

IN THE SHADOWS OF THE PAST

by John Zaleski, Jr.

— There's a small square of virgin prairie near Garske that has never felt the bite of plow or the tread of domestic hoof. It rests alone in a sea of plowed fields on an unobtrusive knoll. An old Ramsey county farmer takes care of it — mends its fences and honors its boundaries. Shrouded now by the passage of years, the small plot has been reclaimed by prairie grass, wild flowers and burrowing badgers.

But the tangled growth of the prairie and the silent crush of the years cannot hide the rich history that makes this tiny parcel of unturned ground unique. It is the final resting place of members of a band of Jewish settlers who came to Dakota Territory in the 1880s, but were beaten by the harsh land and economic misfortune.



Located in Ramsey County's Sullivan Township, the Sons of Jacob Cemetery holds 15 recognizable graves. Some are mere mounds of prairie stone, mute and unidentified. But others record the names Canter, Mill, Yaffe, Greenbergh, Adelman and Kaufmann.

In October, the history of the sacred Jewish ground was brought to life when descendants of the early settlers visited the Devils Lake area. Stewart Stern of

Hollywood, California, and Jeff Kaufmann of Santa Monica, California, are believed to be the only descendants of the Jewish pioneers to visit the burial ground since the settlement disbanded in the early 1900s.

Stern is a screenwriter and has written scripts for "The Ugly American," "Rachel, Rachel," and "Rebel Without a Cause," among other notable movies. His mother, Frances Kaufmann Stern, is a daughter of a pioneer family that homesteaded near Garske. She is living in New York.

Kaufmann is the grandson of Albert Kaufmann, also a member of the pioneer

family. Albert Kaufmann, who died several years ago, entered the American movie industry and was responsible for the growth of the Paramount theater chain. He was born in the settlement near Garske.

The visitors spent three days in the Lake Region while on a cross-country tour of the United States. From the Lake Region they drove to the Turtle Mountains where their pioneer ancestors reportedly traded furs with the Indians to supplement a meager income from small potato and grain crops. »

Stewart Stern (left) and Jeff Kaufmann search for evidence of pioneer graves at the Sons of Jacob Cemetery near Garske.





Stern (left) and Kaufmann took pictures of each recognizable grave marker and hoped to have their relatives translate the Hebrew inscriptions. Here they examine a weathered marker carved from native prairie stone.

Stern and Kaufmann hoped to visit in New York with former movie magnate Adolf Zukor, who had been married to Stern's aunt, Lottie Kaufmann. Lottie had lived on the homestead in Ramsey county in the 1880s.

The Californians planned to present the 99-year-old Zukor with photos of the cemetery and some prairie soil from the Jewish homestead, which was located six miles south of the plot. The site is now on land owned by farmer Ted Overbo. Only an old granary remains.

Two chapters in Zukor's biography "The House That Shadows Built" by William Irwin, chronicle the movements of the Kaufmann family and the Kohn brothers from their homes in Europe to homesteads in Dakota Territory.

The book reports that in 1881 Morris and Samuel Kohn emigrated to the United States from the wine district in Hungary where they had been prosperous vineyard owners. A plague had devastated their crop and destroyed their livelihood. They arrived in Chicago and took jobs in the textile industry. A year later their elder sister, Esther, who was married to vineyard owner Hermann Kaufmann, brought her family to America. The Kaufmanns had two daughters, Nina and Lottie. Lottie would eventually meet and marry Zukor.

By March, 1884, the Kaufmanns and Kohns had saved enough money to fulfill their dream — homesteading in Dakota Territory. The availability of vast acres of virgin land held great promise for men who had been farmers in their European homeland.

At that time Devils Lake was the rails end, and settlers could rent an entire boxcar for \$60 to make the week-long trip from Chicago. Morris Kohn and Kaufmann were to make the trip. Samuel and Mrs. Kaufmann and the girls remained behind, to follow later in the year.

The two immigrants arrived at Devils Lake in April in the midst of a land boom, and wasted no time in staking out a homestead about 20 miles north of the rails end.

But the good fortune they'd dreamed of was not to be theirs.

Within days after hastily building a crude frame and tarpaper shack, Kaufmann accidentally ignited some kerosene and burned the structure to the ground. The wind-whipped fire spread from the shack to the dry prairie and was soon out of control. Rain smothered the fire, but not before the men had lost most of their possessions and the horses had run off. The rain changed to a spring snow storm and then to a raging blizzard.

But the pioneers rebuilt (this time of sod), seeded 40 acres to potatoes, and in late summer, sent for Mrs. Kaufmann and the children.

The intrepid homesteaders survived that first winter on income from the potato crop, the milk from two cows and money sent from Samuel, who had remained in Chicago. Morris Kohn also traded furs with Indians and half-breed trappers in the Turtle Mountains.

With the small profits saved that winter, Kohn and Kaufmann were able to purchase plows and harrows in Devils

Lake. As soon as the frost left the ground they began breaking the thick sod. Working nearly 16 hours a day, they seeded a quarter section of the rich, black earth to wheat. The crop thrived. The golden grain was doing so well, in fact, that the partners planned to seed an entire section the following season.

But the first week in August shuddered under an early Arctic cold wave. A killer frost blasted the fat kernels to black pellets, destroying any hope of a crop that year.

Samuel kept sending money from Chicago, but interest on the farm implements and other debts spelled the end of homesteading for the settlers.

Morris did some carpentry work and traded furs, but the premature frost had deflated the land boom in the Devils Lake area and creditors demanded their money. He quit the homestead and returned to Chicago where he worked to pay off his debts.

The Kaufmanns, however, remained at the settlement for another five years. During those years Mrs. Kaufmann gave birth to three children — Julia, Albert and an unnamed boy who died at age 19 months. He was buried on this hill that was to become the Sons of Jacob Cemetery.

Conditions continued to worsen for the Kaufmanns. The once-friendly temperament of the Indians soured as more white men moved into the region. Bands of horse thieves often made forays out of Canada. The two eldest girls, Nina and Lottie, were old enough for school, but had to ride ten miles to the school bus. Herman Kaufmann feared for their safety.

So after six years of pioneering in Dakota Territory, the Kaufmanns returned to Chicago where Herman re-entered the textile business. Mrs. Kaufmann had one more daughter, Frances, after returning to the city. Frances is the mother of screenwriter Stern.

Certainly the story of the Kohns and the Kaufmanns does not complete the picture of the Jewish settlement in Ramsey county. Other Jewish pioneers came to the area and homesteaded near Garske. History records the names of Solomon and Savol Kalov, Abraham Calof, and Sushanskys and others. Members of these families are buried at the Sons of Jacob Cemetery. ■