

Noble County Jewish History

A rumor may have enticed the first Jews to settle in Noble County, specifically Ligonier. The 1854 newspapers announced that the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railroad would pass through Ligonier, a village with 300 residents. Recent German immigrants Frederick William (F. W.) Straus and Solomon Mier recognized the potential economic opportunities a railroad offered and relocated to the small northern Indiana town.¹ Although the railroad company never installed a line through Ligonier, Straus and Mier stayed and created multiple economic opportunities for themselves and their Jewish relatives.²

Straus and Mier's first years in the United States mirrored other early Hoosier Jews. The two immigrants settled near friends from their birth country, including Joseph Steifel who owned an Auburn general store. Steifel helped Straus and Mier by teaching them some English and furnishing them with items to peddle.³ After a dispute Straus and Mier severed ties and each man opened his own businesses. Although competitive with each other, Straus and Mier offered the same assistance they had received from Steifel to subsequent immigrants. With their newly-arrived relatives, both Straus and Mier built successful business firms.

F. W. Straus formed the Straus Brothers Co., after his brothers Jacob and Mathias immigrated to Ligonier. The Strauses opened a general store in 1860 and the *Citizens Bank* in 1868 and constructed an entire block of buildings by 1888. They also ventured into real estate and manufactured buggies. F. W. and Mathias retired to Chicago in the 1880s, leaving Jacob to control the Straus firm with his sons Simon and Isaac and his son-in-law Abraham Goldsmith. The Strauses expanded their interests, controlling the *Farmers Bank* of Albion, the *Auburn State Bank*, and the *Commerce Bank* of Fort Wayne. The family invested early in the telephone and

formed the *Warsaw Telephone System* which established toll lines throughout northern Indiana. Their farm real-estate business, *Straus Quality Farms*, had branches in Fort Wayne, Chicago, Detroit, and Ontario, Canada.⁴

Solomon Mier and his family were equally as successful. Mier operated a clothing business in Ligonier before selling the company to two employees in 1873. Like Straus, Mier had other businesses to manage. Mier owned or invested in the *Banking House of Solomon Mier*, the *Bank of Wayne*, and the *Cromwell State Bank*, owned the title for a northern Indiana electric railway, and manufactured buggies, carriages, and the early automobile, the Runabout. Contemporary reports recognized the firm *Sol Mier & Co.* as one of the largest farmland dealers in the world.⁵

Straus and Mier's Jewish relatives and friends also enjoyed success, organizing businesses that capitalized on Noble County's agriculturally-based economy. Historian Lois Fields Schwartz writes, "The Jewish merchants formed a monopoly in clothing and general merchandise stores, grain and livestock, and land and farm brokerages."⁶ Jacobs owned a general store, Loeser traded horses, Schloss operated a dry goods business, Selig dealt cattle, and Wertheimer bought and sold grain, seed, and wool. These businessmen purchased regional farmers' crops and livestock and sold them to Chicago and Toledo firms and the farmers patronized the Jewish general stores. A study found that in 1878 Ligonier's one-hundred stores grossed \$1,000,000; the town's ten Jewish-owned stores contributed one-third of the total sum.⁷

Ligonier's Jewish population flourished in the late nineteenth century along with the Jewish-owned businesses. By 1865 Ligonier boasted at least fifteen families who formed the Congregation Ahavath Shalom and elected

officials including Mathias Strus, Isaac Ackerman, Jonas Decker, H. B. Falk, Solomon Mier, Leopold Schloss, and F. M. Straus. The Orthodox congregation conducted services in members' homes, required Bar Mitzvah for all thirteen-year-old boys, observed dietary laws such as separate dishes for milk and meat products, and its members wore hats and shawls during worship. In 1871 the congregation built a small synagogue on Main Street. They introduced reforms including installing family pews instead of separate seating for men and women. By 1876 Ahavath Shalom adopted the book of liberal Reform Judaism.

As the local Jewish population swelled to over fifty-five families, the congregation built a more elaborate red-brick temple at 503 South Main Street. Both Jews and non-Jews celebrated its 1889 dedication with a procession, music, sermons, meals, and a ball. The congregation practiced Reform Judaism and replaced their German-language sermons with English and confirmed both boys and girls.⁸

Temple membership declined as older generations died and subsequent generations moved to larger cities in the early twentieth century. In 1904 a part-time rabbi conducted services and in 1932 the congregation only held services on the High Holy Days and the Sabbath School ceased operation. By 1948 the congregation had dwindled to fourteen members.⁹ The temple was sold several times in the second half of the twentieth century to the Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, the Trinity Assembly of God Church, and the Ligonier Public Library.¹⁰ Although its function has changed, the building still features its original stained glass window with the large Star of David over its main entrance.

Footnotes

¹ Lois Fields Schwartz, "The Jews of Ligonier: An American Experience" (Fort Wayne: The Indiana Jewish Historical Society, January, 1978) 5.

² *The New York Times*, 11 November 1984.

³ Nancy Romero, "Rags to Riches Stories Recorded There," *The News-Sentinel*, 16 August 1975.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Schwartz, 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ Karen Murphy, "Exodus: The Jews of Ligonier," *The Indianapolis Star*, 1989.