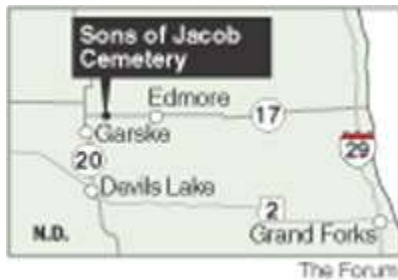


Family honor

**By Janell Cole, The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead
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Lay Rabbi Janeen Kobrinsky of Fargo, standing at the left edge of the monument, and some of the more than 70 people attending the ceremony Sunday engage in the Jewish custom of placing small stones on a grave marker to show it has been visited. The ceremony at the Sons of Jacob Jewish cemetery near Garske was to dedicate a monument to the Jewish homesteaders who settled in the area. Janell Cole / The Forum

Garske, N.D. - The punishing southwest wind seemed fitting, as menacing deep-gray skies greeted more than 70 people who turned out Sunday to rededicate a pioneer Jewish homesteaders' cemetery.

Those gathered knew the Garske Colony settlers' lives in the fields surrounding the small knoll north of Devils Lake in Ramsey County was a harsh one, much harsher than the wind chill that burnished their noses and cheeks to a bright pink.

Sunday's ceremony at the Sons of Jacob Cemetery honored the resting place of an estimated 50 of the Jewish homesteaders who lived and died here between 1882 and 1935. The name comes from a St. Paul synagogue whose members sent financial assistance to the Garske Colony.

Jewish descendants of those pioneers came from as far away as Bellingham, Wash., Lawrence, Kan., and Minneapolis-St. Paul for Sunday's occasion, and were joined by dozens of gentile friends from the Devils Lake area.

"It's great, absolutely amazing," said Myer Shark when he saw Sunday's turnout. Shark, a Devils Lake native and former Fargo resident who now lives in St. Louis Park, Minn., has worried about the cemetery's care in years past, but no longer. It is fenced, mowed and marked by signs, including a new monument.

While growing up, Shark shared Jewish services with the farmers that remained at Garske and traveled to Devils Lake for high holidays.

Lay Rabbi Janeen Kobrinsky of Fargo, standing next to a new granite monument naming all of the pioneers, chanted the Eyl Molei Rachamin in Hebrew: God full of compassion, grant rest to these people and may they find peace in your sheltering wings.

Only 15 grave markers remain, some of them merely scraps of metal on which inscriptions were punched or etched.

Many believe there are more graves than that, said Leighton Siegel of St. Paul, gesturing at the many small, unmarked mounds dotting the ground. But how many more, "I don't think anyone knows."

Not unlike other pioneer-era graveyards, those buried here include a disturbing number of children.

The first burial was of a 19-month-old Kaufman boy in either 1885 or 1888. Others include Anna Canter, 12; Charlotte Greenberg, 4; Israel Greenberg, 11; Joseph Canter, 13; and Benny Parks, about 2 weeks old.

Siegel's wife, Dianne Siegel, is the great-granddaughter of one of the Jewish homesteaders. She compiled a history of the settlement and its cemetery for Sunday's event.

The genesis of the new monument and Sunday's ceremony came about two years ago when Lawrence architect Hal Ettinger was on a business trip to Fargo. Knowing his great-grandfather, Simon Ettinger, was buried in a Jewish cemetery near Devils Lake, he went in search of him.

With help from Ramsey County Courthouse workers, he found the cemetery one weekend in October 2004. He was startled to find himself reading: "Simon Ettinger, died Aug. 28, 1891." Aug. 28 is Hal Ettinger's birthday and he is the last of the male Ettingers. To have the first male Ettinger in America and the last linked by a single date "was very dramatic for me," he said.

A year later, he returned with his sister, Judy Ettinger of Atlanta, and this time, "I was convinced something should be placed there."

He began contacting other descendants of the Garske Colony and proposed a pledge drive for a permanent marker. Donations poured in from North Dakota to Florida.

For a place most North Dakotans aren't even aware exists, the Garske Colony of Jewish homesteaders – as well as several others in the state, all of them long gone – is the subject of a remarkable amount of historical writing.

Much of it describes how non-farming Eastern European and Russian Jews escaped the murderous pogroms of the 1880s and took up agriculture on the Great Plains. It was thanks to the availability of free homesteads, as well as the inspiration and assistance of millionaire German philanthropist Baron de Hirsch's Jewish Colonization Society, the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Society of New York and, variously, the generosity of Minneapolis and St. Paul synagogue congregations.

The settlement is referred to variously as the Garske Colony, the Russian Hebrew Society of Ramsey County and the Sons of Jacob, which is the cemetery and a never-built synagogue, plus the short-lived post office names of Iola and Benzion.

The Jewish farm families at Garske had all moved away by 1925 and the last burial was Mandel Mill of Devils Lake.

Words of memory

The inscription on the cemetery monument dedicated Sunday:

This monument serves as a Memorial to those courageous Jewish homesteaders who, through perseverance and acceptance of exceptionally harsh living conditions, established Garske Colony, a Jewish community in Ramsey County, ND (1883-1925).

Those men, women and children who settled near where this cemetery stands, left Europe during the pogroms of the 1880s. They were attracted to the prospect of free land in the territory that included North Dakota and came to look for their piece of the American Dream. As with all communities, there were successes and failures, life and death. The Sons of Jacob cemetery plot which contains the remains of some of the earliest settlers is what we rededicate this 17th day of September 2006.

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