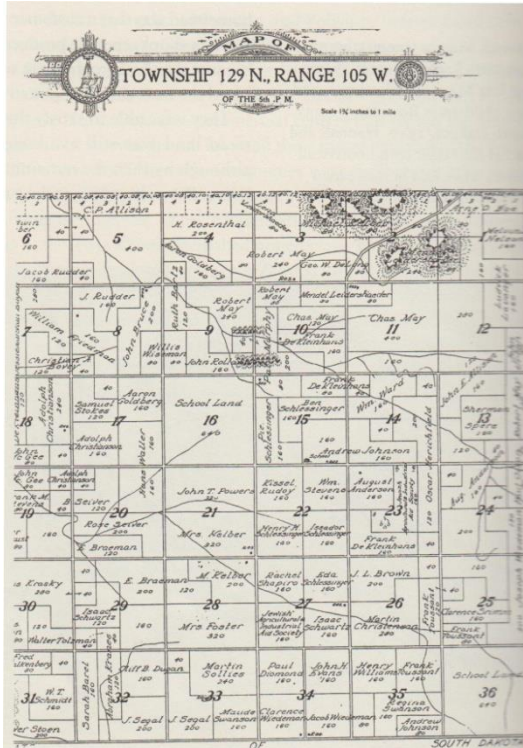
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 109-110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

²² *Ibid.*, 127



This community seems to contain a relatively high percentage of Jewish-owned homesteads (names like Aaron Goldberg, William Friedman, and Jacob Wiedeman almost surely refer to Jewish settlers), but clearly they are still in the minority, and considering that each land plot contained 160 acres, they were also quite remote. Even in Jewish utopian communities, numbers remained very low. Devil's Lake, for example, had about 40 families at its height in 1894.²³ Both extreme isolation from other Jewish settlers (the situation of the average pioneer) and

relative isolation from larger Jewish communities (the case for utopian settlements) proved troublesome for the maintenance of important cultural and religious customs. Rikoon claimed that two of the most essential aspects of Jewish tradition – religious education and endogamous marriage – were made difficult, if not impossible, in these small, isolated settlements. Faced with the prospect of having to relinquish such entrenched and (and, in some sense, sacred) practices, many families chose to leave the homestead for larger towns or cities where such opportunities were more readily available.²⁴

Since the publication of Rikoon's article, the historical conversation on this topic has been almost nonexistent. The one substantial work in the past two decades has been historian Linda Mack Schloff's 1996 monograph, *And Prairie Dogs Weren't Kosher": Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest Since 1855*. Schloff centered on the same issues as Rikoon: the reasons for which

²³ Rikoon, "Jewish Farm Settlements," 117-118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

Jews came to the rural Upper Midwest and the reasons for which they left. Schloff agreed that the physical constraints and their consequences on the ability to maintain Jewishness drove most settlers away after only a few short years. Yet Schloff added a very important contribution by arguing that farming was crucial in the assimilation and Americanization process of Jewish settlers. She claimed that it “stamped those who undertook it as genuine American pioneers. They underwent the full range of settler experiences as they created homes and farms and coped with natural disasters, childbirth, and illness.”²⁵ Farming, she concluded, “imparted some sink-or-swim lessons in how to become Americans.”²⁶ Furthermore, Schloff suggested that the experience allowed Jewish settlers to interact with a variety of different ethnic groups with whom they carried out cultural sharing.

This extensive, detailed, and somewhat complex backdrop leads informs the thesis of this paper.²⁷ Schloff’s conclusion about the assimilation of Jewish settlers has had a particularly significant role in the creation of its argument, which takes Schloff’s claim one step further, exploring the ways in which assimilation converged with the maintenance of Jewish cultural distinctiveness. A detailed examination of the oral histories of three Jewish pioneer women who

²⁵ Schloff, “*And Prairie Dogs Weren’t Kosher*,” 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁷ It is important that I note the role that another field’s historiography played in the creation of my thesis and, therefore, the direction of my paper. In the beginning stages of this process, I worked with the study of Norwegian settlement patterns in the rural Upper Midwest in the 19th century to explore how historians were understood different ethnic group in a similar time and place. These scholars’ focus on assimilation and the creation of a Norwegian-American culture encouraged me to engage related concepts in my own work. While the role of this historiography was certainly important in directing my ideas, however, the historiography of the rural Upper Midwestern Jewish experience is ultimately more relevant to my research and important to understanding the topic at hand. The following sources on Norwegian settlement were key in the earlier stages of this project: Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Jon Gjerde and Carlton C. Qualey, *Norwegians in Minnesota, The People of Minnesota*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002), and Lloyd A. Svendsbye, *I paid all my debts...A Norwegian-American Immigrant Saga of Life on the Prairie of North Dakota*, (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009.)

lived in the rural Upper Midwest between 1880 and 1910 leads to the following statement: Two components of daily life – religious observance and inter-ethnic interactions – demonstrate the ways in which Jewish settlers preserved their religious identity in the face of considerable material constraints on their “Jewishness.” The fact that they maintained their cultural distinctiveness while simultaneously assimilating to a new environment resulted in the creation of a short-lived yet unique hybrid culture specific to their experience.

Primary Source Analysis

There are very few primary sources on this topic. Besides for a plat map, a few newspaper clippings, and some photographs, oral histories provide the only real portal into the world of Jewish farmers of the Upper Midwest. Even these first-hand accounts, however, are extremely limited. The best-known example is the memoir of Rachel Calof, whose ninety pages reveal significant information and insights.²⁸ Yet Calof lived in Devil’s Lake, and while utopian Jewish settlements are interesting and important, this paper concentrates on the experiences of the average Jewish settler: the pioneer who lived isolated from any Jewish community, save perhaps a few other families. For this reason, analysis is focused on the voices of three Jewish women – Anne Rosen, Sophie Trupin, and Sarah Thal – who lived as typical farmers on homesteads in what is now North Dakota between the years of 1880 and 1910. One must be aware of and keep in mind the fact that all three of these women’s accounts are edited. Nonetheless, their perspectives are evident and the insights they provide are invaluable.

Anne Rosen was born in North Dakota in either 1901 or 1902 to Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Her father, Samuel Labovich, and his brothers, Israel, Esidor, Abraham, and his

²⁸ See Rachel Calof, *Rachel Calof’s Story: Jewish Homesteader on the Northern Plains*, ed. J. Sanford Rikoon, trans. Jacob Calof and Molly Shaw (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

sister, Sarah, left Yasse, Romania in 1887 or 1888 and went to Montreal, Canada. In her account, Anne does not say when or why they came to the United States, simply that the American government gave each family member a quarter section of land (160 acres) in North Dakota, along with a few domestic animals.²⁹ Anne lived on her father's homestead, surrounded by siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles located on neighboring plots, until 1907 when her family sold the farm.³⁰ Therefore, in this account Anne is describing events that happened when she was at most five or six years old, some seventy years after the fact.³¹ While she admits at one point that, "I was very young and not aware of many things,"³² and while memory can be somewhat unreliable, this account is still a rich source that must be explored, albeit with a critical eye.

Sophie Trupin was born in Seltz, Russia in 1903 and arrived in the United States in 1908.³³ She and her mother, sister, and brothers met her father in North Dakota where he had already built a home.³⁴ Like Anne, therefore, Sophie was quite young when she experienced many of the events that she describes in her account. Sophie does not say how long she lived on the farm or when she left. The fact that she writes in so much detail, however, especially about religious life on the prairie, suggests that perhaps her family stayed in the area for some time.³⁵ It is also

²⁹ Anne Rosen, "Events on the Farm in North Dakota as I Remember Them," Reprinted in the Inventory Notes for Collection ID: 000052 of the North Dakota Jewish Project, 1975. Held at the Upper Midwest Jewish Archives.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ There's no information as to when Anne wrote her account. We know only that her collection was filed in 1975. Therefore, we can gather that she could not have been older than about 75, but she could have written the account many years before her collection was filed.

³² Rosen, "Events on the Farm," 5.

³³ Andrea Kalinowski, "Sophie Trupin," *Stories Untold: Jewish Pioneer Women 1850-1910*, Online Exhibition from the Palace of the Governors and New Mexican History Museum.

³⁴ Sophie Trupin, "Sophie's Quilt: The Story of the North Dakota Jewish Adventure of Sophie Trupin: As Printed on the Giant Quilt Display at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage for the Jewish Life in the American West Exhibition, June 21, 2002 through January, 20, 2003, Los Angeles, California," *Western States Jewish History* 34 no. 4 (Summer 2002): 309.

³⁵ I was unable to find any information about Sophie or her family on ancestry.com.

unclear when Sophie wrote her account.³⁶ Despite these uncertainties, however, Sophie's story provides very useful information specifically about religious observance among Jewish settlers.

As described in the introduction, Sarah Thal arrived with her husband, Solomon, and baby daughter, Elsie, in the Dakota Territory in the early 1880s. After moving around several times, the family finally settled on a homestead in Dodds Township near Lakota.³⁷ Because Sarah was already grown when she arrived on the northern prairie and because, as mentioned earlier, she remained in the area for such a long period of time, her memoir can be seen as the most accurate and reliable of the three. It is also the longest and most detailed account by far.

Religious Observance

Anne, Sophie, and Sarah all discuss, albeit to varying extents, their experiences of Jewish religious observance in the rural Upper Midwest. Within this subject, two main topics arise: keeping kosher and Jewish holidays. These women's experiences illustrate the maintenance of certain religious practices and the sacrifice that extreme isolation required of others. They also show the range of degrees to which settlers chose to remain observant.

Keeping kosher

Keeping kosher, or following Jewish dietary laws, is one of the most central parts of Jewish religious and cultural tradition. How did the nature of the homesteading experience affect the maintenance of this vital practice? How did Jewish settlers respond to the challenge of isolation?

³⁶ All we know is that Sophie's story was featured in an exhibition at the Ultry Museum of Western Heritage from June 2002 to January 2003.

³⁷ Thal, "Early Days: The Story of Sarah Thal, Wide of a Jewish Pioneer Farmer, Nelson County, North Dakota 1880-1900," 78, 80.

Anne's account illustrates one possibility. She reports that every winter a shochet would slaughter a cow.³⁸ A shochet is a person who is educated and trained in the proper slaughtering of animals according to the provisions of Jewish law.³⁹ It is clear, then, that Anne's family was observant enough to continue following this important Jewish dietary restriction. Anne also reports that, "we had chicken, wild game, and fish in the summer."⁴⁰ Both poultry and most fish are acceptable based on Jewish dietary law.⁴¹ In Anne's discussion of food on the homestead, she makes no mention of pigs or of eating pork. This is not to say that the farm didn't contain pigs or that her family never ate pork. However, because she refers specifically to other livestock they ate, and because they were observant enough to ritually slaughter the cow, it is fairly safe to assume that pigs were not a part of the Labovichs' diet. The fact that Anne says very little about kosher practices suggests that this may not have been at the center of the Labovichs' lives. Although she was young at the time, she manages to remember a variety of other events, including the vegetable garden, numerous blizzards, and the hunting practices of her brothers. Had keeping kosher been one of the most important aspects of daily life, it is likely that Anne would have highlighted it more. Still, it is significant that the Labovichs made a concerted effort to maintain this religious observance.

Sophie Trupin gives more weight to the kosher experience on the prairies. She writes: "My mother kept a kosher home, observing every holiday. This was never easy, but here it was even harder than it had been in the Old Country. There was no kosher meat, and hard-working men needed nourishment, so my father learned to slaughter fowl in the prescribed way. He had a

³⁸ Rosen, "Events on the Farm," 2.

³⁹ "Shohet," in *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia*, 5th ed, ed. Geoffrey Wigodor and Cecil Roth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977): 1746.

⁴⁰ Rosen, "Events on the Farm," 2.

⁴¹ This information is from my personal knowledge.

special ritual knife for this purpose and made a special prayer.”⁴² Sophie doesn’t explain why there was no kosher meat, but based on what is known about rural Upper Midwestern Jewish settlement patterns, one can assume that it was due to extreme isolation from appropriate Jewish services (such as kosher butchers). In their traditional tight-knit Jewish community in the Old Country, kosher meat was likely widely available. Here, without such access, the Trupins were forced to take matters into their own hands. Such resourcefulness and flexibility allowed the Trupins to both maintain Jewish dietary restrictions and satisfy the physical requirements of their situation. Their decision to make do with what they had is significant. They could have decided that the constraints were too great, choosing instead to give up their traditional dietary practices. The fact that they did not do so illustrates their intention to maintain this aspect of their Jewishness despite material challenges.

Sarah Thal’s experience deviates from both Anne’s and Sophie’s in that she chose to discontinue her observance of Jewish dietary restrictions. She recounts that, “one day Mr. Mendelson brought in a crate of pork and asked me, a piously reared Jewess, to cook it. In time I consented. However, I never forgot my religious teachings. I did, however, discard the dietary laws and practices, but to this day I observe the Passover and Yom Kipper (the Day of Atonement).”⁴³ This passage shows that Sarah retained certain aspects of her religion while abandoning others. Though she chose to discontinue the orthodox tradition of keeping kosher, she did not give up her religious observance entirely. It seems that she valued her spiritual upbringing and had a desire to continue some of the more occasional customs.

⁴² Trupin, “Sophie’s Quilt: The Story of the North Dakota Jewish Adventure of Sophie Trupin,” 309-310.

⁴³ Thal, “Early Days,” 76.

Mr. Mendelson's role in this experience may be of some significance. Sol Mendelson, the manager of Sam Thal's farm, was almost certainly also Jewish,⁴⁴ yet he asked Sarah to prepare pork. This request suggests that Sol had already given up on being kosher before Sarah and Solomon's arrival. The fact that Sarah "consented in time" implies that there may have been some pressure from Sol to discontinue the practice. This interaction suggests that decisions surrounding how much Jewishness one would maintain were not simple and may also have been influenced by the practices of other Jews in the community.

Jewish Holidays

Holidays are at the center of any religion. In Judaism, Shabbat – the Sabbath, which begins on Friday at sundown and continues until Saturday at sundown – is considered the most important religious holiday, though among less orthodox Jews it is often the least celebrated. The High Holy Days – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – are considered most holy; often the least observant Jews will attend services only for these two holidays.⁴⁵ How did Jewish settlers' physical isolation affect the observance of Jewish holidays? Namely, how did pioneers celebrate community-based holidays without traditional Jewish communities?

Anne's situation differed from that of either Sophie or Sarah in that she both lived in very close proximity to a number of other Jews and in that these other Jews were her family members: She recalls that, "they were about two miles apart – to the left of us was uncle Abraham's farm

⁴⁴ On ancestry.com I was able to find the 1923 passport application of a Ralph Waldo Mendelson, born 1888, living in Lakota, North Dakota. He listed his father as S. R. Mendelson, born in Russia. S.R. Mendelson almost certainly refers to Sol Mendelson; his location matches that of the Thals, his birth date makes sense, and very few Mendelsons existed in North Dakota at this point) I wasn't even able to find a record of Sol himself). Given the fact that he was born in Russia and that his last name is traditionally Jewish, I believe it is safe to assume that Sol Mendelson was, indeed, Jewish. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington D.C., *Passport Applications, January 2, 1906 - March 31, 1925*, Collection Number: *ARC Identifier 583830 / MLR Number A1 534*, NARA Series: *M1490*, Roll #: *2168*, accessed through ancestry.com

⁴⁵ This information is from personal knowledge.

and next to his, uncle Israel's."⁴⁶ This relative nearness made possible frequent meetings and so "on Saturdays, the brothers would congregate in one of the homes and they would hold services and prayers during the day...Every week, the services were held at someone else's home."⁴⁷

Although they were not able to attend synagogue on Shabbat, as Jews traditionally do, Anne's family was able to conduct their own make-shift services. In emulating traditional religious practices as closely as possible given their environment, they retained important aspects of their Jewishness, while making certain necessary sacrifices. In this way, they created a new religious tradition specific to their situation.

Sophie gives considerable attention to her experience with Jewish holidays. She describes in detail her family's observance of both Shabbat and the High Holy Days. Sophie recalls:

Our family never worked on the Sabbath. There was nothing unusual about this in the Old World; any other mode of living was unthinkable. The Sabbath was considered even holier than any of the major holidays. Thus it was on the Sabbath day, in any season, my father and brothers devoted themselves to the study of Holy Writ. There was no synagogue or *minyan* of ten, but no matter. Each morning the *tefillen* was wound about the arm, and the forehead was adorned with the small black box containing the ancient prayer offered up to God, as it had been for centuries.⁴⁸

Clearly, Sophie's family took Shabbat very seriously. They sustained all rituals associated with the holiday, including the wearing of ceremonial garb (the *tefillen*), prayer, and cessation from work. It seems that for the Trupins, Shabbat was a spiritual event that must be respected and upheld at all costs. Sophie's account also suggests that there was a significant ritual aspect to the celebration of the Sabbath. The fact that working on Shabbat was "unthinkable" in the Old World likely influenced the Trupins' desire and decision to uphold such practices in their new environment. Similarly, because Jews had observed this holiday every week for centuries,

⁴⁶ Rosen, "Events on the Farm," 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴⁸ Trupin, "Sophie's Quilt," 311.

discontinuing such a ritual probably seemed nearly impossible; perhaps such a possibility didn't even enter the family's mind. The only custom the Trupins could not maintain was that of attending synagogue. They were so isolated from other Jews that they could not even hold a minyan, a meeting of ten adult Jewish males required for communal prayer⁴⁹. Without access to a temple, the Trupins did as Anne's family: they made do with what they had. Sophie's account of Shabbat leaves the historian with one question: How did a weekly cessation of work affect the Trupins' livelihood? Life on a farm requires constant work; it is simply not possible to neglect livestock for a full twenty-four hours. Did one of the Trupins' neighbors milk the cows on Shabbat? Did they hire a worker to do so? Due to the lack of primary sources, this question will have to go unanswered, at least for now.

Sophie's account of the High Holy Days is especially illuminating, not only for understanding the Trupins, but for understanding the general Jewish pioneer experience. She remembers that

For the Day of the Atonement, Yom Kippur, something special had to be done. Even those Jews who had not spent their Sabbaths in rest and study and contemplation were compelled to stop and remember their training. And so it came about that on the day preceding Yom Kipper all the Jewish homesteaders, who were scattered over many miles, gathered their families and started on a journey to a common meeting place in order to observe the holiest day of the year. The farmhouse that could accommodate the most worshippers was the house of the Weinbergs. It was to be our *shul*.⁵⁰

First of all, Sophie provides some important information on other Jewish settlers in the area. In referring to "those Jews who had not spent their Sabbaths in rest and study and contemplation," she affirms that she knew other families who were not as observant as hers; this in turn suggests that there was a range of religious observance among nearby settlers. However, the fact that even these less observant Jews "were compelled to stop and remember their training" implies that even those Jewish farmers who had discarded some practices remained committed to observing

⁴⁹ "Minyan," in *The New Standard Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1347.

⁵⁰ Trupin, "Sophie's Quilt," 311.

the most vital religious holiday. Sarah's continued observance of Passover and Yom Kippur despite her abandonment of Jewish dietary restrictions confirms this hypothesis.⁵¹ Additionally, this passage illustrates the way in which Jewish settlers managed to create a religious community despite extreme isolation. Although they were "scattered over many miles," the Trupins and their fellow Jewish homesteaders chose to gather together and create an improvised synagogue ("it was to be our *shul*").⁵² Of course, these gatherings happened very infrequently. Yet the important point is that these settlers both aimed to and succeeded in retaining a level of religious and cultural community, a level of Jewishness, despite the constraints of their physical environment.

Examinations of Anne, Sophie, and Sarah's accounts clearly demonstrate that Jewish settlers in the rural Upper Midwest both sought and accomplished the maintenance of certain vital aspects of Jewish religious observance despite physical constraints. Their extreme isolation, however, did require them to deviate from the some practices, such as attending synagogue on Shabbat and having a rabbi bless the meat. The compromises and improvisations they made – abandoning dietary restrictions, learning to become shochets, and forming make-shift synagogues, among others – were the foundations of a new identity. They were both Jews and rural Americans. In assimilating *and* retaining their "Jewishness," they created a new culture of rural Upper Midwestern Jews.

Inter-Ethnic Interaction

For a deeper understanding of the nature of this hybrid identity and culture, it is important to look at another aspect of these pioneers' daily lives: interactions with settlers of other ethnicities.

⁵¹ Thal, "Early Days," 76.

⁵² "Shul" is the Yiddish word for a synagogue.

For Anne and Sarah, and likely for many other Jewish homesteaders, inter-ethnic interaction occurred principally in their contact with nearby settlers.

Despite the fact that there was 160 acres of land between homestead claims, settlers still had neighbors with whom they interacted. Many of these neighbors were not Jewish. Anne recalls that, “to the right of us was Swernson, and from there on Hillman’s, Schroeder, Abercrombie, et al.”⁵³ Although one can’t know the ethnicity or religion of these families – the lack of information makes such knowledge impossible – several of these names do not sound traditionally Jewish or Eastern European (“Swernson” suggests Scandinavian roots and “Abercrombie” is often a British name). Anne does not discuss interacting with these neighbors, but the fact that she mentions them at all, and especially the fact that she remembers them by name, suggests that her family had some level of contact with them.

Sarah discusses her non-Jewish neighbors in much more detail. This does not mean that she necessarily had more contact with them. Although this is certainly a possibility (due to community and individual variation), it is just as likely that she simply remembered and/or chose to include more details. Sarah recalls that when her family was forced to stay on the Sam Thal farm after their fire, “the Mahoney Brothers, Mike and Jerry, were our only neighbors. They were wood cutters. I cooked their dinners for them and baked their bread all through the winter. In the spring they offered me \$5.00 for my work. I refused to take more than \$3.00 and felt fully paid at that. We have laughed over this a good many times since.”⁵⁴ This anecdote shows that Sarah not only interacted but formed friends with her fellow farmers. The fact that she “baked their bread all through the winter” suggests that she had regular contact with Mike and Jerry.

⁵³ Rosen, “Events on the Farm,” 1-2.

⁵⁴ Thal, “Early Days,” 79.

Their shared laughter illustrates their comfort with and affinity for one another. Finally, “a good many times since” suggests that Sarah and Solomon stayed in touch with the Mahoney Brothers after their move back home. Again, one cannot be sure that the Mahoneys were gentiles, but their last name strongly suggests Irish or Scottish heritage. Simply engaging in a relationship that crosses ethnic and religious divides implies an involvement in and assimilation to the wider community.

Another striking example of inter-ethnic interaction is Sarah’s relationship with Mrs. Stratton, a neighbor and friend from whom she “learned to make citron and green tomato pickles and cakes and pies” and who she in turn taught “how to make coffee cake, potato salad, cottage cheese, noodles, etc.”⁵⁵ It seems that Mrs. Stratton, most likely a woman of British heritage, taught Sarah how to make a few of her traditional foods while Sarah did the same for her.⁵⁶ This act of cultural sharing was key in the creation not only of bonds between Jews and non-Jews, but of a new hybrid culture. One can imagine that Sarah began making traditional British foods at home, and that Mrs. Stratton incorporated German Jewish recipes into her cooking. Though it may seem arbitrary, the broadening of one’s diet to include foods of other ethnicities can be a sign of the birth of an acquired culture, one that is defined by the integration of multiple innate cultures. The exchange of recipes is representative of the broader mixing that evidently occurred on the prairie.

Throughout her memoir, Sarah refers to various other (assumedly) inter-ethnic interactions: She was close friends with Mr. and Mrs. Gutting, received help milking her cows from Mrs.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁶ As someone of both German and Jewish heritage I can confirm that potato salad and cottage cheese are common dishes. Yum.

Fahey, and attended barn dances with the Dougherty boys.⁵⁷ Her apparently frequent contact with nearby non-Jewish settlers suggests a deep level of engagement in the multi-ethnic community that was the rural Upper Midwest. Rather than isolate herself from those of different backgrounds, Sarah chose to engage with them. This decision is important in and of itself; the fact that she became friends with some of her non-Jewish neighbors, thereby exchanging both laughter and customs, is even more significant.

It is important to note that Sophie makes no mention of interaction with anyone other than her family members and the Jewish settlers with whom she attended Yom Kippur services. This may indicate several possibilities. Perhaps the Trupins were so isolated that they had no neighbors whatsoever, Jewish or otherwise. Or maybe they purposely chose not to have contact with gentiles. What is most likely, however, is that the Trupins experienced inter-ethnic interactions but that Sophie didn't include these experiences in her account, either because she was too young to remember them, or because they've been removed by the editor. Based on Anne and Sarah's reports, one can imagine that Sophie and her family did, indeed, have some neighbors of other ethnicities with whom they came in contact, if not befriended.

Conclusion

Despite the intense physical hardships detailed at the beginning of this essay and recounted (at least to some degree) by all three settlers, Anne Rosen, Sophie Trupin, and Sarah Thal survived to tell their stories of life as Jewish farmers in the Upper Midwest. Furthermore, despite the constraint of extreme isolation, all three women preserved at least certain aspects of traditional religious observance. Yet at the same time as they negotiated their Jewishness, they were in the

⁵⁷ Thal, "Early Days," 80, 83, 85.

process of engaging with and assimilating to their new surroundings. This assimilation/preservation dynamic gave birth to a hybrid culture specific to the Jewish experience of the rural Upper Midwest between 1880 and 1910. Though one can't assume that these three accounts are representative of every Jewish settler, they do provide invaluable insight into the experiences of an explored population.

While this essay does some important work, there is still a lot more to be done. One interesting direction could be a comparison of Jewish utopian communities – Devil's Lake and Painted Woods – with the average, independent Jewish settler like the ones this paper examined. How did someone like Rachel Calof's experience differ from that of Anne Rosen, Sophie Trupin, or Sarah Thal? What were the effects of a larger, more accessible Jewish community on religious observance and inter-ethnic interaction?

Perhaps the most obvious and necessary next step is a study of women's roles in the Upper Midwestern Jewish experience. The reason that this paper engages exclusively women's voices is that the only oral histories on this subject are written by female settlers.⁵⁸ While sources are limited in general, perhaps this imbalance is significant. In any case it is important to explore more explicitly the experience of female settlers *as women*. This essay did not address the topic because it would not have been able to do it justice. For one thing, it is too complex an issue to handle effectively in the span of a few pages. Additionally, none of the women refer explicitly to the ways in which they experienced the prairie due to their femaleness; such self-reflective sources almost certainly don't exist. However, comparing the diaries of a Norwegian woman and a Jewish woman living in a similar time and setting could help one understand how culture of

⁵⁸ I am willing to admit that I may have missed something here, but I spent many hours (including several with reference librarians) looking for primary sources and never came across any from a male perspective.

origin impacted women's roles. Similarly, comparing a first-generation Jewish woman and a second-generation Jewish woman living in the same community at the same time could inform understanding of how traditional roles for Jewish women changed in the new environment. But that is an undertaking for a different student, or at least a different essay.

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