

Small-Town Jewry on Wane in Texas

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image: [Shearith Israel, Wharton, TX](#)

Shearith Israel, Wharton, TX

ROSS E. MILLOY

For more than a century, Jewish families have gathered in this unlikely spot along the bottomlands of the Colorado River to study Hebrew, master the Torah and celebrate their history as one of the oldest Jewish communities in Texas.

But on Saturday, members of the Shearith Israel Synagogue met for the last time. Their congregation is disbanding, their distinctive star-shaped synagogue is to be sold, and their religious objects will be scattered among Jewish organizations across the state.

"It's really the end of a way of life, the end of small-town Jewry in Texas," said Larry Wadler, vice president of the congregation, as Sabbath services began on Saturday. "Our community has just quit growing."

Jewish settlers started arriving in Wharton, a former cotton-gin town 60 miles southwest of Houston, just after the Civil War. By the 1890's, they had begun holding services in their homes and at the local Masonic Lodge.

The congregation incorporated in 1917, bent on hiring a rabbi to conduct services and teach children Hebrew, and by 1921 it had erected its first synagogue, which was sold to build the larger Shearith Israel Synagogue in 1956.

"A rich man in New York named Jacob Schiff encouraged us to come to Texas," recalled Mary Meyers Rosenfield, 91, who moved with five other families to Wharton from Minsk, Russia, around 1915. "He said New York was too crowded with Italians

and Irish and other Jews, but that there was plenty of room in Texas.

"A hardware store in Galveston would give the men \$50 worth of merchandise and send them out into the countryside to sell it. If they did well, they got \$100 worth of merchandise, and that's how we got started in business."

By the 1930's Jewish merchants dominated ownership of the retail stores lining the square around the Wharton County courthouse, and Jewish families had spread into the populations of other small towns nearby, like Bay City and El Campo, Mr. Wadler said.

"If the Christian community had not nourished the Jewish community here, it could not have survived," he said. "The Jewish community didn't pick Wharton because there was anything special about it; other communities just weren't looking forward to having Jews in their midst, and consequently we didn't flourish there."

Although Wharton is richly endowed with Methodist, Baptist and Lutheran churches, the residents always seemed to welcome the Jewish community, Mr. Wadler said.

"On the Jewish High Holy Days," he said, "most of the shops on Main Street would be closed, and I've heard more than one story of people waiting until the following day to shop out of respect for our religion."

Nearly 80 families, perhaps 400 people, belonged to the congregation in the 1960's and 1970's; a hundred children studied Hebrew at the synagogue's school on weekends; and thousands showed up for Shearith Israel's annual barbecues, members said on Saturday.

But the financial success of the congregation's members proved to be its downfall. As the merchant families moved into the professional classes, they and their children began moving to larger cities, and older members of the community began to die off, Mr. Wadler said. Attendance at the Sabbath services suffered, the schoolroom, without pupils, was torn down, and eventually the congregation could no longer afford a full-time rabbi. With only 39 members left, the group's board of directors voted this year to disband.

"This was the last remaining small-town synagogue in Texas," said Ilene Robinson, 57, Mrs. Rosenfield's daughter. "We're just suffering the same generational changes that are affecting rural communities across the country."

Indeed, Wharton, a slow-paced community of 9,000 people known primarily as the birthplace of Dan Rather and the playwright Horton Foote, has the feel of a city on the wane. Out on the highway to Houston, the concrete-cones of the Tee-Pee Motel are abandoned and crumbling; the Dairy Princess has been razed; and many of the shops on the town square are closed, their windows soaped.

But just as Wharton's earlier, better days survive in most of Mr. Foote's work as the fictional town of Harrison, Tex., members of Shearith Israel -- which means "remnants of Israel" -- believe their religious roots, though born here, can flourish elsewhere. "I'm still just as Jewish today as I was yesterday, before we shut down," Mr. Wadler said.

Some Shearith Israel members plan to join congregations in Houston. Others say they might join with other Jews and found a synagogue in nearby Bay City.

In concluding Saturday's final service, Rabbi Jerome Cohen told the congregation, "Wherever we are, wherever we go, whenever we worship, we are all still Shearith Israel, remnants of Israel, and we must build a mighty future."

"As we close one door, let us open up another," he said. "Shalom."

Photo: The Shearith Israel Synagogue in Wharton, Tex., one of the oldest Jewish communities in the state, held its last service on Saturday. The congregation once comprised some 400 people but had dwindled to 39 members. (Phillippe Diederich for The New York Times)

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