

## November 1 - 3, 2013 SJHS to Meet in Birmingham, Alabama

By Stuart Rockoff

This year the Southern Jewish Historical Society will be meeting in Alabama's "Magic City" for the first time in 25 years! In conjunction with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the seminal Birmingham Civil Rights Campaign of 2013, the conference will explore the topic of Jews and the struggle for civil rights.



Our keynote speaker will be celebrated scholar and civil rights activist Julian Bond. His talk, which will take place Friday night at Temple Emanu-El, is co-sponsored by the temple's Steiner Interfaith Fund of the Rabbi Grafman Endowment Fund. Bond will also lead a tour of Birmingham civil rights sites on Friday afternoon, so plan to arrive for the conference early. To honor Rabbi Allen Krause, a noted scholar and board member of the SJHS who passed away last year, Mark Bauman, the editor of the society's journal *Southern Jewish History*, will speak about Krause's interviews with southern rabbis during the Civil Rights Movement.



In addition to the topic of civil rights, the program will also feature presentations about Birmingham Jewish history and various other aspects of the southern Jewish experience. Dan Puckett and Stuart Rockoff are

co-chairs of the program committee, and they promise an entertaining and informative weekend. A more detailed program will be printed in the next issue of the *Rambler*.



Our conference hotel will be the Doubletree, located in the city's bustling "Little Five Points" neighborhood, just a short walk to our program sites and to numerous restaurants and shops. We have secured a special rate of \$119 a night, plus tax. Contact the hotel at (205) 933-9000 to reserve your room now. Be sure to ask for the special group rate for the Southern Jewish Historical Society conference.

Our conference is part of the city's official commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Birmingham Civil Rights Campaign. The Birmingham Jewish Federation and the University of Alabama at Birmingham will be our co-hosts for the weekend. The 2013 conference promises to be a memorable one.

We hope to see you there!



Top left: Birmingham, Alabama (Photo courtesy of Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau). Bottom left: Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham (Photos courtesy ISJL). Top right: Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham (c)Chris Pruitt (CC BY-SA 3.0). Bottom right: Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (Photo courtesy of Birmingham Convention and Visitors Bureau).



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## President's Message *By Dale Rosengarten*



When I started work as curator of the Jewish Heritage Project at the College of Charleston in 1995, I was charged first and foremost with recording oral histories. Leaders of one of our sponsoring agencies, the brand new Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, were mindful that Jewish life in small towns was passing from the scene. As the sons and daughters of successful shopkeepers graduated from universities, moved to cities, and became lawyers, doctors, professors, and accountants, no one was left to mind the store. Inter-marriage, upward mobility, and out-migration were taking their toll. We had to start immediately if we hoped to capture the history of a bygone era in the words of the people who had lived it.

A second task, championed by colleagues at the University of South Carolina's McKissick Museum, was to survey the state for objects of Jewish ritual and domestic life that were worthy of display. We intended from the start to produce an exhibition, and in seven years it came to pass. *A Portion of the People: 300 Years of Southern Jewish Life* opened in Columbia at McKissick Museum in 2002, and over the next two years traveled to venues in Charleston, New York City, and Charlotte.

Our third partner, the College of Charleston library, wanted to build a collection of research materials, manuscripts, photographs, and artifacts for its archives, a goal that dovetailed nicely with the search for exhibition objects.

Through the oral history project my team of volunteers and I were welcomed into people's homes and hearts. We asked the men and women we interviewed to tell us what it was like to grow up Jewish in the South, to search their memories as well as their attics, trunks, and drawers for bits and pieces of the past. Initially, we hoped to record some three dozen oral histories; the number grew and grew until we had interviewed more than 300 people.

The work of recording interviews has been followed by the more costly and intensive labor of transcribing and cataloguing these memoirs. But the value of the finished products is inestimable. The point of oral history is to put life back into history, to express the *lived* life, the *felt* experience. Generations of Jewish southerners, previously hidden to history, have had a chance to reflect on their lives and leave a permanent record, in their own words. They have given the rest of us the gift of knowledge while assuring themselves that their stories will live on after them. They have extended the longevity of the Jewish historical record. We can share in their pride of purpose and their slice of immortality.

Moreover, I contend, the subjective point of view, even as it shifts over time, is as valuable a source of information as a newspaper report, a court deposition, a deed, a ledger, or a will.

For all these reasons—historical, institutional, educational, psychological—I encourage members of the Southern Jewish Historical Society to design your own oral history projects, even if it means simply interviewing your grandmothers. Go forth, ask questions, listen, and record!

## Rosenwald School Restored

**By Milton Grisham**

After massive damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a Rosenwald school in Pass Christian, Mississippi, was recently rededicated and repurposed as a senior citizen's center.

Known locally as the Randolph School, the elegant U-shaped brick building was originally built in 1927 as the first public school for the city's black community. It is one of only about a dozen surviving Rosenwald schools in Mississippi out of more than 550 built across the state in the early 1900s.

After working with Booker T. Washington on the board of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Julius Rosenwald, the president of the Sears catalog empire, formed the Rosenwald Foundation and, in less than 20 years, spent more than \$28 million to build over 5,000 black

schools, teacher's homes, and workshops throughout the former Confederate states.

The historic school in Pass Christian, on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, was restored with funding from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, FEMA, and other agencies.



The restored Rosenwald School in Pass Christian, Mississippi, originally built in 1927. Photos courtesy of Milton Grisham.

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## Harriet Wise Stern

By Sumner Levine



It is with profound sadness that we inform you of the death of Harriet Wise Stern of Memphis, Tennessee. Harriet died unexpectedly on December 22, 2012, after a brief illness.

Born in Chattanooga on August 22, 1933, Harriet was the wife of the late Dr. Thomas N. Stern, to whom she was married for 49 years. She moved to Memphis after her marriage and devoted her life to *tikkun olam*. Harriet was dedicated both to the Southern Jewish Historical Society (SJHS), which she served multiple times as a board member and as an officer, and to the Jewish Historical Society of

Memphis and the Mid-South, which she co-founded with her husband and others, and which she served as first president. With her good friend Margie Kerstine, she regularly attended the SJHS conferences, appearing at

each session with her notebook and pencil in hand. Her thirst for knowledge never diminished.

A 1955 graduate of Smith College where she received her bachelor's degree, she earned a master's degree from then Memphis State University so that she could better teach reading to inner city school children. Among other causes too numerous to name, she worked for and supported organizations that provided food and clothing for needy children and adults. She taught the disadvantaged, raised funds to help victims of AIDS, read to the vision impaired, and personally traversed the city of Memphis to count the city's homeless population in an effort to secure additional funding for them.

A faithful and tireless and hands-on volunteer and friend, Harriet always shunned recognition for her many acts of kindness. She was lovingly referred to as "Saint Harriet" or as "Mother Teresa of Memphis" for her devotion to good causes and for her self-effacing manner. Her death is an enormous loss to the community. May her memory be a blessing.

## Request for Submissions New Listing of Resource Persons

The Southern Jewish Historical Society is currently soliciting participants for a new resource persons listing. The listing is open to those with expertise pertinent to the field of southern Jewish history and culture: lecturers, archival consultants, genealogy consultants, authors and editors, oral history interviewers, museum professionals, and exhibit curators. Materials supplied by the participants will be placed on the society's web site and made available to individuals and organizations that wish to use the services of those listed.

Those who wish to be included should provide the following information: (a) name, (b) contact information, (c) current and other significant positions, (d) relevant education/training, (e) summary of relevant publications and evidence of work in particular field of expertise, (f) financial requirements (honoraria plus expenses), and, as applicable, (g) speaking topics, consulting expertise, and/or specific activities to be performed. Submission of a recent photograph is optional.

Please submit materials via email attachment to Dr. Mark K. Bauman, Chair, SJHS Resource Persons Committee, at [markkbauman@aol.com](mailto:markkbauman@aol.com).

The SJHS requests that individuals who obtain engagements as a result of this listing service make a voluntary contribution to the society based on fees received. (Suggested amount: 15% of total after expenses). We welcome your inclusion as a resource person on this listing.



Left: Edna Frankfurt Ravkind, Elsie Frankfurt Pollock, Louise Frankfurt Gartner.  
c. 1947-1950. Photo courtesy of Kay Goldman.

## Dressing Modern Maternity The Frankfurt Sisters of Dallas and the Page Boy Label

By Kay Goldman

In Depression-era Dallas, Elsie Frankfurt and Edna Frankfurt Ravkind raised five hundred dollars and launched a daring new enterprise, Page Boy Maternity Clothing, the first manufacturing company specializing in fashionable maternity clothing. Elsie Frankfurt, using her drafting skills, engineered a stylish suit for her pregnant sister. The two sisters filed for and received a patent to protect their original design. A few years later their younger sister, Louise Frankfurt, joined the firm as designer. The fledgling firm survived World War II and emerged from wartime restrictions with a label recognized from coast to coast. By the time the firm celebrated its tenth anniversary, the sisters had proven themselves to be masterminds of design, marketing, and public relations.

They arranged a lavish style show at the Stork Club in New York City and garnered free publicity in newspapers from New York to Los Angeles. Magazines such as *Colliers* and *Look* featured stories about the company and the stylish young owners, and within a few years, Elsie Frankfurt became the first woman inducted into the Young Presidents organization. Page Boy entered the Los Angeles market shortly before World War II, and Edna Frankfurt Ravkind temporarily relocated her family to the West Coast. This step sparked interest within the movie industry. MGM featured Page Boy clothing in films, and Page Boy began relationships with many Hollywood and entertainment icons such as Loretta Young, Judy

Garland, Debbie Reynolds, and Elizabeth Taylor. Later, they also dressed television stars such as Jayne Meadows and Florence Henderson, and notables such as Grace Kelly, Maria Shriver, and Jackie Kennedy.

The sisters were not only innovative designers, they were revolutionary executives. In 1949, they built a modern production plant and air conditioned both offices and manufacturing spaces. In an era when most manufacturers sold through jobbers, Page Boy operated its own retail outlets selling under the Page Boy name and sold wholesale directly to upscale department stores such as Lord & Taylor. During the 1950s and 1960s the sisters searched for new ways to garner publicity and to modernize their styles. Furthermore, they were willing to test new ways to improve the lives of the men and women who worked in their shop. When the sisters realized that yoga helped them relax and improved their concentration, they hired an internationally known yoga instructor and introduced a yoga break throughout the entire Page Boy plant.

Despite the meteoric rise of Page Boy Corporation, changing styles in the late 1970s, less formal lifestyles, and a lack of organizational planning eventually left the firm with no future. As often happens when the entrepreneurial generation ages, the business declined and the remaining assets were sold to Mothers Works in 1994.

The story of Page Boy Maternity Company and the Frankfurt Sisters of Dallas, Texas, is told in *Dressing Modern Maternity: The Frankfurt Sisters of Dallas and the Page Boy Label* (Costume Society of America Series) published by Texas Tech University Press.

# News and Notes

## ◆ JHSC Meeting and Family History Roadshow

The Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina's spring meeting, "The Past as Prologue: Jewish Genealogy Looks to the Future," will be held at the College of Charleston on May 18–19, 2013.

In a world that moves in forward gear with lightning speed, the conference invites us to look back at where we have come from, to marvel at the transformations of occupation, wealth, and status Jews have experienced in relatively few generations, and to imagine where this momentum will lead. The title of the conference alludes to novelist William Faulkner's famous quote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past"—a view of time that lies at the heart of Jewish continuity.

Mounted in conjunction with the conference, an exhibition titled *Family History Roadshow* offers a look through the archival window at the world of southern Jews, then and now. Anchored by portraits and photographs, costumes, quilts, Bibles, and business ledgers, the exhibit will be on display in Special Collections at the Marlene and Nathan Addlestone Library from April 1 until May 20.

## ◆ Jewish Genealogical Conference



Registration is now open for the 33rd IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy to be held in historic Boston on August 4–9. The conference is the leading genealogy event of the year for people researching their family history. Experts will give 200 lectures, hands-on workshops, and programs during the conference. Over 1,000 researchers ranging from beginners to professional genealogists

from all over the United States and around the world are expected to attend the conference in Boston. The International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) and the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston (JGSG) are co-hosts of the conference. The early registration discount will end on April 30. For more information or to register, visit [www.iajgs2013.org](http://www.iajgs2013.org).

## ◆ Leon Dyer historical marker in Galveston



The Texas Star Chapter of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas will dedicate a historical marker on April 28 at 2 p.m. in honor of Major Leon Dyer at the Hebrew Benevolent Society Cemetery in Galveston, Texas.

Dyer was a member of one of the first Jewish families to settle in Galveston, arriving there in 1836 during the War for Texas Independence. He served in the Army of the Republic of Texas and saw action against Mexican troops. He is said to have been assigned to the detail that escorted Mexican dictator Santa Anna to Washington, D.C., following his capture in 1837.

## ◆ Virginia Plan

The story uncovered in *The Virginia Plan: William B. Thalhimer and a Rescue from Nazi Germany* (History Press, 2011), written by SJHS board member Bob Gillette, will be featured at the major exhibit entitled "Against the Odds: American Jewish Rescuers and European Refugees, 1933–1941" at the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City. The exhibit is scheduled to open to the public on May 21, 2013, and it will be on view for a year. Bob continues to speak extensively, and if members are interested in his coming to their cities, he can be reached by email at [gilcanoe@gmail.com](mailto:gilcanoe@gmail.com). He always includes a mention of the Society in his remarks.

## ◆ Update: Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina

*Down Home: Jewish Life in North Carolina* has been a wildly successful multimedia project that has spread the story of Jewish settlement in the Tar

Heel State far and wide. Over 300,000 guests visited the exhibit as it toured the major museum venues in Raleigh, Greensboro, Wilmington, and Charlotte over the past two years. The highly praised documentary film continues to be aired on public television statewide, as well as at film festivals and cultural events throughout the South. The critically acclaimed book, published by UNC Press, has received reviews nationally as a well-researched, comprehensive, and very readable account of the Jewish experience in the state. And the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade school curricula, including a classroom DVD and teaching guide, are now complete and ready to be distributed.



To continue to promote the *Down Home* story, the Jewish Heritage Foundation of North Carolina now plans to create an interactive website that will allow visitors to "walk through" the entire *Down Home* exhibit; roll out the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade educational curricula to social studies

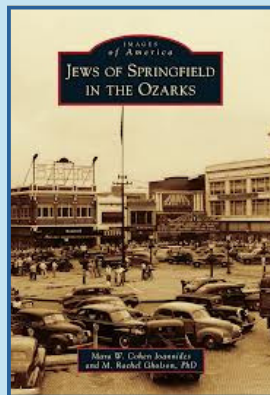
teachers throughout the state; document, preserve, and present the rich archives of books, photos, textiles, and sacred and family heirlooms that was collected in producing the exhibit; and premier the "Down Home Cantata" by Alejandro Rutty, Professor of Music Composition at UNC-Greensboro, which will have its first performance by the Triangle Jewish Chorale on December 9 at the Durham JCC. More information on these developments is available at [www.jhfn.org](http://www.jhfn.org).

## ◆ Janice Blumberg book talks

Janice Rothschild Blumberg, author of *Prophet in a Time of Priests: Rabbi "Alphabet" Browne, 1845–1929*, is on a book-signing and speaking tour of southern cities. All of the events are free and open to the public. Scheduled dates are as follows: Thursday, April 18, 2 p.m., Temple Beth Or, Montgomery, Ala.; Sunday, April 21, 2 p.m., Temple Israel, Tallahassee, Fla.; Saturday, April 27, Temple Sinai, Washington, D.C. (day-long seminar, author panel); Tuesday, April 30, Leisure World, Rockville, Md.; Wednesday, May 1, 12 p.m., Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Friday, May 3, Temple B'nai Shalom, Huntsville, Ala.; Sunday, June 2, Jewish Educational Alliance, Savannah, Ga.



## ◆ New Book: Jews of the Ozarks



The newest addition to Arcadia Publishing's popular *Images of America* series is *Jews of Springfield in the Ozarks* by Mara W. Cohen Ioannides and Dr. M. Rachel Gholson. The book boasts more than 200 vintage images and memories of days gone by.

Jews arrived in the bustling town of Springfield shortly after its founding in 1838, only five years after the birth of the state of Missouri. The first Jews to live in Springfield were Victor and Bertha Sommers with her brother Ferdinand Bakrow. They opened Victor Sommers & Co., a dry goods store in 1860. Unlike other small Jewish communities that have slowly perished because of their children's migration to larger Jewish communities where they could use their education, this Jewish community in the Ozarks continues to thrive because of the universities and hospitals in the region.

The book is available at area bookstores, independent retailers, and online retailers, or through Arcadia Publishing at [www.arcadiapublishing.com](http://www.arcadiapublishing.com) or (888)-313-2665.

# “My Shtetl” Bessemer, Alabama

By Joe Wittenstein

I was born in Jefferson County, Alabama, in December 1938, to Harry and Fannie Wittenstein. They were already established in Bessemer, in a brick four-room duplex on 6th Avenue and 17th Street, just a few blocks from the Beth-El Synagogue. Our family consisted of my parents and two older sisters, Florence and Roslyn. On the other side of our duplex was my mother's sister's family, the Fiermans, and next door to us was another Jewish family, the Sigels-Weinsteins. As far as I know, we were the only three Jewish families living on this side of town.

This little “shtetl” lies between Birmingham and Tuscaloosa, some thirteen miles by trolley or bus north of the big city of Birmingham. Even though Bessemer seemed to be a sleepy little southern town of approximately 40,000 people, there was much going on. Major iron ore and coal mines operated there. United States Steel Mills was established very close by, as were the U.S. Pipe Shop Company, the Tennessee Coal & Iron Company, the Pullman Railroad Company, the Woodward Coal and Iron Company, and other job-producing facilities. All these resources helped put Bessemer into a better position.

My father was a peddler, and my mother tried to assist him in this business. Being a merchant in the South was not easy. You were dependent on credit and extra help from the family and others. The way it worked was you drove into Birmingham to call upon the “jobber,” or the wholesaler, where you bought your merchandise on credit. Then you proceeded to sell the goods in order to pay back the jobber. My parents piled the merchandise in the back of an old Plymouth and off they would go, block by block, in the black neighborhoods to sell their goods. This whole process caused Jewish merchants to learn a lot about the black community, and their observations fostered empathy for the African Americans.

In my formative years, my parents needed help with the children, so they hired Willie Mae and later Leona to care for us. They were our maids, or domestics as they were called. I would like to take this opportunity to recognize these wonderful people. I will forever be grateful to these ladies who literally raised my sisters and me. They had the complete trust of my parents. When my parents were away at work, they had the authority to correct and/or discipline us if we so deserved. My parents, from what I could tell, treated them with the utmost respect.

They were paid a very low weekly wage that barely made ends meet. It was what the family could afford. However, they ate all their meals at the house and took home the leftovers. They received hand-me-down clothes and other material goods and gifts to help them out. All their medical bills were taken care of by my father. In this unfair system, I can only hope the extra material gifts, the health care, and food made up for something.

It wasn't too long after I was born that my family moved across the tracks, so to speak, to a little more affluent neighborhood. This allowed me to attend Arlington Grammar School and then Bessemer High School. It did not take long for me to get to know all of the neighbors and the neighbor children. All doors seemed to be left unlocked, car doors were left open, and you were allowed to go into neighbors' homes without knocking. Eventually food was offered and eaten, presents exchanged at birthday parties, Halloween was a neighborhood holiday, and Christmas was shared with me as if I was a participant. I helped with the tree decorating and in the gift giving and receiving. Some very non-Jewish kids got to eat matzah, gefilte fish, lokshen kugel, kreplach, chicken soup, and my mother's famous chocolate chip cookies.

Among my friends, who were part of various church groups, on

occasion we had discussions about religion. There were the few who told all of us we were going to hell, but it was never said in anger. They felt it was a fact. I heard occasional references to “these were our Jews,” but in a protective manner, or as something to be proud of.

During the middle and the late forties, I believe at its peak, there were forty-three Jewish families in Bessemer. The Jewish community decided it needed to hire a full-time rabbi. Previously, young student rabbis were hired for the High Holidays, and the congregants led the regular Shabbat services. The new full-time rabbi was Joseph Gallinger. I do not believe we ever knew his or the synagogue's religious preferences. Not that it really made a difference: the Beth-El congregation tried to satisfy all of the congregants' needs and preferences.



Rabbi Joseph Gallinger with (l to r) Hannah Gallinger, Howard Sarason, Alan Goldman, Bennett Cherner, Joseph Wittenstein, Harvey Applebaum, and Adele Sarason.

Photo courtesy of Joe Wittenstein.

Rabbi Gallinger was a tall, stern-looking man, and we kids felt that he meant business. I do not remember him smiling too much, and I guess we were not the easiest pupils to stimulate. The nine or ten Jewish youths in the congregation were growing up, and so the priority for the rabbi was to prepare them for their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. There were two Hebrew classes after school during the week. This did not sit well with most of us. We were losing play time with our neighborhood friends who were out playing football or baseball. I do not remember any Bat Mitzvahs taking place in Bessemer. I guess it just wasn't the thing to do at the time. Most of the boys, however, were prepared, and most did have their Bar Mitzvahs in Bessemer.

It was quietly insinuated that we were to keep from creating any bad Jewish stereotypes. We were to set good examples at school and in public: make good grades, use good judgment, get into school clubs like National Honor Society, play in the band, do well in math classes and/or in sports. On the other hand, our parents did not want the children to stray too far. To maintain some Yiddishkeit, the parents made sure the Bessemer children had contact with a bigger group of Jewish youth. We were sent off to Birmingham to take part in Jewish youth groups like AZA and BBG. If your objective was to start dating and socializing, let that someone be Jewish -- or else.

My connections with the town were severed in 1960, but I have returned to Bessemer for reunions. Bessemer began to fall apart economically in the '60s. The mines were shut down; U.S. Steel closed a lot of its shops; TCI pulled out and left; and the Pullman Shop closed its doors. Not many jobs were left, and many white people migrated elsewhere. Bessemer's Jewish families also disappeared, as most of the children went off to college and left for greener pastures. The elders since have passed on. I am really sorry for the town's sake, as it was a very comfortable place to live.

What is the old saying? “You can't go home again.” But it was nice.





## Join the Southern Jewish Historical Society!

Your membership will help support the SJHS in its efforts to study, preserve, and present the Jewish experience in the American South. The SJHS awards prizes and research grants, publishes scholarship, supports exhibitions, and holds an annual conference. Members receive *The Rambler*, *Southern Jewish History* journal, and special conference rates.



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To support the research, scholarship, and exhibition of the Southern Jewish History, I wish to make a donation to the SJHS Endowment of \$\_\_\_\_\_ in honor/memory of \_\_\_\_\_.

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