

Sons of Jacob Cemetery honors early Jewish settlers

By Tessa Sandstrom
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For a small group of settlers to North Dakota, their presence is not as vibrant and well-known as the American Indians, Scandinavians, Germans, or many others that make up North Dakota's rich culture. One of their only memorials stands at the end of a modest prairie trail that leads to a small grassy knoll near Garske in Ramsey County. There, a granite marker is a silent tribute to a small band of Jewish settlers who came to North Dakota and tried their best to make a living in a rough and unforgiving environment. Many of those settlers have that grassy knoll as their final resting place.

The marker stands among 15 identifiable tombstones in the Sons of Jacob Cemetery, although other unmarked graves could lie among them. The memorial was placed there last September, through the collaborative efforts of Devils Lake citizens and Hal Ettinger, a descendant of one of the Jewish settlers, who lives in Lawrence, Kansas. Ettinger's great-grandfather, Simon Ettinger, rests in the cemetery, his grave marked with an unorthodox tombstone made from a piece of tin draped over a stone. It was after visiting that grave that Ettinger decided these early settlers needed a permanent memorial.

According to Ettinger, a small band of Russian-Jews came to Ramsey County to homestead in the 1880s and 1890s after escaping persecution in Russia. They came with the hopes of building a better life, but the settlers were faced with other hardships.

"They were merchants, teachers, shopkeepers," says Ettinger, "they weren't farmers! But they left persecution and came to America and tried to become farmers."

Unaccustomed to farming, especially in the rough terrain of North Dakota, settling on their lots was a struggle for the settlers, who faced poor conditions and numerous



This unorthodox tombstone marks the resting place of Simon Ettinger. *Leighton Siegel photo*

crop failures. Many families moved out within the next few years, but others stayed to battle the elements. By 1888, the settlers were receiving welfare from sympathetic Jews in the Twin Cities. But even that did not help enough. By 1920, most of the families had drifted away. Their presence, however, was not forgotten by all.

Mike Connor of Devils Lake recalls stories his parents told him about the settlers and the hard times they faced on the Dakota prairies. This brief part of North Dakota history had always intrigued Connor and after hearing of Ettinger's



Mike Connor of Devils Lake, left, and Rabbi Janeen Kobrinsky of Temple Beth Elim, Fargo, speak at the memorial's dedication ceremony September 17, 2006. *Louise Oleson, Devils Lake Journal, photo*

plans to erect a monument, Connor was glad to help. Dennis Kitsch joined the cause and did research for the cemetery, while Connor worked on gaining local support and the sponsorship from the Devils Lake Basin Joint Water Resource Board for the memorial. Both Connor and Ettinger were amazed at the support they received.

"It was a beautiful thing," says Ettinger. "This was a col-



A small gathering of descendants and area residents attended the September dedication. *Louise Oleson, Devils Lake Journal, photo*

laborative effort by Jews and non-Jews, locals and non-locals, and many were interested even though it happened over a hundred years ago.”

The monument memorializes the names of the Jewish settlers, but as efforts progressed to establish the granite marker, it came to memorialize newly-forged friendships as well. People from across the nation and the state came to know each other well, but according to Connor, it was as if they had known each other for many years.

“What’s odd is that sometimes you meet people and you’ll still have that getting acquainted feeling,” says Connor, “but it seems like on this cemetery, once you talked to them or got an email, it was like hearing from an old friend.”

This connection may be due to the fact that there is a shared history, says Ettinger. “It’s a unique story. It is just a sliver of history that came, some were buried and now it’s gone, but it really impacted a lot of people’s lives. Homesteaders took

a part of North Dakota with them as they dispersed in the early 1900s, so a bit of North Dakota is in a lot of people throughout the country and throughout the world. That was one reason I wanted to make sure we had something permanent out there – so that flash wouldn’t be forgotten.”



Two New York rabbis visited the cemetery in August, as part of a visit they make to rural areas every summer. They are Rabbi Cheskel Rothman, left and Rabbi Yudi Steiner. Louise Oleson, *Devils Lake Journal*, photo