Pee Dee Pioneers

by Alyssa Neely

In 1888 the town of Dillon began sprouting up around a railroad depot built amid pine trees on swampy land of little value, not far from the North Carolina border. A number of Jewish immigrants and their families settled in Dillon and neighboring towns such as Little Rock and Latta. Many played important roles in the local community and one achieved success at the national level as an economist. Although Ben Bernanke, current chairman of the Federal Reserve, was born in Augusta, Georgia, he was raised in Dillon. His grandparents Jonas and Pauline Bernanke immigrated to the United States from Austria in the 1920s, moved to Dillon in the early 1940s, and opened a pharmacy, the Jay Bee Drug Company. In 2006, Dillon County and the South Carolina legislature honored Ben by declaring September 1st Ben Bernanke Day and presenting him with the Order of the Palmetto, the state’s highest civilian award, in recognition of his accomplishments. Ben has come a long way from waiting tables at South of the Border as a college student during his summer vacations.

South of the Border was founded by Little Rock native Alan Schafer in the mid-to-late 1940s, when a North Carolina county bordering South Carolina changed its alcohol licensing laws, limiting sales. Alan seized the opportunity by setting up a beer stand not far from the state line. The acreage he bought was near the north-south highway connecting New York and Miami, later supplanted by Interstate 95. In this ideal location, Alan’s beer business expanded exponentially over the years to become South of the Border, employing hundreds of South Carolinians to run the Mexican-themed amusement park rides, hotels, restaurants, and gift shops. Like many Jews who grew up in small southern towns, Alan was a descendant of a merchant of modest means.

In the late 19th century, Jewish immigrants began to arrive in the Pee Dee region, opening stores in Dillon and nearby towns. Abraham Schafer, Alan’s grandfather, may have been the earliest Jew to settle in the area. Born in Oberheim, Germany, Schafer came to Darlington in the 1870s by way of New York and Charleston and worked for the Iseman family, who had sponsored his immigration. He married Isaac Iseman’s daughter Rebecca, and they settled in Little Rock where they opened a general store. The family of six lived above the shop. Successful in the dry goods business, Abraham and Rebecca expanded their operation, opening stores in Dillon and Latta. When two of their daughters married, they turned the newest stores over to the newlyweds. Belle Schafer and Isadore Blum ran the Dillon location while Lizzie Schafer and her husband Leon Kornblut took over the Latta Dry Goods Company soon after their marriage in 1906.

A decade earlier, 17-year-old Leon Kornblut had emigrated from Austria and followed his brother to Latta. He partnered with his brother-in-law Isadore Blum during the 1920s. At one time, Blum and Kornblut owned as many as eight stores.
scattered throughout the area, staffed by Jews they hired out of Baltimore. Bankruptcy forced them to close their doors in 1928, however, and the two went their separate ways. Blum opened a store just across the state line in Rowland, North Carolina. Kornblut became a well-established businessman who was actively involved in Dillon County’s civic affairs, serving as a director of the Dillon Merchants Association and the Dillon Industrial Corporation. He opened Kornblut’s Department Store with “fashions for the entire family” in two locations, Dillon and Latta. His sons, Moses and Sigmond, followed him into the family business and ran both stores when he retired.

Austrian immigrant Morris Fass and his wife, Rosa Nachman of Charleston, moved to Dillon around 1910 and began a small business that over the years grew into the large Fass Department Store. The couple also acquired a significant amount of real estate, including farmland which they rented to tenants. Morris played key roles in the Dillon Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade. He was an alderman, a Mason, and a charter member of the Dillon Rotary Club. Morris’s brother Max also settled in Dillon and opened a store. A Mason and a Shriner, Max made his living in the insurance and real estate business.

Isadore Cohen left Lithuania in 1910 to avoid conscription into the Russian army. His brother Harry, who had ventured south peddling, urged Isadore to make his way to South Carolina, insisting he could make a decent living. The five dollars he sent took Isadore as far as Dillon, where he peddled before taking a job with one of the Blums in Latta. At some point, he opened his own small store with credit extended by the Baltimore Bargain House. Cohen’s clothing store, which catered to local tenant farmers, thrived and the business grew. Discharged from the military at the end of World War II, his son Leonard joined him and kept the store running until 1987, when I. Cohen’s closed its doors for the last time. Leonard’s children, who had professional careers that took them away from home, were not poised to take over the family business, and competition from the large chain stores had become fierce.

By the 1990s, Dillon and Latta’s Jewish population had dwindled to a fraction of what it once was, yet Jews have made a lasting mark on the region. Moses Kornblut served as a Latta City Council member for nearly 50 years. In 1993, the Latta Rotary Club honored him by naming him Citizen of the Year. Kornblut was also active as president, treasurer, and secretary of Ohav Shalom in Dillon. A devoted member of the congregation, he filled other roles as well, including lay reader and organizer of High Holy Day services. He was also a founding member and president of the Dillon B’nai B’rith Lodge. Moses Kornblut passed away on January 10, 2009. Up to the end, he continued to sit on City Council, serve as Latta’s Mayor Pro Tem, and operate Kornblut’s Department Store, the last Jewish-owned shop in the area.

ISJL Digital Archive

Drawn from material in the College of Charleston’s Jewish Heritage Collection, illustrated histories of several South Carolina Jewish communities have recently been added to the Digital Archive of the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, based in Jackson, Mississippi. Go to www.isjl.org/history/archive and click on SC. Please send comments and corrections to neelya@cofc.edu. We are especially interested in finding photographs of Jewish-owned stores, family events, congregational activities, and streetscapes in these South Carolina communities.
The Rise and Fall of Dillon’s Ohav Shalom

by Alyssa Neely

Austrian immigrants Max and Morris Fass appear to have been the catalysts for establishing Dillon’s first Jewish religious organization. By 1915, the Dillon Hebrew Congregation had formed and was meeting at one Fass home or the other. Charter members included Adolph and Hyman Witcover, William Brick, and Sam Levin, with Morris Fass as lay leader. Beginning in 1922, Rabbi Jacob S. Raisin of Charleston’s Reform temple Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim traveled to Dillon one Sunday a month to conduct services. About the same time, Fannie Brick organized a Sunday school under Rabbi Raisin’s supervision.

In 1928, the congregation and its Sunday school changed its name to the Teresa Witcover Fass Congregation in honor of Max Fass’s wife who died in 1927 at the age of 48. Teresa’s hallmark, noted by many Dillon area residents, was her generous and good-hearted nature. Two months after her death, 21 female members of the congregation, inspired perhaps by the Jewish tradition of carrying on the work of the deceased, founded the Teresa Witcover Fass Sisterhood. Sisterhood members became the backbone of the religious school, hosting holiday celebrations, participating in charitable work, and raising money to build a synagogue.

In 1937, 84 Jews lived in Dillon while another 75 lived in the nearby town of Latta. Dillon’s small congregation struggled during the Great Depression, especially after the deaths of both Fass brothers in 1935. In 1939, the congregation hired Rabbi Samuel R. Shillman of Sumter’s Temple Sinai to lead services. Under Shillman’s leadership, the congregation was reorganized and officially incorporated under the name Ohav Shalom, or Lover of Peace. With a membership of about 20 families, the rejuvenated Reform organization built a house of worship in 1942 and added a community center in 1956.

In the 1950s, the Dillon Temple Sisterhood joined the Conservative National Women’s League—the only South Carolina sisterhood to do so. This association reflected a shift toward Conservative Judaism, a trend noted as early as 1939 by member Moses Kornblut. The congregation’s willingness to hire rabbis of varying backgrounds suggests that the lines between Reform and Conservative remained blurred, a common survival strategy among small-town synagogues.

In 1964, Ohav Shalom celebrated its 25th anniversary. Served on a part-time basis by Rabbi Charles B. Lesser, who led Florence’s Beth Israel between 1961 and 1970, the congregation of 25 families had added a third building, used for educational purposes. Slightly fewer than half the membership lived in Dillon, while the rest made their homes in Latta, Marion, Clío, Hamer, McColl, Mullins, Florence, and across the state line in Fairmount, North Carolina.

The Dillon synagogue maintained its numbers through the 1970s and into the 1980s. By the early 1990s, however, only a handful of Jewish families remained in Dillon. The fate of Ohav Shalom was typical of small-town Jewish life across America, as out-migration, intermarriage, and the deaths of the elderly all took their toll. In 1993, the seven remaining members agreed to close and sell the synagogue. Proceeds from the sale, plus funds remaining in the sisterhood and congregation accounts, were split seven ways, with the stipulation that the recipients would donate the money to the Jewish charity of their choice. The majority gave their portion to Florence’s Temple Beth Israel and most became members of the congregation as well.

This article is a sequel to Pee Dee Pioneers, which appeared in our Spring 2009 issue. Both stories are based on community histories written by Alyssa Neely for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life’s Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities, accessible at www.isjl.org.