

TRIBUTARIES

JOURNAL OF THE
**Alabama
Folklife
Association**

17

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ON THE COVER

Jump Start quilt made by Earamichia Brown (front cover) and ... *and the flowers bloomed* quilt made by Tony Jean Dickerson (back cover), featured in the *Soul of Zora: A Literary Legacy through Quilts* exhibit honoring the life and work of Zora Neale Hurston | *Courtesy of Zanice Bond and Tony Jean Dickerson*

DESIGNED BY Valerie Downes

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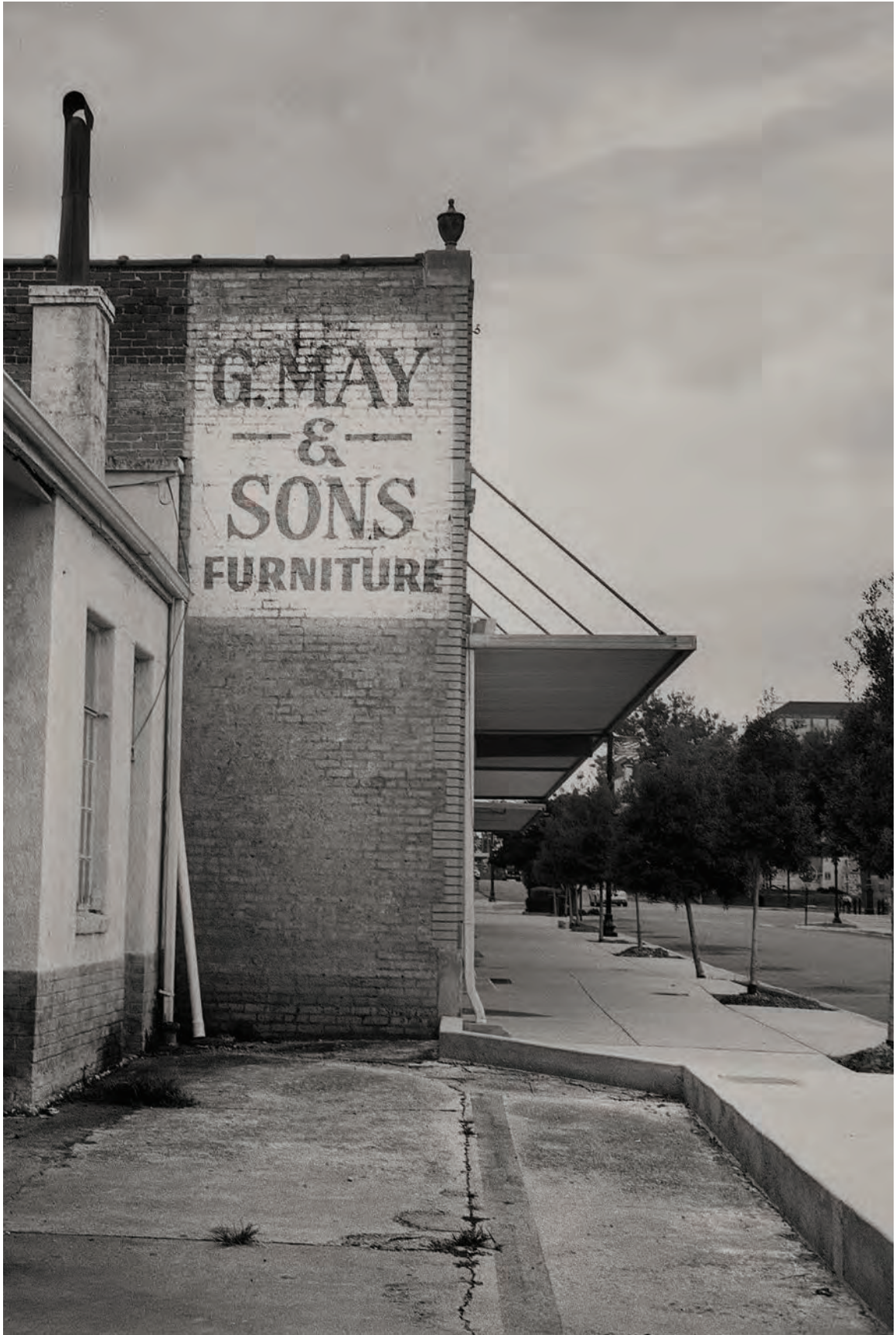
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G. MAY
— & —
SONS
FURNITURE

A River of Time

Jewish Memory Practices in Rural Alabama

DANIEL J. LEVINE

On a bright winter day, Hamm takes [her son] Chad to stand over the markers for her grandparents and shows him that rocks have been left on the headstones: a sign in Jewish cemeteries that loved ones have visited. She tells Chad, “Our faith is as strong as these rocks.”

ROY HOFFMANN, *ALABAMA AFTERNOONS* (2011)⁶³

In 1892, Wolf Israel opened a furniture and clothing store in what is now West Blocton, Alabama, some thirty miles east of Tuscaloosa. Formally incorporated in 1901, West Blocton had all the makings of a boomtown, supplying coal and coke to steel mills in Birmingham and Bessemer. In 1903, the town got its first telephones and built its first public school. By 1920, its main street boasted some sixty businesses and served a regional population of about 12,000.⁶⁴

A native of Kobryn — then a district town in imperial Russia, now in western Belarus — Israel first came to rural Alabama as an itinerant peddler in 1884.⁶⁵ He returned to Kobryn two years later to start a timber business. That business failed, however, and in 1888 he was back in Alabama — this time, with his family in tow. He was, it seems, deeply pious. With eldest son Samuel Baer and neighbor John Krenzman, Wolf founded the town’s first and only synagogue, or *shul* — Congregation *Ah Goodies Ah Chem* — in 1905.*

* That is, *אגודת תדריג* — “the league/association of brothers,” as rendered by the congregation’s founders. While likely faithful to the way Wolf would have pronounced the name, the transliteration makes for awkward reading. Following contemporary practices, I will render the name as *Agudas Ahim* from here on.

Regular Sabbath services were held until about the First World War, with High Holiday and Passover services continuing irregularly into the 1930s.

For all its growth, West Blocton might seem a far cry from Kobryn — the latter, a town of about 10,000, of whom some seventy percent were Jews. The community was then at least three centuries old. Its age and relative prosperity could be seen in the grandeur of Kobryn’s Great Synagogue — a vaulting brick structure adorned with brightly-painted murals.⁶⁶

By contrast, the West Blocton *shul* was a modest affair: a two-room, wood-framed structure. Even so, it seems to have incorporated some old-world touches and sensibilities. Onetime parishioner Elmo Ellis Israel recalled the colorful paintwork that adorned its small sanctuary — “yellow, brown, green, smokey gray;” further, that space was set aside for women who wished to sit apart during prayer — but that only ‘old-timers’ made use of it.⁶⁷



The only known image of *Ah Goodies Ah Chem* shul in West Blocton, AL, behind Frank and Libby Jean Israel, circa 1914 (Courtesy of Elmo Israel Ellis and published in Blocton: The History of an Alabama Coal Mining Town by Charles Edward Adams, University of Alabama Press, 2012)

2015, cared for by friends and former neighbors. The proceeds of that sale were donated to the University of Alabama, where an undergraduate Jewish Studies scholarship fund was established.⁶⁹ That was how I first learned about the *shul*, and why I wished to know more about the community that built it.

For many decades, small, rural Jewish communities like West Blocton remained underrepresented in historical and literary accounts of American Jewish life. These centered on large cities, particularly in the Northeast and Midwest. New York enjoyed pride of place here, initially with novels like Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) and Mike Gold’s *Jews without Money* (1930), and later with a range of historical and/or reflective works: Stephen Birmingham’s *Our Crowd* (1967), Irving Howe’s *World of*

Our Fathers (1976), Alfred Kazin's *New York Jew* (1978), and Deborah Dash Moore's *At Home in America* (1981).

To be sure, the movement of Jews to the 'boomtowns' of the post-Civil War South and West was recognized — as were Jewish communities that predated the 1880s. But those stories remained secondary.⁷⁰ Even now, much of the published material on the Jews of West Blocton owes its existence to a chance celebrity connection: several of Wolf's grandchildren had long, successful careers in commercial radio. One attained national celebrity as the "Voice of the Yankees" — Mel Allen — first hired by CBS Radio New York in 1939.⁷¹ Much of what appears here draws on biographical accounts written about Allen, or by him.

Systematic historical writing would begin to fill in these gaps in the late 1990s.⁷² In broad terms, such writing locates Jewish migration to the American South and West within three interconnected "master narratives." The first follows what historian Deborah Weiner has aptly called the "peddler-to-merchant paradigm" — immigrants from Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia's "Pale of Settlement" seeking opportunity and freedom from persecution.⁷³ Reconstruction, westward expansion, and rapid industrialization created unprecedented demands for labor in the US, while economic, political, and demographic upheaval at the frontiers of Central and Eastern Europe provided ample incentive to brave the journey.

Similarities between these frontiers meant that some immigrants possessed skills and community networks that could be reproduced in the US — in some cases, to greater effect and at greater scale.⁷⁴ In both Eastern and Central Europe, and the American South and West, rapidly-expanding



Rendering of Ah Goodies Ah Chem shul, West Blocton, AL (Courtesy of University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections)

Competition and overcrowding in large industrial cities induced many to seek their fortunes farther afield ... Small-scale family and community credit networks placed retail, family-run businesses within reach, while slowly expanding rail networks created a window of opportunity, which such businesses could fill.

states competed for access to land and primary resources. Whole populations were uprooted and replaced — impelled by a mix of ostensibly “spontaneous” ethnic-racial violence and calculated policy.⁷⁵

Once in the US, competition and overcrowding in large industrial cities induced many to seek their fortunes farther afield. While excluded from formal banks, small-scale family and community credit networks placed retail, family-run businesses within reach, while slowly expanding rail networks created a window of opportunity, which such businesses could fill. Similar stories can be (or have been) told about many other such communities: Selma, Huntsville, Dothan, and Bessemer in Alabama; Hattiesburg, Port Gibson, and Brookhaven in Mississippi; Devil’s Lake, North Dakota and Bozeman, Montana.⁷⁶ Nor were Jews the only immigrant group to take up these opportunities.

While a full consideration of the similarities and differences between the American and European frontiers exceeds the present discussion, one major difference bears emphasizing. While Jews certainly suffered from antisemitism in the American context, they were not the primary targets or objects of the violence described above. In the ‘bloodlands’ of Central and Eastern Europe, of course, they were.⁷⁷

That difference may explain a second narrative thread in historical accounts of communities like *Agudas Ahim*: ambivalence regarding both antisemitism and anti-black racism. Both are acknowledged — the question is *how* they are. As regards antisemitism, awareness was tempered with a kind of relief — even a sense of gratitude — for the fact that things were not a great deal worse. Regarding anti-black racism, the emphasis is often on personal acts of decency, alongside a larger sense of helplessness or complicity. Violence against African Americans seems to have struck familiar chords with many Jewish immigrants. But those feelings may have informed a kind of ethnic, small-community *realpolitik*. Violence against pariah communities, such thinking might hold, was simply a fact of life; if one happened to be in a place where that violence was directed primarily at others, well — such was what passed for luck. If there was a sense of guilt, perhaps it followed from this: that one’s own relative peace is being ‘paid for’ by another.

Some might, of course, dream of a world without any such violence; or



pray for it, or even agitate for it. But one did so — if one did so — the way that some Jews prayed for the coming of the Messiah: quietly, and without definite expectations. Stella Suberman, author of *The Jew Store* (1998), described her immigrant father’s ambivalence regarding Jim Crow in such terms: “What he did was keep quiet about it, and do the best he could do.”⁷⁸

A third — smaller, and more newly-emergent — narrative thread follows what happens after the economic ‘boom’ is over — in the decades following the great expansions described above. Here, the focus is on challenges faced by small, “remainder” communities.⁷⁹ These include handfuls of individuals and families — such as Sarah Hamm and her son, quoted in the epigraph above — facing a river of time and forgetfulness.⁸⁰

Such efforts are heroic, in the classical sense: they place individuals and communities before all-but-insuperable external forces. In the present context, two sets of such forces bear consideration.

The first carries forward the historical-economic narrative set out above. The window of opportunity that sustained small, family-owned retail businesses along rural main streets closed long ago. A latter-day Wolf Israel would have to compete against

Main Street, West Blocton, AL, circa 1934
(Courtesy of Library of Congress)

a growing host of discount chains and big box retailers. The numbers here speak for themselves. While never especially large, the Jewish community in Alabama has contracted considerably over the past century: from a high of some 13,000 in 1927 to some 9,000. This, even as the overall population of the state has nearly doubled. Its distribution has also shifted away from small towns. Some 90% of the state's Jewish residents now live in its four largest cities: Birmingham, Montgomery, Huntsville, or Mobile.⁸¹

Viewed regionally, the shift is even more marked—though it tells a somewhat different story. Overall numbers of Jews in the American South and West have grown considerably over the past century, both in relative and absolute terms. But that growth centers on large metropolitan areas — “global cities,” like Atlanta, Houston, Miami, or New Orleans.⁸² Alabama has no cities of comparable scale. What appears regionally as a demographic shift from country to city looks locally like a story of decline and disappearance: the gradual “emptying out” of the countryside.

This phenomenon is not unique to Alabama, as the work of community non-governmental organizations like the Jewish Community Legacy Project shows. A 501(c)(3) organization, the JCLP serves “diminishing Jewish communities,” with a particular emphasis on small towns: helping to effect the orderly transfer of property and religious articles; arrange long-term care for aging community members; establishing legacy endowments to maintain graveyards and community structures; and — crucially, for present purposes — helping these communities decide how they wish to document and preserve their history and memory.⁸³

In describing these communities, the JCLP studiously avoid terms like *decline*. Even so, there is a certain pathos to their work. In part, that is inevitable: “endings are difficult for most people.”⁸⁴ Yet the pressures that inform their efforts could be seen decades earlier. Allen's biographers — and his own, largely tongue-in-cheek, memoir (*You Can't Beat the Hours*, 1963) — allude to them. Allen's paternal grandfather, Wolf Israel, had founded West Blocton's synagogue. His maternal grandfather, Abraham Leibowitz, was by all accounts also deeply pious — a cantor, who had been employed for a time at one of the Jewish congregations in Birmingham. In some ways, biographer Curt Smith quipped, young Melvin seems to have taken after his mother's father. Both were vocally and musically gifted — talents which each cultivated to advantage. But there, the similarities ended. Where Leibowitz had “chanted the *Kol Nidre*” — a demanding liturgical arrangement, sung on the Day of Atonement — the only religion that seemed to interest young Melvin was the all-American church of baseball.⁸⁵

The joke works because it plays upon what was by then an established Yiddish literary-theatrical trope: the ‘wayward cantor’ — or the pious cantor's wayward son. At issue is the Janus-faced nature of musical talent.⁸⁶ When safely confined to the prayer hall, such talents are a gift: they bring one's fellow believers closer to God. But when those confines begin to chafe — say, when a

*The commandment to remember figures centrally
in Jewish ritual and practice.*

cantor indulges a desire for stardom — talent becomes a liability.

Just how powerfully this anxiety was felt can be discerned in the real-life example of Yosef “Yossele” Rosenblatt (1882-1933). Certainly the most famous cantor of his age, Rosenblatt gained national attention in 1918, when he turned down an invitation to appear in an operatic production. Though the funds — \$1,000 per performance — were slated for charity, and though the libretto was on a Jewish theme, Rosenblatt felt his “sacred position... [did] not permit him to enter the operatic stage.”⁸⁷ The plot of *The Jazz Singer* (1927; remade in 1980) — in which Rosenblatt did appear — treaded essentially similar ground.⁸⁸

In fact, the ‘wayward cantor’ trope was older still. It began, film historian J. Hoberman has argued, with a real-life cantor from Vilnius known affectionately as the *Vilner Balebosl* (1815-50). It seems the *Balebosl* abandoned his wife, took up with a paramour, and ran off to Vienna in pursuit of greater opportunity. Things did not go as planned, and spiritual self-destruction was only the beginning of his fall from grace. Committed to an asylum, he died destitute and friendless at the tender age of thirty-five. By the time Allen had signed with the Yankees in 1939, the *Balebosl’s* story had been reworked perhaps a dozen times: in theatricals, films—even a novel by Shalom Aleichem.⁸⁹

There is, to be sure, nothing particularly American — or particularly Jewish — in *fin de siècle* literary representations of the big city as a place where material opportunity and spiritual peril come hand-in-glove.⁹⁰ That, precisely, is the point. The roads that lead from Vilnius to Vienna, and from West Blocton to the Bronx, run parallel.

A second set of forces is tied to the specific ways in which Jewish memory is sustained and transmitted. As the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has noted, the commandment to remember figures centrally in Jewish ritual and practice. At the same time, Jews have historically lacked centralized mechanisms and fixed territorial bases from which to preserve and disseminate such memory: the Jewish “homeland,” as George Steiner put it in 1985, was the text.⁹¹ Written in Hebrew and Aramaic — languages that no one actually spoke — and accessed through highly challenging “reception traditions,” access to those texts demands a considerable educational infrastructure.⁹² One should not underestimate the challenge this poses even to large, well-established communities.



Former Gullede
Drygoods, Clayton,
AL (Photo by Emily
Rena Williams)

For this reason, anxiety about the preservation and propagation of such memory — what is sometimes called Jewish continuity — is longstanding. “The world makes many images of Israel [i.e., of Jews and Judaism]” noted the historian and public intellectual Simon Rawidowicz in 1967, “but Israel makes only one image of itself: of a being constantly on the verge of ceasing to be, of disappearing.”⁹³

Anyone who has attended a *Seder* — the ceremonial meal that takes place at the beginning of Passover — may have a sense of this. The meal combines historical-narrative texts and commentaries related to the Israelites’ Exodus from Egypt with particular actions. Bitter and salty foods are prepared and eaten in a particular order to evoke the bitterness and tears of enslavement. At other times, one reclines ceremonially to mark the ease and comfort of freedom. Unleavened bread is eaten — and leavened bread is not — to commemorate the haste and disorder of the Exodus; because the bread prepared for that journey had to be baked before it could rise.

Such reading-and-doing does two distinct kinds of work. First, it connects the present-day “doer” to the past that is being commemorated: a chain of transmission that crosses the generations. “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Holy One Blessed be He took us out from there,” the Passover liturgy explains. Were it not for that, “then we, our children, and our children’s children would be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, even to this day.”⁹⁴ Second, and equally significant, these acts connect participants to one another *in the present*: the doer finds herself in “imagined community” with others — here

and elsewhere — who are doing the same things in a similar way.⁹⁵

Problems began to arise, Yerushalmi argued, when these two functions began to work at cross purposes. At about the same time as the “great transformations” described above were playing out, a new form of historical awareness also emerged. This new awareness drew partly on the Protestant Reformation and partly on the German and French enlightenments, and involved an effort to carry out a reform within Judaism along broadly analogous lines. To that end, traditional memory practices, justified by tradition, revelation, or clerical authority, were subjected to systematic, historical scrutiny.⁹⁶ The aim was to identify ‘correct’ — that is, factually and/or historically-grounded — beliefs, while winnowing out what was derided as superstition or deviation.

Whatever their merits, such efforts did not — and could not — produce anything like consensus.⁹⁷ But that was not the only problem. Those who embraced the ensuing reforms found they shifted the grounds of their religious experiences. The Passover Seder example can again serve here: suppose one concludes that the traditional-liturgical account of the Exodus — the ten plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven, etc. — have no firm evidentiary or historical basis. They are simply myths — no different than the origin stories of any other nation, people, or faith.

One can still take part in the *Seder* — lots of Americans eat turkey, succotash, and cranberry sauce, even if they disbelieve much of the traditional story about “the first Thanksgiving.”⁹⁸ But now, the words of the traditional Passover liturgy — assuming one keeps to them — take on a different cast. One is saying them not to renew, preserve, or transmit one’s connection with one’s *actual* ancestors and their experiences. Rather, one says them simply because that is what Jews *do* — it is what links a community together in the here and now.

That’s one thing if — like Thanksgiving in the US — one is engaged in a practice together with a great many other people. But what if one must do these things in relative isolation — with perhaps only a few dozen others, within a larger society that neither understands these rituals, nor is even fully aware of them?

Perhaps one feels less a sense of imagined *community* than of isolation, marginality, or irrelevance. Writing in 1993, Eli Evans called this “loneliness of soul;” a feeling that was, he continued, “epigrammatic of the emotional terrain of Jews who arrived in the small towns of the South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”⁹⁹

Loneliness of soul can be the basis for an imagined community, but it requires considerable moral determination — again, the point with which this essay opened. One must make a friend of such loneliness. Such courage might have something to teach many of us, given that our own era is characterized both by its own great transformations and by new, no less powerful, forms of political and social alienation.

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of that to fill up a service, but they wished to observe the
Sabbath anyway. So they did, fashioning one out
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I found this remarkable, and still do.*

Thinking through such courage, I was reminded of a religious service that I attended shortly after moving to Alabama. The regular prayer leader was not there, and the congregants had to make do with whatever they knew and could remember: bits and pieces from the hymnal, melodies, and the like. When these had been sung through, one congregant suggested “Sunrise, Sunset,” from the Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Perhaps we could think of *Fiddler* as not-quite-canonical, as liturgy-adjacent.: a lovely song, which encourages a certain awareness of time, an appreciation for the small blessings of life and community — and which has — to borrow from Richard Newton’s work on *Roots* in the African-American community, a certain middlebrow status.¹⁰⁰ It *felt* appropriately Jewish. No less important, it was *accessible*: everyone knew it. The official liturgy, remember, is hard: it must be taught, and that demands time, attention, and infrastructure. This congregation might not have remembered quite enough of that to fill up a service, but they wished to observe the Sabbath anyway. So they did, fashioning one out of the words and melodies they had ready to hand. I found this remarkable, and still do. There was no awkwardness, no sense of guilt or anxiety at the thought one might be “doing it wrong.”

Such anxiety was very much a part of my upbringing — though we had many more resources at our disposal. Jewish readers of a certain age may remember a short story that was widely circulated in Sunday-school classes and youth group meetings in the 1980s. Entitled “The Last Jew,” it was written as a short, fictional confession, set in 2124 — at the time, about 150 years in the future.¹⁰¹

“My name,” the narrator says, “is not important.” What matters is *what* he is, and *where* he is: a living exhibit, housed in the Smithsonian Institution. Around him, a host of artifacts is also on display: “a [prayer shawl], a *Torah*, the books of the Talmud.” But he is the star — the world’s last living Jew. All day long “[p]eople pass my way ... staring, pointing, and sometimes even laughing.”

The last Jew? How can that *be*? After all, only a few decades earlier there were thriving Jewish communities in the US, in Israel, and all over the

world. That question, the narrator continues, has consumed him for years. “I contemplate the reasons, I recall the events, and I search for an answer.” He is writing now because he believes he finally knows.

I now believe that I know how the Jews ... disappeared ... [F]amilies stopped attending [Sabbath] services, the parents stopped sending their children to religious schools, Hebrew High School, day schools, and Bar Mitzvah classes. [Sabbath] candles were never lit ... To attend a Kol Nidre service became a chore, not an honor—to hold a Seder became a task, not a joy. The rituals and observances of Judaism began to vanish.¹⁰²

The final blow, the narrator announces, came when a nuclear sneak attack had wiped out the State of Israel and its population in an instant — this was, after all, the height of the Cold War, the decades between the 1973 War and the first Palestinian *Intifada*. Rather than shake American Jews out of their apathy, that loss deepened it. “Really,” most said, “what could I have done?” Assimilation continued. Now, he is the last. “In less than twenty years, I too, will die ... never again will another ... set foot on this planet.”¹⁰³

At the time, none of this seemed especially distant or fantastical. Fear of nuclear war was a staple of the period, and hadn’t the Nazis planned a museum sort of like that?¹⁰⁴ If anything, then, it seemed rather *too* real. Human exhibitions of this sort *had, in fact, already happened* — though neither, it must be said, to Jews, nor in Europe.¹⁰⁵



Photo courtesy of Caity Bell and Ellie Cochran, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama



Fred May of
Jasper, Alabama
(Photo by Emily
Rena Williams)

That is the problem to which “The Last Jew” points but cannot resolve. There had been a time when it seemed that the very survival of Jews and Judaism — notwithstanding periods of greater or lesser suffering — was *itself* miraculous. It was proof of God’s abiding love and care. The historian Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) — perhaps the most admired Jewish historian of the modern era, and a distant relative of Mel Allen — had famously called the Jews an *Am Olam* — an “eternal people.”¹⁰⁶ Dubnow meant to suggest that the great transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were no more the end of Jews or Judaism than had been the transformations of previous centuries and eras. Yet in 1941 — some two years after Mel signed with CBS — he was murdered in the Riga ghetto. What would each have made of the other’s fate?

What matters now is not the stories we tell, but the raw materials from which such stories might yet be made.

I do not presume to have an answer for this. I am by training a student of power politics — of strategy and interest, war and peace — in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Much of my research deals with that conflict in its formative, pre-state decades, when these questions were no less alive than they are now.

Students of such topics often take a tragic, deeply secular view of human affairs. Divine provenance matters less than the choices made by wise leaders, and the initiative shown by citizens possessed of a common heritage and a shared vision for the future. Chance, fear, and contingency are a part of life, this tradition holds; one must learn to live with them. Perhaps that's why I found the kind of determination with which this article opened — those who continue to observe, even when one's community, or one's words, are not entirely there — so arresting.

What might help those “remainder” communities, in the here and now? Surely, they do not need anyone to tell them what words they should use, or what their community — past or present — should or could mean to them. Perhaps what is needed are tools by which they can preserve, or recover, such words *on their own*.

For this reason, I have been involved with other historians, archivists, and folklorists to help support the creation of an archive for Jews and other small religious communities in Alabama. My hope is that this work will achieve two goals. First, by gathering up and preserving those evocative bits and pieces that can be used to reconstruct some measure of our past and present, it allows individuals to find the words and stories they wish to use — whether now, or in the future.

Second, in assembling the materials for future storytellers, we affirm the possibility that such storytellers *might someday come into being* — despite all the forces arrayed against them. One dares to believe. By stipulating the possibility of a future, one roots oneself in the present, with others who believe the same. What matters now is not the stories we tell, but the raw materials from which such stories might yet be made. Such work has its own long and honorable tradition.¹⁰⁷ ○

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- 69 College of Arts & Sciences, University of Alabama: "Former West Blocton Congregation Establishes Judaic Studies Award Fund" *The Collegian* 24:1 (2015), 31; *Southern Jewish Life*, 11-12.
- 70 Eg, Stephen Birmingham: *Our Crowd* (Harper & Row, 1967), 53-4. For notable exception, see Eli Evans: *The Provincials* (New York: Atheneum, 1973) and Stephen Whitfield: "The Braided Identities of Southern Jews" *American Jewish History*, 77 (March, 1988), 363-387. On the construction of Jewish collective memory, see Beth Wenger's: *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton, 2010) and her co-edited volume (with Hasia Diner and Jeffrey Shandler), *Remembering the Lower East Side* (Indiana, 2000).
- 71 Born Melvin Israel, Mel changed his name in 1939. "1978 Ford C. Frick Award Winner Mel Allen." *National Baseball Hall of Fame*, <https://baseballhall.org/discover-more/awards/frick/mel-allen>. The Israel family also actively maintains its own inter-generational private/family history, portions of which can be publicly accessed; see <http://www.israel-family.net>.
- 72 This has since grown into a considerable literature. See Deborah Weiner: "The Jews of Keystone: Life in a Multicultural Boomtown" *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999), 1-23; Terri Barr: "A Shtetl Grew in Bessemer" *Southern Jewish History* 3 (2000), 1-44; Leonard Rogoff and Margaret Anne Goldsmith: "Four German-Jewish Families and the Built Environment of Huntsville, Alabama" *Southern Jewish History* 20 (2017), 33-67; Dan J. Puckett: *In the Shadow of Hitler* (University of Alabama, 2014); Lee Shai Weissbach: "East European Immigrants and the Image of Jews in the Small-Town South," *American Jewish History* 85 (September, 1997): 231-262; Anton Hieke: "The Transregional Mobility of Jews from Macon, GA." *American Jewish History* 97:1 (2013), 21-38; Jarrod Tanney: "Between the Borsht Belt and the Bible Belt: Crafting Southern Jewishness Through Chutzpah and Humor." *Southern Jewish History* 15 (2012), 119-167. For a recent, synoptic survey, see Mark Bauman: *New Vision of Southern Jewish History* (Alabama, 2019), 312-60 and passim.
- 73 Weiner, "Jews of Keystone," 1; Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (Yale, 2004), 67-75; and Hasia Diner: *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way* (Yale, 2015). Compare to Yuri Sletzkine: *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, 2004). On the Pale of Settlement, see YIVO's *Online Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/pale_of_settlement.
- 74 See John Klier: *Russians, Jews, and the Pogroms of 1881-82* (Cambridge, 2011); Steven Zipperstein, *Pogrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History* (Norton, 2018); Israel Bartal: *The Jews of Eastern Europe, 1772-1881* (Penn, 2011); and Gur Alroey: *An Unpromising Land* (Stanford, 2017).
- 75 This is an enormous literature, which I cannot reproduce here. In Jewish-historical circles, see for example Steven Zipperstein: *The Jews of Odessa: A Cultural History* (Stanford, 1986); Benjamin Nathans: *Beyond the Pale* (California, 2004); Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern: *The Golden Age Shtetl* (Princeton, 2017); Jeffrey Veidlinger: *In the Shadow of the Shtetl* (Indiana, 2013); and Kenneth Moss: *Unchosen People* (Harvard, 2020).
- 76 "By the end of the nineteenth century there were small but thriving Jewish communities...in Canton, Clarksdale, Cleveland, Greenville, Greenwood, Vicksburg, and Yazoo City...as well as Brookhaven, Columbus, Jackson, Meridian, and Natchez." Leon Waldoff: *A Jewish Experience in Mississippi* (University Press of America, 2018), 32. For a broad survey, see the Institute for Southern Jewish Life's online *Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities*, www.isjl.org/encyclopedia-of-southern-jewish-communities.html.
- 77 Timothy Snyder: *Bloodlands* (Basic Books, 2010); Annemarie Sammartino: *The Impossible Border* (Cornell, 2010). Compare Snyder's analysis to Jonathan D. Sarna: "The 'Mythical Jew' and the 'Jew Next Door' in Nineteenth Century America." In Haim Gerber (ed.): *Anti-Semitism in America* (Illinois, 1986), 57-78.
- 78 Here cited in Clive Webb: "Jewish Merchants and Black Customers in the Age of Jim Crow." *Southern Jewish History* 2 (1999), 55-80, 55. To be sure, some Jews did nothing at all – or worse. For a range of accounts, see *inter alia* Mark Bauman and Berkley Kalin (eds.): *The Quiet Voices* (University of Alabama, 1997); Cornel West and Jack Saltzman (eds.): *Struggles in the Promised Land* (Oxford, 1997); Clive Webb: "A Tangled Web: Black-Jewish Relations in the Twentieth-Century South" in Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg (eds.): *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil* (Brandeis, 2006) 192-209; Eric Cohen: *The Price of Whiteness* (Princeton, 2006), 138-64 and Stephen Whitfield: "Merchants: The Marrow of the Southern Jewish Experience," *The Jewish Merchant Project*, <https://>

- merchants.jhssc.org/narrative/merchants-the-marrows-of-the-southern-jewish-experience/, last accessed 12 August 2023. Privately, Suberman recalls that her father was more outspoken. Thus, she notes, his dislike of Al Jolson's performances in blackface: "Was it not too much? To make fun of people already so *auf tsores*, already so full of woe?" Cited in Waldoff, *Jewish Experience*, 82.
- 79 Amy K. Milligan's: "The 'Jewish Zealots of Tobacco Land': the Circuit Riding Rabbi Project's Impact on Small Town Jews in North Carolina, 1950–1980." *Jewish Culture and Society* 20 (2019), 62-79 is nonpareil; see also Rogoff and Goldsmith, "Four German-Jewish Families" and R. Barbara Gitenstein's: "A Manhattan Jew in a Small Alabama Town." *Southern Jewish History* 24 (2021), 123-75. For Alabama-based collective memory projects, see the *Jewish Mobile Oral History Project* (https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/jewish_oral_hist/), and Temple Beth-El's *Civil Rights Experience* (<https://templebeth-el.net/education/beth-el-civil-rights-experience/>), and ongoing work by Selma's *Mishkan Israel* (www.selmatemple.org). Roselle Kline Hartok's *Jewish World of Elvis Presley* (McKinstry Place, 2020) also bears consideration here, as does the photography of Emily Rena Williams.
- 80 I owe this metaphor to Bradford Vivian's account of *Lethe* ('forgetting/concealment'). In classical mythology, *Lethe* was a river said to pass through Hades. Souls who wished to be relieved of their earthly memories would drink its waters. *Infra Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (Penn State, 2019), 19.
- 81 In 1920-21, the *American Jewish Year-Book* listed a total of 23 Jewish congregations in Alabama. All, save three, reported fewer than 200 members. Decatur's Beth El Synagogue reported 22; Tuscaloosa's Emanu-el, ten; Eufala's B'nai Israel, six. *American Jewish Committee* (1919-20), 337-9. For demographic surveys, see Ira Sheskin: "Dixie Diaspora." *Southeastern Geographer*, 40:1 (2000), 52-74; Lee Shai Weissbach: "Community and Subcommunity in Small-Town America." *Jewish History* 15 (2001), 107-18; Pew Research Centers: *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (Washington DC, 2013); Dale and Theodore Rosengarten (eds.): *A Portion of the People* (South Carolina, 2002), 185-94; and Stuart Rockoff: "The Fall and Rise of the Jewish South," in Ferris and Greenberg, *Jewish Roots*, 284-303.
- 82 Saskia Sassen: *The Global City* (Princeton, 2013).
- 83 See <https://jclproject.org>. According to a recent account by Joel Kotkin and Edward Heyman, the JCLP is "currently assisting 61 communities" nationwide. Fourteen have closed, and thirteen have "legacy plans in place." "The New American Judaism." *Tablet* (February 2021), www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-new-american-judaism-kotkin.
- 84 Barr, "Bessemer," 34.
- 85 Smith, *Voice*, 19. It seems that neither of Allen's parents approved of Mel's career; they considered it unserious, and objected when he changed his name. But Allen's parents had also faced their own share of parental discontent: Wolf, it seems, opposed their marriage. Borelli, *How About That*, 28-38; Mel Allen: *You Can't Beat the Hours* (Harper and Row, 1963), 1-6.
- 86 J. Hoberman *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (Temple University Press, 1991), 258-60.
- 87 Waldoff, *Jewish Experience*, 78; David Olivestone: "Rosenblatt, Josef." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Macmillan, 2007), XVII:441; Bernard Beer: "Joseph Rosenblatt – The Man and His Music." *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 32 (2013/14), 42-73. See also Wayne Allen: *The Cantor: from Mishnah to Modernity* (Wipf & Stock, 2019), esp. 88-90.
- 88 It appears that debt, incurred from a series of ill-fated investments, forced Rosenblatt to relax his initial opposition to such appearances.
- 89 Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*.
- 90 See, for example, Raymond Williams: *The Country and the City* (Chatto and Windus, 1974).
- 91 George Steiner: "Our Homeland, the Text." *Salmagundi*, 66 (1985); Daniel Boyarin: *A Travelling Homeland* (Penn, 2015).
- 92 Or at least it did until recently—thanks to a concerted effort to translate these texts into a range of vernaculars, and to make them popularly available – see, for example, www.sefaria.org. Never before has the *Talmud* been available outside of its traditional reception communities, and in so many vernacular languages.
- 93 Simon Rawidowicz: *State of Israel, Diaspora, and Jewish Continuity: Essays on the 'Ever-Dying People'* (University Press of New England, 1998), 53.
- 94 For the traditional text and a range of translations, see www.sefaria.org/Pesach_Haggadah%2C_Magid%2C_We_Were_Slaves_in_Egypt.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.
- 95 See Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991).
- 96 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi: *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington, 1982); David

- N. Myers: *The Stakes of History* (Yale, 2018); Ivan Jablonka: *History is a Contemporary Literature* (Cornell, 2014). For contrasting takes on the Haskalah/Jewish enlightenment, see Samuel Feiner: *The Jewish Enlightenment* (Pennsylvania, 2011) and Olga Litvak: *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism* (Rutgers, 2012).
- 97 Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 77-103.
- 98 James W. Baker: *Thanksgiving: The Biography of an American Holiday* (Durham, NH: University Press of New Hampshire, 2009), 6-7.
- 99 Eli Evans: *The Lonely Days Were Sundays* (Mississippi, 1993), xxii
- 100 Richard Newton: *Identifying Roots: Alex Haley and the Anthropology of Scriptures* (Equinox, 2020).
- 101 As of this writing, I have been unable to discover the story's author, or an account of where it first appeared. Nor am I aware of any systematic historical or theological considerations of it. For the version cited here, see <https://s3.amazonaws.com/nscy-education/The-Last-Jew.pdf>.
- 102 *Last Jew*, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/nscy-education/The-Last-Jew.pdf>.
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Though widely believed at the time, recent scholarship suggests it is based on a misreading of historical sources. For a compact survey of the historiography, see Leonhard Riep: "The Production of the Muselmann and the Singularity of Auschwitz." *Hypatia* 35 (2020), 642n8.
- 105 An individual generally remembered as 'Ishi' – as with the story here, he would not disclose his actual name – lived the final years of his life in what was then the University of California's Museum of Anthropology. Believed to be the sole survivor of the Yahi people of California, Ishi was captured after the rest of his family had been killed in 1911. He died in 1916. For a detailed account, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes: "Ishi's Brain, Ishi's Ashes: Anthropology and Genocide." *Violence in War and Peace* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2004). For the Museum's contemporary account of these events, see <https://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/ishi/>.
- 106 On the Allen-Dubnow connection, see Eli Wohlgeleinter: "Allen, Mel." *Encyclopedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Macmillan, 2007), I: 667.
- 107 Laura Levitt: *The Objects that Remain* (Penn State, 2020); Jason Lustig: *A Time to Gather* (Oxford, 2022); Francesco Spagnolo and Shir Gal Kokhavi: *Memory Objects: Judaica Collections, Global Migrations* (Berkeley, CA: Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, 2019); Jeffrey Veidlinger (ed.): *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse* (Indiana, 2016).
- 108 www.theparisreview.org/blog/2023/04/24/mapping-africatown-albert-murray-and-his-hometown/
- 109 www.southalabama.edu/departments/publicrelations/pressreleases/101922africatown.html
- 110 <https://digitalcollections.nysl.org/items/510d47dc-8779-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>; www.britannica.com/place/Oyo-empire; www.loc.gov/resource/g8751f.ct002939/?r=-0.102,0.19,1.113,0.777,0; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Tarka; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarka,_Nigeria; <https://digitalcollections.nysl.org/items/510d47dc-8779-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>; www.britannica.com/place/Oyo-empire; www.loc.gov/resource/g8751f.ct002939/?r=-0.102,0.19,1.113,0.777,0; www.britannica.com/place/Oyo-empire
- 111 Stephanie Zehnle, "'Urban by nature': The Sokoto jihadist approach to urban planning," *Afriques* [Online], 11 | 2020, Online since 15 December 2020, connection on 17 January 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/afriques/2993>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.2993>; <https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/docannexe/image/2993/img-1.png>; <https://journals.openedition.org/afriques/docannexe/image/2993/img-2.jpg>
- 112 Jackson, Kern Michael. "Listening to the Wise Ones: Personal Narrative as a Window Into Traditional Black Neighborhoods in Mobile, AL." United States: Indiana University, 2004: 40, 134.
- 113 Caquard S. and Carwright W. (2014) "Narrative Cartography: From Mapping Stories to the Narrative of Maps and Mapping." *The Cartographic Journal* 51(2) 101-106. Albert A. Palacios, Relaciones Geográficas, Benson Latin American Collection, LILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, The University of Texas at Austin, <https://ut-austin.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=b43ddf4e011646a58404162d4cddc1c8>. Jeffrey Burnett, "Memory Mapping," MSU Cultural Heritage Informatics Initiative, April 4, 2022, <https://chi.anthropology.msu.edu/2022/04/memory-mapping/>
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Contributor Biographies

Zanice Bond served as a Cauthen Fellow for the Alabama Folklife Association (2022-2023). This fellowship supported her research on memory quilts in Alabama and allowed her to begin an in-depth study of these artifacts that occupy a broader quilting tradition. During her fellowship, she presented her work in Auburn, Alabama, at *Every Stitch a Story: A Symposium on Quilts in Alabama* that was hosted by the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities, and she was guest speaker for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) Brownbag where she presented *A Death in the Family: Quilts, Memory, and Bereavement*. This year, Bond was selected to serve as a lecturer for Auburn University's Draughon Seminars in State and Local History. She is scheduled to present *Memory Quilts in Community Spaces* in selected cities across the state. In 2019, she was guest curator of *The Soul of Zora: A Literary Legacy through Quilts* at Tuskegee University's Legacy Museum. Bond earned her Ph.D. in American Studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence and is currently an associate professor of Southern Literature at Tuskegee University.

Sarah Bryan is a folklorist and author, and the Executive Director of the Association for Cultural Equity. Previously the director of the North Carolina Folklife Institute and editor of the *Old-Time Herald*, she lives in Durham, North Carolina. She and Hal Pugh are co-writing a book on the history of southern folk pottery, forthcoming from the University of North Carolina Press.

David Ivey is a lifetime Sacred Harp singer. He is co-founder and Director of Camp Fasola, an innovative summer camp for teaching Sacred Harp music and traditions. David was recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts prestigious National Heritage Fellowship award in 2013. David presently serves as Chair of the Revision-Music Committee for *The Sacred Harp*, 1991 Edition, which will be its sixth revision since 1844. David is a Past President of the Alabama Folklife Association and has served on its Board of Directors since 2014.

Daniel J. Levine is the Aaron Aronov Associate Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Alabama. His scholarly training is in international politics, political philosophy, and security studies, and he holds degrees from John Hopkins University, Tel Aviv University, and the University of Chicago. His book, *Recovering International Relations*, was published

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Destiny Williams Levy resides in Montgomery, Alabama where she coordinates partnerships for the Alabama River Diversity Network and serves as strategic partnerships and project director for Blackyard, LLC. Destiny has a background in English education, African American historic preservation, and project management. Destiny is also an artist whose music, poetry, and spoken work explores the sociological, economic, and cultural elements of the Black experience in the African diaspora.

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Beth McGinnis is Associate Professor of Musicology at Samford University, where she was honored to receive the 2021-2022 Buchanan Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching. She is also Organist at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. Her podcast and website, Hear in Alabama (www.hearinalabama.com), explore the rich musical cultures of her home state. She holds a Bachelor of Music in Piano from Samford University, a Master of Music in Musicology from Texas Christian University, and a Ph.D. in Musicology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Jerrilyn McGregory is a recently retired professor of Folklore in the English Department at Florida State University. She is the author of *Wiregrass Country, Downhome Gospel: African American Spiritual Activism in Wiregrass Country* and *"One Grand Noise": Boxing Day in the Anglicized World* (Winner of the Chicago Prize in Folklore).

Hal Pugh has been a working potter for the past 52 years. A historian and author, he has written about the pottery traditions and history of North Carolina, and has worked as a consultant concerning historical ceramics. Hal lives in North