

Whitley County Jewish History

Jews living in Whitley County during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were a part of, not apart from, mainstream culture. According to one report, one hundred Jewish individuals lived in the northeastern Indiana county in 1900.¹ Most Whitley County Jews resided in Columbia City, but a few families lived in South Whitley and one family lived in Churubusco. Possibly due to their small number, the local Jewish community did not erect a temple or synagogue, a Hebrew school, or kosher businesses. Rather, Whitley Jews befriended their non-Jewish neighbors, attended public schools, occasionally went to Christian Sunday school, and joined interfaith choirs. Yet through individual and group activities, the Whitley Jewry maintained their cultural heritage.

Former Columbia City citizen, Eugene Kraus, Sr. posits that by the time his grandfather Leopold Krause immigrated to Columbia City in 1858, a handful of Jews already lived there.² Another citizen Abraham K. Strouse asserts that most Whitley County Jews immigrated from Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, and Russia in the 1880s and 1890s to flee pogroms.³ Regardless of their arrival date, most nineteenth-century Whitley County Jews established stores after first peddling. These Jewish-owned stores and Jewish residences lined Van Buren and Chauncey Streets in downtown Columbia City.

Area Jews launched congregation Bene Jacob in 1877 and signed a constitution. Bene Jacob conducted High Holy Day Services in rented quarters such as local lodges and churches. Minutes of the Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society document that the organization helped pay for an organ used in a



Abraham Storuse's home in Columbia City (Whitley County).

lodge room.¹⁶ Yet, Bene Jacob did not provide all Jewish religious services. Eugene Kraus, Sr. recalls that he attended a local Lutheran kindergarten and a Presbyterian Sunday School circa 1900–1913 because there was not a Jewish Sunday School in Columbia City. Maureen Isay Grinsfelder recounts that her uncles traveled weekly by train from Churubusco to a Fort Wayne Jewish Sunday School until 1908. Grinsfelder’s father attended a local Methodist Sunday School if his mother, Tillie Starr Isay, did not object to the weekly lesson content.

Whitley County Jews also formed relationships with Fort Wayne’s congregations. Kraus writes, “With few exceptions, Columbia City Jews affiliated with the congregations in Fort Wayne” and traveled to the Allen County city to attend Jewish holiday services.¹⁷ Grinsfelder’s aunt Helen Isay Smith remembers traveling to Fort Wayne, passing by her non-Jewish friends going to school. Smith writes, “I felt a little superior and special because we were all dressed up and going to Temple.”¹⁸ In the early twentieth century Fort Wayne rabbis, particularly those from the Achduth Vesholom Congregation, traveled from Allen County to accommodate Whitley County Jews. Strouse writes, “Rabbi Ettelson came to Columbia City once a week to prepare the confirmands.” The local Lutheran church cancelled their Sunday services once a year and offered their facilities for Jewish confirmation services.¹⁹

Abraham K. Strouse’s grandfather Abraham Kramer, an early Jewish settler, opened a grocery store, which his son Nathan ran after Abraham’s death in 1896. The *Farmers Loan and Trust Company* later used the building. Abraham K. Strouse’s father Moses was born in Germany in 1860 and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of thirteen.⁴ In 1887 Moses and his brother Emanuel opened a clothing store at the corner of Van Buren and Chauncey Streets in Columbia City. After Emanuel moved to Ohio, Moses partnered with his sons Edgar and Ralph and named the store *M. Strouse and Sons*. Moses’ other son Abraham K. Strouse later took over

the business with his brother Edgar and then his nephew Edgar Jr. Abraham K. Strouse lived in a house at 310 East Market Street until 1954. The structure is still in existence.

Leopold Kraus and his sons Max and Sam partnered with Moses Apfelbaum to operate a grain and wool business. Born in 1862, Moses Apfelbaum married Leopold's oldest daughter Hannah. The firm *Kraus and Apfelbaum* had offices in the Masonic Temple and their warehouse in a brick building at 113 East Van Buren Street that the *Superior Garment Company* and the Moose Lodge later used and remains standing today. Although Eugene Kraus, Sr. noted that his grandfather Leopold "spent his life buying and selling grain and wool," the *Kraus and Apfelbaum* firm also had a grocery store at 122 West Van Buren Street.⁵ Store items included furs and apples, and in an 1894 newspaper Kraus and Apfelbaum advertised that they paid "the best price" for local farmers' produce and sold groceries and chinaware "cheaper than any firm in the county."⁶ While the 1880 U.S. census listed Leopold as a grocer, other federal censuses referred to him as a grain and wool dealer.⁷ In 1913 the Kraus and Apfelbaum families relocated to Fort Wayne along with the firm. Leopold maintained a small office in Columbia City, where he traveled each day by train to conduct business. The 1920 federal census reveals that

Leopold lived with his daughter Hannah and son-in-law and business partner Moses and

Leopold Kraus' grain dealership office in Columbia City (Whitley County).



continued to deal grain and wool. By 1930 Leopold retired, leaving Moses as the senior proprietor of their business. Leopold's grandson Eugene joined the family firm in the 1920s, formed the Central States Grain Company, and partly owned the Columbia Grain Company in Columbia City. The Kraus and Apfelbaum families prospered enough to hire live-in servants.⁸

Samuel Apfelbaum had a plumbing store on the block east of the old *Provident Trust Company*. According to Abraham K. Strouse, Apfelbaum "advertised as a 'sanitary plumber.'"⁹ Apfelbaum possibly relocated his business to Gary, Indiana.¹⁰

One of Columbia City's first Jewish residents and city council member Daniel Daniel was born in Germany in 1844 and immigrated to Indiana in 1866. Daniel first peddled and later established the *Star Shoe Store*, which was housed in a brick building at 223 West Van Buren Street from 1897–1982. Daniel's sons Albert and Maurice assisted their father with the shoe business and advertised their fine and heavy rubber boots and shoes as "fresh from the factories" in an 1894 newspaper.¹¹ Daniel's third son Louis helped with his other ventures such as a cattle farm and meat market. A federal census listed both Louis and his father as cattle stock buyers. The Daniels owned farmland on County Road 50 East where they erected a wooden barn with a metal roof. The barn stands empty today. Louis and his wife Thelma lived in three houses in Columbia City that remain standing: 301 East Van Buren Street from 1897–1926, 302 East Van Buren, and 316 North Chauncey Street. Louis' son Daniel L. Daniel also worked in the *Star Shoe Store* as well as his cousin's clothing store *Bluminthal*. Daniel L. lived at 116 South Whitley Street from 1969–1999. The house is still in existence. The *Nook Restaurant* currently occupies the *Star Shoe Store* building.

David Daniel and his sons Harry, Edward, and Lee maintained a butcher shop and a packing plant in Columbia City and a wholesale and retail store in Fort Wayne. The Daniel family also operated a grocery store in Columbia City, which later became the *Williams Market*. The family prospered enough to have a servant.¹²

Lee and Sarah Daniel of the Daniel Bros. Packing Plant lived at 216 North Chauncey Street. The 1920 federal census listed Lee as a county stock buyer. After their deaths, the Daniel brothers' wholesale and meat firm ceased to exist.¹³



The home of Lee and Sarah Daniel in Columbia City (Whitley County).

Hungarian Samuel Lorber was born in 1858 and immigrated in 1880. He ran *Lorber Cloak and Suit Store* with his children. The 1910 federal census listed daughter Ruth as a saleslady and son Milton as a commercial salesman. Milton opened a ladies' ready-to-wear shop with Edgar Lorber in the Grant Building, which was

later used as a dental office until its demolition. The Lorber Family enjoyed the services of a live-in housekeeper at their house, which remains standing.

The Stein family operated the *Chicago Fair*, a notions and dry goods store, in an 1897 brick and stone building at 105 South Main Street. In an 1894 advertisement the Stein brothers conveyed that holiday sales had exceeded their expectations.¹⁴ The family eventually relocated to West Pullman, Illinois. Wright Choice Therapy currently uses the former store space.



The Chicago Fair, dry goods and notion store in Columbia City (Whitley County).

The 1889 Clugston building at 201-203 West Van Buren Street housed the *Flox and Flox Department Store* from 1926–1982. Jacob Flox partnered with George

Harrison until Harrison’s death, after which he invited his brother Louis into the firm. Jacob lived in a house at 604 West Van Buren Street from 1926–1954 and in a brick home at 302 Line Street, which Moses Strouse later purchased. After the Flox brothers’ deaths, Jacob’s son Richard served as the store’s proprietor. The Estlick-Girvin and Lefever Insurance Agency currently operates in the former store and the two houses remain standing.

The Landy, Portman, Levin, and Heller families each owned their own scrap iron and metal businesses in Columbia City. Harry and Rebecca Levin emigrated from Russia in 1911 and lived at 509 East Van Buren Street, currently the River Bluff Apartments. A federal census listed Harry as a “coal and junk owner.” Charles

and Rebecca Heller resided at 112 Swihart Street and ran their business in their backyard. Although both houses remain standing, the junkyards are gone.

Harry and Sadie Rush resided in the Rush Apartments at 210-214 East Van Buren Street. The Simon Meyer family lived at the corner of Wayne and Van Buren Streets. Both of these structures remain in existence.

The Isay family and bachelor Louis Gloutzer comprised the Jews living in Churubusco. Leopold Isay emigrated from Bremen, Indiana to Churubusco in 1880 to clerk and keep the books in his uncle's, Theodore Mayer, dry goods store. By 1902 Leopold purchased full interest in the store and his wife, Tillie Starr Isay, assisted with the daily operations.

Although Whitley County Jews never built a house of worship, they did establish a Jewish cemetery and a local congregation. The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society organized in 1874 and aimed to help bury local Jews. In 1890 the society founded a cemetery at Spencer and Madison Streets in Columbia City and maintained it until the group disbanded in January 1931. The local Jewish community operated the cemetery until management was turned over to the city. Although the Jewish cemetery is currently part of Greenhill Cemetery, a road and some property separates it from the other graves.

The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society met regularly in private residences to sign a register and collect dues. The group participated in social welfare activities, making donations for flood relief, orphanages, Matzos for Jews, war sufferers, hospitals, Christmas funds, and to anonymous needy individuals. In 1893 Leopold Isay of Churubusco wrote his fiancée Tillie Starr that although there was no temple in the small town and that he spent

Yom Kippur in his room, Columbia City boasted a Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society. Isay assured Starr that she would enjoy the society members.¹⁵

The Whitley Jewry also formed close relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors. Kraus writes, “Most of the time, I was the only child of Jewish parentage in class . . . We had Jewish friends and non-Jewish friends visit our home, and we visited their homes.” Few Whitley Jews remember hostility or discrimination. Kraus writes, “I do not recall a single instance of anti-Semitism during my childhood.”²⁰ Grinsfelder chronicles that Churubusco non-Jews expressed curiosity when her grandfather Leopold Isay first opened his store. One farmer wished to meet Leopold because he had “never seen a Jew before.” When Leopold died years later businesses closed and people lined the streets to pay their respects to their friend.²¹

Jewish families actively participated in Whitley community organizations: Leopold Isay founded the Churubusco Masons and served as president of the school board, Eugene Kraus, Sr. was a member of the Board of Directors of Whitley County Memorial Hospital, at least five Jews have been selected as president of the annual Old Settlers Day celebration, and others have established or led the Rotary Club, PTA, and the local Red Cross. Tillie Starr Isay baked goods for the Methodist church’s fundraisers and sang in the church choir, skipping words not consistent with her Jewish faith.²²



The Jewish Section of the City Cemetery in Columbia City (Whitley County), originally founded as a separate cemetery, but eventually given to the city to assure that maintenance would occur.

Whitley County Jews socialized with non-Jewish residents and assimilated to the American culture while honoring their culture and faith. Extant structures such as former stores and residences and resident testimonies illustrate Whitley County's Jewish heritage. Nineteen structures were surveyed; one was rated Outstanding, none were rated as Notable, 18 were rated as Contributing, and none were rated as Non-Contributing.

Footnotes

¹ A.K. Strouse, "The History of the Jewish People of Columbia City and Whitley County, Indiana," *Jewish Life in Indiana* (Indiana Jewish Historical Society, Inc., 1980), 1. The 1910 U.S. Census notes that Kraus emigrated from Germany in 1856. Kraus may have temporarily lived in other American cities before settling in Columbia City.

² Eugene Kraus, Sr., "History of the Kraus Family of Columbia City, Indiana" *Jewish Life in Indiana* (Indiana Jewish Historical Society, Inc., 1980), 13-14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Strouse, 5. According to a federal census, Moses Strouse immigrated to the United States in 1877. This information conflicts with A. K. Strouse's recollections.

⁵ Kraus, 14.

⁶ Advertisement. *The Columbia City Post*, 19 December 1894.

⁷ 1880 U.S. Census; available from www.ancestry.com (accessed 8 September 2006).

⁸ 1920 & 1930 U.S. Censuses; available from www.ancestry.com (accessed 8 September 2006).

⁹ Strouse, 3.

¹⁰ The 1920 U.S. Census lists a "Sam Aplebaum" in Gary Ward 7, Lake, IN as a "plumber/steel works."

¹¹ Advertisement, *The Columbia City Post*, 10 January 1894.

¹² 1930 U.S. Census.

¹³ Strouse, 3-4.

¹⁴ Advertisement. *The Columbia City Post*, January 1894.

¹⁵ Maureen Isay Grinsfelder, "The Jewish 'Community' of Churubusco, Indiana, 1880-1980" *Indiana Jewish History*, no. 33 (July 2000): 54.

¹⁶ Strouse, 6.

¹⁷ Kraus, 10.

¹⁸ Grinsfelder, 56.

¹⁹ Kraus, 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

²¹ Grinsfelder, 53-54.

²² Ibid.