

Memories Set in Stone

By Kevin Bonham, Herald Staff Writer Published Saturday,
September 16, 2006

GARSKE, N.D. Hal Ettinger had more than a passing curiosity about North Dakota when he traveled from Kansas to Fargo on business a couple of years ago.

"I knew that my great-grandfather was buried somewhere in North Dakota," he said. After his work was done, he traveled to Devils Lake for the weekend.

Sons of Jacob Cemetery

September 16, 2006



Dennis Kitsch, whose family owns the land where Sons of Jacob Cemetery sits near Garske, N.D., looks at a headstone Friday. Local community and Jewish descendants will dedicate a permanent memorial Sunday. The memorial contains more than 100 names of the original homesteaders.

Herald photo by Jay Pickthorn

© 2006 Grand Forks Herald
375 2nd Ave. N. Grand Forks, ND 58206-6008
All rights reserved [Terms and Conditions](#)

"He was attempting to homestead in Ramsey County," Ettinger said. "I did some homework and found that cemetery."

The Sons of Jacob Cemetery is tucked away on a wind-swept hill surrounded by a 5-acre piece of native prairie, about 25 miles north of Devils Lake. It's a piece of North Dakota history, a testament to the struggle of Jewish refugees trying to carve out a new way of life in a foreign land.

Simon Ettinger was one of 90 Eastern European and Russian Jews who emigrated to what became the Garske Colony after escaping from anti-Semitic persecution in the Russian Empire in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

German philanthropist Baron de Hirsch, who was well aware of the Homestead Act in the United States, sponsored the resettlement. With the promise of free land for some hard work, he paid for their journeys and helped to get them established on the Northern Plains.

Unlike most European settlers at the time, these Jewish immigrants knew little or nothing about agriculture. But farming was their ticket to a new life. They endured harsh winters and struggled to make ends meet. While many of them failed at farming, the Garske Colony was considered a success.

Fieldstone markers

Hal Ettinger was both excited and troubled by his discovery in 2004. The cemetery was fenced, with a wooden gate. A blue-on-white sign at the entrance noted that it was established in 1885.

He found his great-grandfather's gravesite, outlined by a ring of fieldstone rocks. A crude, rusted metal nameplate with his name and the year he died, 1891, was attached with barbed wire anchored into the ground.

Simon Ettinger arrived at the Garske Colony five years earlier. He died just six months after he was issued a land patent free title to his 160 acres. His widow, with five young children, then moved away, reportedly with a total of \$10 in their pockets.

Hal Ettinger counted a dozen total grave markers, mostly fieldstone gathered from the surrounding countryside. Many had names and dates of those buried some adults, some children carved into the stone, some with encryptions in Hebrew. All were weathered, some barely legible.

After Ettinger returned to Kansas, he wondered what could be done to preserve the memory of his great-grandfather.

"My curiosity grew. I wanted to know more about him, and that led me to other people, other descendants," he said.

Ettinger started researching names and found other descendants. He decided that a permanent monument would be a fitting tribute. So, he started a fund-raising campaign for the \$2,500 granite monument.

He contacted people in Devils Lake. Mike Conner, whose family homesteaded near the colony, adopted the cause.

"My parents always talked about how tough the Jewish settlers had it at the turn of the century," Conner said. "They were part of the community. Those people who I grew up around, they always left me with a feeling of respect. They went through some times that we couldn't imagine."

Conner manages the Devils Lake Basin Joint Water Resource Board, which became the official sponsor. The agency applied for contributions from other organizations. The Devils Lake Area Foundation contributed \$500.

To date, the campaign has raised about \$5,000. Ettinger said the extra money is being held in a fund for cemetery maintenance. The money has come from all over the country

Ettinger doesn't know how many descendants will travel to North Dakota for the dedication, but he's heard from some in California and New York, and other places in between.

Myer Shark will be back. He lives in the Twin Cities and has a son, Steve, living in Fargo. Although not a direct descendant of the Garske Colony homesteaders, he grew up in Devils Lake.

"My parents both came from Lithuania," he said. "They settled in St. Paul. That's where they met," the 93-year-old retired attorney said.

Shark's family moved to Devils Lake in 1909, where they started a retail clothing business Shark Clothiers, which eventually had stores in Fargo, Bismarck and Minot. A brother also was a partner in Reutell's in Grand Forks.

"The farming community that was established there really was part of the Devils Lake Jewish community," Shark said. "The farmers gradually left the farm. Some of them moved into Devils Lake."

The old Friedman Clothing Store in Devils Lake was owned by Louie Friedman, whose ancestors Herman, Jacob and Lena Friedman are buried in Garske.

Maier Calof is there, too. He's the patriarch of the family whose memoirs are documented in a book, "Rachel Calof's Story."

And Mandel Mill, 1860-1935. His grandson, Martin Mill, who lives in San Diego, Calif., returns to Devils Lake every few years to visit the cemetery.

"Mandel had a little corner store in Devils Lake," said Dennis Kitsch, whose family owns the land on which the cemetery rests. "He had a wagon he would drive around to the farms and sell fish pike and walleye that he bought from somewhere in Minnesota."

Kitsch's grandfather, Nick Kitsch, bought three quarters of land from the government in 1902, after many of the homesteaders had gone.

"They watched over it, and fenced it to keep the cattle out," Kitsch said of his grandfather.

The Kitsch family has continued to maintain the cemetery over the years, keeping the grass cut and mending the fence and gates.

"It's a wonderful thing, to put a monument here," the 79-year-old retired farmer said. "They were good neighbors. And future generations should know they were here."

That's what Hall Ettinger had in mind.

"It's been a very rewarding experience," he said. "It's important insomuch as it's a memorial to those individuals who attempted to homestead there. Without it, any record of their existence might just fade away."

Bonham reports on the region. Reach him at (701) 780-1269, (800) 477-6572, ext. 269; or kbonham@gfherald.com.

