

Dixie Diaspora



In communities along the lower Mississippi River, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience helps residents preserve the evidence of a once-flourishing presence. **BY ANDREA OPPENHEIMER DEAN**



When Hannah Wood was growing up as the daughter of a cotton broker in the 1920s and '30s in the Mississippi River town of St. Francisville, La., a number of Jews lived right on her street. That would be Leonard Street, just off Ferdinand. "There was us, the Rosenthals," she says in a soft Louisiana drawl. "There were Leopolds, Teiches, some Levis, some Manns, the Schlesingers." But by the early 1920s, the synagogue in St. Francisville had already been turned into a Presbyterian church, and during the intervening decades the few remaining Jews either assimilated entirely, died, or moved away. Now Wood, 84, says that she is "the last person who claims to be Jewish in this town." She admits she's an odd sort of Jew, the daughter of a mixed marriage who, "though my father was very, very Jewish," was raised Catholic. But for nearly half a century she has voluntarily cared for Hebrew Rest, the shade-dappled little Jewish cemetery enclosed by an iron fence at the edge of town.

We think of American Jews as refugees from mid-19th-century Germany or turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe, landing in New York Harbor and settling in the inner cities mainly of the Northeast. Yet in smaller numbers Jews began filtering into the agrarian South as early as the 17th century. They started as itinerant peddlers and within a generation or two became established merchants. More recently the story of most southern Jewish communities duplicates that of St. Francisville, leaving many towns with no Jewish population whatsoever. Wood and the others who remain compose a confederacy of elders holding on to traces of their Jewishness: a few artifacts and customs of their religion and history and fading memories. Their quest to preserve runs against the larger southern culture's pressures on outsiders to assimilate and against southern Jews' historical tendency to acquiesce in that process.

Since its founding in Utica, Miss., in 1986, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience has helped Jews of the Deep South preserve their heritage. Its records confirm that in dozens of towns up and down the Mississippi River, a once-thriving Jewish presence has declined or disappeared altogether. The population of Jews in Mississippi dwindled from 4,600 in 1937 to 1,400 in 1995; in Arkansas there were only 1,700 Jews compared with 6,500 in 1937, and the num-

ORTHODOX, CONSERVATIVE, AND REFORM JEWS WORSHIPPED AT TEMPLE BETH ISRAEL, LEFT C. 1920, IN CLARKSDALE, MISS. BELOW, KENNETH AND HANNAH WOOD, ST. FRANCISVILLE, LA.



HISTORICAL PHOTOS COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE SOUTHERN JEWISH EXPERIENCE; ALL OTHERS, NANCY MINER



Natchez

bers in Tennessee dropped from 25,000 to 18,000 over the same period.

Most Jews who settled in these towns came in two waves during the 19th and early 20th centuries. The first major migration arrived in New Orleans between 1800 and 1840; it consisted mainly of rural German shopkeepers and salesmen fleeing Prussian draft policies. Many trudged northward as peddlers, their heavy backpacks loaded with household goods and other wares for sale to both planters and dirt farmers. In time, the peddlers settled down, often in river towns along trade routes, and opened what were called (apparently without insult) Jew stores, creating a new mercantile class in the South. Many became wealthy, some prominent, and in an effort to gain acceptance, almost all assumed a low religious profile and assimilated to a far greater degree than Jews in other regions of the country. In part because they never amounted to more than five percent of a town's population, immigrant Jews in the South did not form a cohesive culture of their own but worked hard

ABOVE, FARMERS SOLD PRODUCE TO THE ABRAMS STORE, AND RESIDENTS CAME TO BUY. BELOW, B'NAI ISRAEL TEMPLE; LAY READER JERRY KROUSE AND HIS WIFE, BETTY JO; JEWISH NEIGHBORHOOD; AND TOMBSTONE OF SEVEN-YEAR-OLD WAR VICTIM



to blend in. Most adopted Reform Judaism, which was spawned in 1873 in Cincinnati to Americanize and liberalize Jewish observances and rituals. An effect was to accelerate assimilation.

The second major wave of Jewish immigrants, Eastern Europeans and Russians fleeing pogroms and poverty, reached the South at the turn of the 20th century. Like the Germans before them, the newcomers built businesses in river towns such as Natchez and Vicksburg in Mississippi and prospered until, beginning around 1910, the boll weevil wrecked the region's cotton-based agricultural economy. Jews, along with many others, headed northward or to large southern cities such as Dallas and Atlanta, whose economies were not dependent on cotton. Because many of the South's small towns never recovered economically, the Jewish exodus never ended.

Jews fled even from towns that prospered, propelled by the tendency of ambitious sons of successful fathers to leave hometowns and make their own way. "The story of Jews in the South is the story of fathers who built businesses to give to their sons who didn't want them," wrote Eli N. Evans in his 1973 book, *The Provincials: A Personal History of Jews in the South*. Evans, who grew up in Durham, N.C., where his father had built up a retail business and served six consecutive terms as mayor, now heads the Charles H. Revson Foundation in New York City. The author recounts how hard it was for him, while at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, to tell his father that he wanted out of retail and out of town. But, he adds, his father "had to know already... few of the sons were staying." In a 1997

update of his book, Evans writes, "The provincials are changing too, for the small-town era that molded so much of the culture of Southern Jews in this century is vanishing, as the Jews follow the rest of America to the cities and the suburbs."

One of those towns is Natchez, made splendid by antebellum mansions of cotton planters. The city cemetery, overlooking the Mississippi, shows just how tightly entwined were the gentile planters and Jewish merchants: Jewish graves are clustered apart but in view of the others. A time-scoured tombstone memorializes Rosalie Beekman, a seven-year-old Jewish child who, felled in front of her father's store, was the only fatality in the 1862 shelling of Natchez by the federal gunboat *Essex*. After the Civil War, Natchez's bankrupted cotton planters welcomed an influx of Jewish cotton brokers who lent money for new crops and helped the town prosper. In the 1870s and '80s, Jewish businesses composed about half the dry goods businesses and cotton-buying operations in a town where cotton was king and Christians and Jews both belonged to the prestigious Prentiss Club. As they prospered, Jews, whose population grew to approximately 400 in 1905, also entered civic life; as many as 13 served as aldermen, and Isaac Lowenburg served two terms as mayor in the 1870s. As counted in the 1990 census, no more than 25 Jews lived among the 19,460 people in Natchez.

"The Jews brought energy and a spirit of community to a city that felt depressed and downtrodden," says historian and Natchez preservationist Mimi Miller. "There was no way for the Jewish community to hold itself apart, and the gentiles did not hold them apart either." Miller, not a Jew, says that the only anti-Semitism she detected when interviewing residents for a history project came from "very elderly businessmen who felt that the Jews had deserted them after the boll weevil arrived." The Jews had more in common with the old planting aristocracy than that group had with anybody but one another, she says. Besides, fundamentalist Christians respected the Jews as "the people of the Book," which didn't necessarily mitigate their image of Jews as killers of Jesus.

On a mild spring evening last year, a handful of worshippers show up for the Friday night service in Natchez's B'Nai Israel Temple. It is home to Mississippi's oldest Jewish congregation, which, formed in 1843, became one of the original charter members of the American Reform movement. In fact, the city's classical revival temple, rebuilt in 1905 after a fire, was dedicated in 1872 by the Reform movement's founder, Rabbi Isaac Mayer

Wise. Mark Greenberg, a historian and factotum of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, characterizes this night's service as "very, very Reform." The lay reader, Jerry Krouse, reads from the Hebrew Union Prayer Book, with the congregation of about eight regulars responding. Then he presents a reading from the Torah that he says he found on the Internet. After the service, Krouse says that "in every way this congregation is extinct." The remaining local members number fewer than 20, and only one is younger than the 58-year-old Krouse. The Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience has made a preservation agreement to take over the building when the congregation can no longer maintain it.

Krouse, unusual for southern Jews, detects the presence of anti-Semitic prejudice. "Maybe I'm paranoid," he intones in slow southern cadence, "but I feel a subtle, below-the-surface anti-Jewish sentiment that excludes Jews from certain clubs and organizations." His family arrived in Natchez in 1917 and so is newer than many, a disadvantage, and the Krouses came from Poland, opening them to the prejudice of some German Jews, who were relatively assimilated even in Europe.

Krouse, whose mother was Christian, says that as a boy he attended the temple's Sunday school with about 20 other children. The community's demise, he says, "occurred so gradually that I hardly saw it happening until one day the whole landscape as I had known it had changed." His two daughters were the last in the area of religious-school age, and for years Krouse drove them 80 miles each way to Sunday school. His wife, Betty Jo, a member of the Pentecostal First Assembly of God, accompanies her husband to temple most Fridays. She feels like an adopted daughter of Natchez's Jewish community. "They like my matzo balls," she says. "I think the South must be the only place they put gravy on matzo balls."

AN ÉMIGRÉ FROM BAVARIA, Philip Sartorius was one of the first soldiers wounded by Union troops in the Battle of Millikin's Bend just outside Vicksburg. The small city was known as "the Gibraltar of the Confederacy" during a year of bloody battles and 47 days of siege before falling in the summer of 1863. Union soldiers are buried in the 110-acre Vicksburg National Cemetery, which adjoins a national military park. Sartorius, one of more than 3,000 Jewish soldiers who fought with the Confederate army, lies buried in the old section of Vicksburg's Jewish cemetery, located between the military park and a Pizza Hut.



ANN GERACHE, A MEMBER OF VICKSBURG'S ANSHE CHESED TEMPLE, SAYS THAT VICKSBURG'S JEWISH POPULATION, ONCE 650, HAS DECLINED TO 25 TODAY.

As they prospered, Jews entered Natchez's civic life.

The South had a larger number of Jewish commissioned officers than the Union, says historian Greenberg. They were almost universally accepted as long as they acceded to the South's prevailing views about race. Abolitionism was not, lamentably, part of the southern Jewish experience, he says.

Vicksburg's only temple is Anshe Chesed, a low-slung, flat-topped 1970s building of yellow brick that replaced a more imposing red-brick pile built in 1868. In 1905, Vicksburg's Jewish population reached 650, but by 1970 a dwindling congregation of about 75 families could no longer afford the old building and tore it down. Ann Gerache, in her 60s and one of Anshe Chesed's youngest members, talks about how Jews have continued to move away—to get married, find better jobs or larger Jewish communities. “More funerals, but no bar mitzvahs and no weddings,” she says. Only about 25 Jews remain in Vicksburg, a city of 27,000, and Gerache believes that the temple will have to be sold in the next 10 years.

Like Krouse and Hannah Wood of St. Francisville, Gerache was the product of a mixed marriage. Her paternal grandfather came from Russia with a pack on his back in the 1890s, opened a store in Cary, 40 miles north, and raised nine children. All of her aunts and uncles left, most in the '30s, but her father stayed, married an Episcopalian, ran a country store—groceries on one side, dry goods on the other—and prospered through land purchases and farming. Gerache had Baptist playmates and attended an Episcopal school but joined a Jewish sorority at the University of Alabama, because “it was just more comfortable. Growing up in this assimilated environment, you know your friends accept you, but in some way I know I'm different, and that's my Jewish difference.”

There were 40 Jewish merchants who closed their stores for the High Holidays in Vicksburg when Gerache arrived as a bride, but only one is left. When she says she believes that southern towns changed when Jews departed, she means that Jewish families were among those who promoted a cosmopolitan culture. Greenberg, the historian, concurs, saying Jews “pushed for inviting the visiting orchestra or the traveling theater group,” and Jewish stores provided fashionable clothes and furnishings. But affluent Jewish merchants, he says, “kept a low profile, tending to keep their contributions to hospitals and to arts organizations anonymous.”

The temples that Jews built frequently enlarge a southern community's architectural vocabulary. In Port Gibson, Miss., a

town of fewer than 2,000 situated on a bayou about 27 miles south of Vicksburg, the Gemiluth Chassed Synagogue, a red-brick building, Moorish with a Byzantine dome and an arched doorway and windows, stands opposite the Romanesque First Presbyterian Church. The synagogue was saved from the wrecking ball in 1987 by Bill and Martha Lum, neither of them Jewish. “My dear,” explains Martha Lum, “the Jews are part of our heritage here.”

In 1905 Port Gibson's Jews numbered 171 and formed a bulwark of the town's economy; today, two Jews live here, and of the Jewish stores that once dotted the main street, the longest survivor, Frishman's department store, has been turned over to a regional arts program specializing in homemade quilts. No one knows what to do with the temple. Its pews remain in place, but its reliquaries are elsewhere. Hoping to convert it into a museum, Bill Lum stabilized it, repairing the roof and replacing joists, and they worried over the building for more than a decade. But since Bill Lum's death four years ago, the family has lost interest in the temple, and it continues to deteriorate.



MACY B. HART, FOUNDER OF THE MUSEUM OF THE SOUTHERN JEWISH EXPERIENCE, HOPES THAT THE MUSEUM WILL SOMEDAY SPREAD THROUGHOUT THE SOUTH.

THE MAN TO SEE if you want to know more about the Dixie diaspora, and indeed about Jewish life in the South, is Macy B. Hart. He founded the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience to generate oral histories and save artifacts from disbanded temples and some temple buildings themselves; to oversee abandoned cemeteries and help maintain active ones; and to create

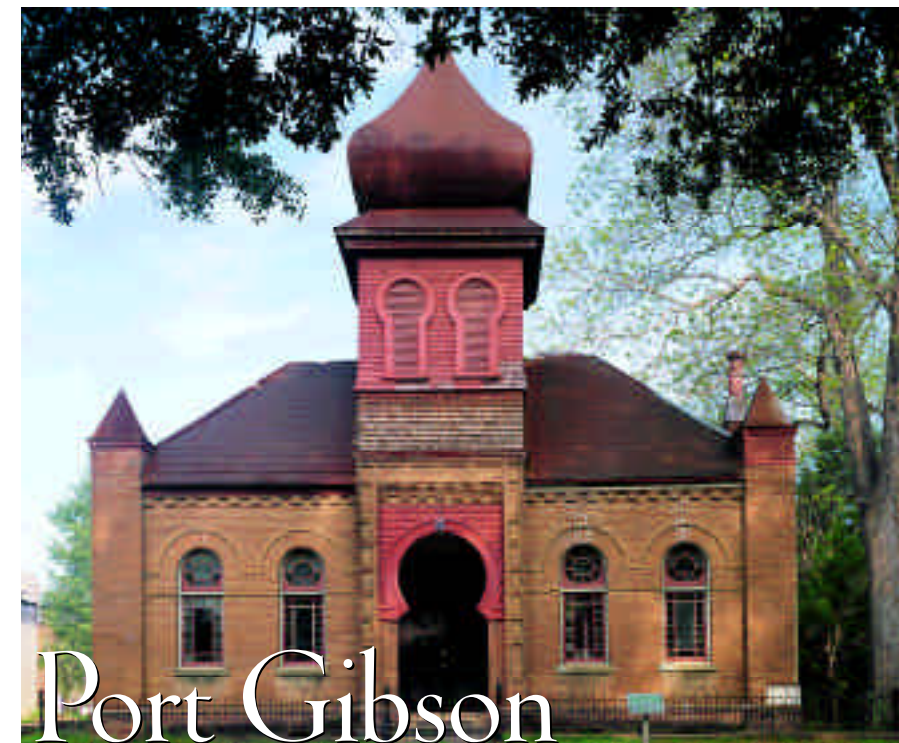
a genealogical center and mount exhibitions. The museum exists in several places—an administrative headquarters in Jackson, Miss., a sanctuary-cum-museum in Utica, and a satellite location at Natchez's B'Nai Israel Temple—and Hart says that in time the museum will be “located all over the South.” For starters, the museum has carved out two so-called cultural corridors, one stretching from Jackson north through the Mississippi Delta towns of Greenville, Cleveland, and Clarksdale to Memphis. (It was there on Alabama Street that Elvis Presley served as a “Shabbos goy” for a rabbi living upstairs, turning on lights on the Sabbath, when observant Jews are proscribed from working or using modern conveniences.) The other tour snakes south from Jackson to New Orleans.

Hart's family has lived in Mississippi for more than a century. His great-grandfather, Isaac Hart, arrived in New Orleans from Jamaica, settled in Woodville, Miss., in 1864, became a merchant, and lived there until his death in 1905. Macy grew up

working in a department store in Winona, Miss., owned by his maternal grandfather, who arrived with the Eastern European wave of immigration. The number of Jewish families in Winona had shrunk from about 40 during his mother's childhood to one—the Harts themselves—when he was a boy. Now 52, Hart remembers that his family had become at least as southern as they were Jewish and were fully accepted by their community. They didn't know Hebrew, didn't speak Yiddish, didn't wear skullcaps, and did work on the Sabbath, the day the farmers came to town. But to assure that their children retained a Jewish identity, Hart's parents spent their only day off driving their four offspring to Jewish Sunday school, first 30 miles to Greenwood, and when that congregation disbanded, to Cleveland, 80 miles from home.

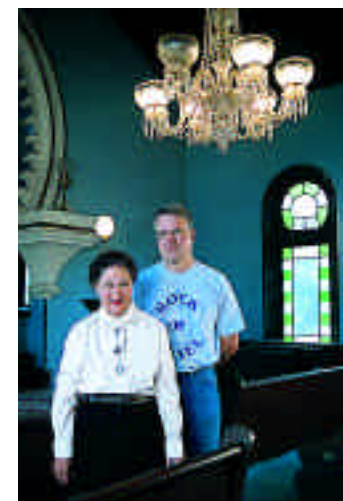
After graduating from the University of Texas in 1970, Hart became the director of the Henry S. Jacobs Camp for Reform Jewish children in Utica, 40 miles southwest of Jackson. The idea for a museum to preserve the memory and treasures of a once-vibrant Jewish South came to him, he says, as the camp became “a dumping ground” for religious objects from disbanded temples. He then realized that stories of southern Jewish families were being lost because oral histories weren't being recorded. With the camp becoming “a lifeboat for southern Jews,” Hart says, he wanted to create a year-round program of Judaic learning. In 1986, using a \$500,000 grant from the Plough Foundation, Hart oversaw construction at the camp of a religious sanctuary with exhibition galleries and classrooms. The unpretentious, modern-style, yellow-brick building now forms the centerpiece of the camp, a cluster of cottages hugging the shore of a man-made lake.

Relics from nearby defunct temples furnish the light-filled



BELOW, MOTHER AND SON, MARTHA AND DOUGLAS LUM, HAVE WORKED TO SAVE GEMILUTH CHASSED SYNAGOGUE, ABOVE. THE HOME OF THE JEWISH-OWNED BERNHEIMER BANK, BELOW, ALSO SURVIVES.

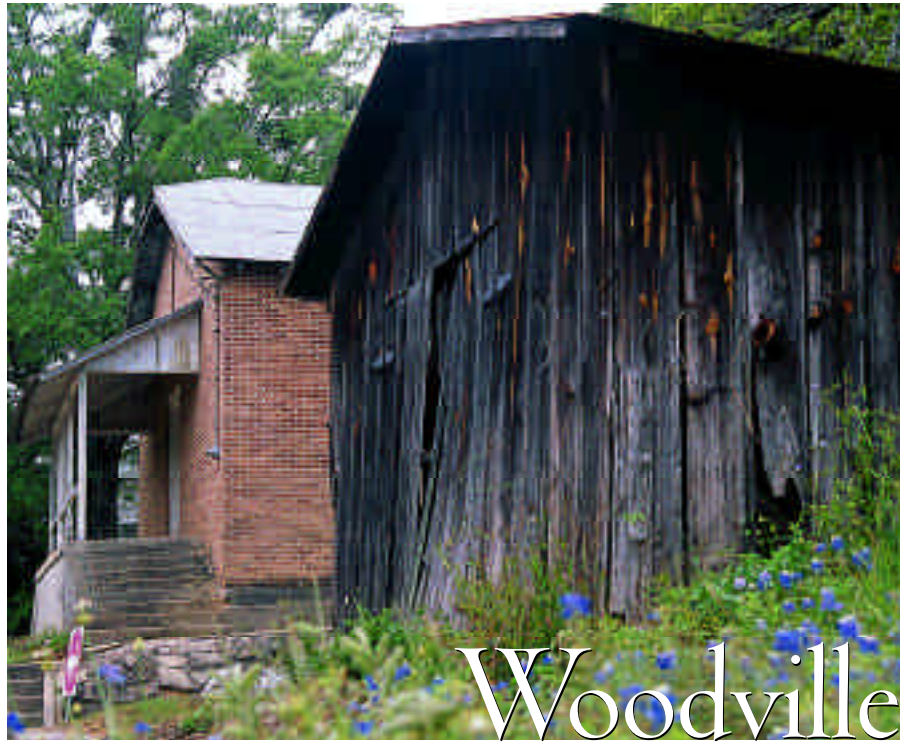
sanctuary. The majestic oak ark, a cabinetlike structure in which Torah scrolls are kept, comes from Vicksburg's original Anshe Chesed Temple of 1868, Hart explains. The Torahs and eternal lights, signifying God's eternal presence, says Hart, were rescued from abandoned synagogues in the Mississippi towns of Laurel, Port Gibson, and Greenwood, and in El Dorado, Ark. Old



photographs on the walls include one of the tombstones in Woodville of Isaac Hart, Macy's great-grandfather. Others show the quirky blend of southernness and Jewishness in everyday life: A Succoth assemblage for the harvest feast is hung with cotton, soybeans, and corn husks; a cotton field can be seen through a window, background for a challah loaf on a Sabbath table.

On display throughout the museum is the exhibit “Alsace to America: Discovering a Southern Jewish Heritage.” Curated by Greenberg, it attracted 22,000 visitors when it was on view in downtown Jackson during the summer of 1998. The exhibit tells the story of the mid-19th-century wave of immigration to the South and includes

No one knows what to do with Port Gibson's temple.



Woodville

a Torah binder of European origin, made from an infant boy's swaddling clothes, salvaged from an unknown emigrant's voyage from Le Havre, France, to Hamburg, Germany, to New Orleans. From a nameless peddler's pack comes a shoemaker's last and a watchmaker's tools. Images and words explain how the immigrants settled down, first forming burial societies, then establishing a congregation, and finally building a temple—"how Jewish peddlers became businessmen, and how their sons and daughters pulled up stakes, writing their own chapters in the story of the Dixie diaspora," in Hart's words. For him, Judaism means giving back. "We want to recapture southern Jewish history and educate people about Jews of this region. What we hope to be is a clearing-house and community resource, not just a treasure chest."

To that end, Hart recently created the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, an organizational umbrella for the museum and for efforts in historic preservation, oral history,

ONCE CALLED LITTLE JERUSALEM BECAUSE OF ITS LARGE JEWISH POPULATION, WOODVILLE TODAY HAS NO JEWS. ABOVE, THE FORMER JEWISH BLACKSMITH SHOP AND GROCERY STORE; BELOW, MAIN STREET, C. 1910 AND TODAY; AND BETH ISRAEL CEMETERY



and genealogy. Sounding not unlike a southern evangelical pastor concerned about an untended fold, Hart says he wants the institute to provide a circuit-riding rabbi and a Jewish educator to minister to "these small little towns that have nobody to help them."

Hart and historian Greenberg agree that in casting off their past, southern Jews are following the path of other minorities, and that in abandoning small towns, Jews are part of a larger American phenomenon. New Orleans, the gateway through which most Jews who settled in the South entered the country, is also a city to which some have returned. Murray Blackman, rabbi emeritus of Temple Sinai, the city's oldest Reform congregation, says New Orleans' Jewish population of more than 12,000 is stable. "We are able to replace losses but haven't grown," he says. "A lot of our young people are going to Atlanta and Houston." Indeed, Atlanta's Jewish population has increased fivefold since 1971, and in Houston, Dallas, Austin, and to a lesser extent Richmond and Charlotte, the Jewish population is rising. Many young southern Jews are choosing these cities over northern or western ones, says Rabbi Blackman, because they tend to "feel more comfortable with the slower pace, the



TOP, JEWISH ORPHANS' HOME, NEW ORLEANS, 1904, AND B'NAI B'RITH DANCE IN VICKSBURG, MISS., C. 1925; ABOVE, ROSENZWEIG'S STORE, LAKE VILLAGE, ARK., AND JOE ERBER'S '50S BAR MITZVAH, IN GREENWOOD, MISS.

strong sense of place; it's familiar, and there don't seem to be any barriers to their participation in the larger community."

The single word that most characterizes the history of southern Jews is assimilation, and, like the abandonment of small towns, assimilation has a larger context. The greatest threat to Judaism in America comes not from "those who would persecute us, but from those who would, without any malice, kill us with kindness—by assimilating us, marrying us, and merging with us out of respect, admiration, and even love," writes Alan M. Dershowitz in *The Vanishing American Jew*. The declining American Jewish population, numbering about five and a half million out of roughly 262 million, makes up only two percent of the U.S. population and is expected to dip below a million by the time America celebrates its tricentennial.

But in the rural American South there was probably no tenable alternative to assimilation, especially for a minority that formed about one percent of the region's population. Beyond just wanting to get along and avoid trouble, southern Jews seemed to feel a special kinship and loyalty to their region. Perhaps it is that Jews and southerners shared a feeling of exile—for Jews a millennia-old legacy, for southerners a result of the Civil War and its agrarian economy.

Macy Hart is no exception. He has remained in Mississippi, rather than opting for New York, say, or Chicago, "by choice, not by sentence. They have more opportunities," Hart says. "I have more challenges." That's the way he likes it.

THIRTY-SIX MILES south of Natchez, near the southwest corner of Mississippi, stands Woodville, a left-behind town of mostly boarded-up shops that was called Little Jerusalem at the turn of the century for its collection of Jewish-owned businesses. David Smith (not Jewish), who grew up in Woodville and curated an exhibit of Jewish life at the Wilkinson County Museum in 1995, recalls his grandmother telling him that it was much more accepted in her day for a Protestant girl to marry a Jewish boy than a Roman Catholic. "Basic economics and basic upbringing," he remembers her saying, were closer to Protestant standards. "The Jewish people had already established their stores; the Irish and Italians were still pushing carts."

In 1888 there were 75 Jews in Woodville; today there are none, and few traces of that culture remain except for the Jewish cemetery. In that respect, Woodville is like Donaldsonville, La., where a fenced-off Hebrew section of a larger cemetery is called Bikur Sholim, and like St. Francisville, La., where Hannah Wood tends 40 stone markers in Hebrew Rest cemetery. Scores of little communities on both sides of the Mississippi tell similar stories of a lost Jewish presence through a few headstones or Jewish names on abandoned stores. But Woodville's Jewish cemetery is where Macy Hart's great-grandfather Isaac rests. For now, at least, Macy and a small band of others remember who Isaac was and fragments of his life story. The Institute of Southern Jewish Life is the only cause for hope that such memories will not vanish altogether. **E**

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"We want to recapture southern Jewish history."