

By IRENA PENZIK NARELL

THE JEWISH FORTY-NINTERS

CALIFORNIA'S gold rush has fascinated American artists, writers, and scholars for over a century. Countless paintings, songs, plays, novels and scholarly studies have covered the subject from almost every angle. Yet few of these touch on the fact that hundreds of European Jews joined the 300,000 gold seekers and left a permanent imprint on the development of the state.

Young Jews from Poland, England, France, Germany and even Australia came to San Francisco as early as February 1849. They fanned out to live in nearly all the mining settlements in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, popularly called the Mother Lode.

In 1849, San Francisco was a tough, devil-may-care city of 20,000. In winter, the streets were mired in mud. Wind blew across the sand dunes, turning small fires into giant conflagrations. Mushrooming in haphazard conglomeration were stores, saloons, hotels, warehouses, brothels, boarding houses and gambling halls—all built of canvas and frame.

The city was in a perpetual state of gold fever. The blare of loud music from the saloons mingled with the sound of carpenters' hammers. In the auction houses, one could purchase food, clothing, tools and lots, as well as mining claims. The market was faced with glut one day and scarcity the next.

Most Jewish immigrants came equipped with merchandise to sell. Many were barely literate in English but saw at once that surer fortunes

San Francisco, although this was not possible in mining towns for lack of a *shokhet* (ritual slaughterer). A goodly number of Jews closed their stores on the Sabbath.

At the same time, Jews took part in the organized life of their communities, becoming members of Odd Fellows and Masons and serving in local government as postmasters, mayors and members of the legislature. They were staunch supporters of the law—this prompted their participation in early Vigilance Committees—and of public schools. The vast majority acquired reputations for honesty and fairness.

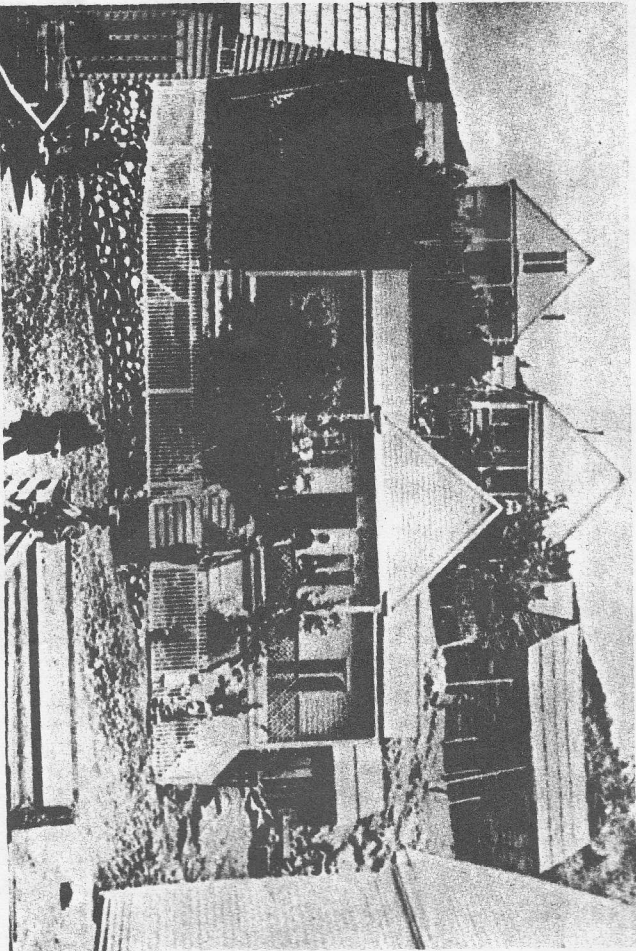
Although California Jews were highly successful in business, they did not confine themselves to commerce. Many of the early California Jews had unusual and varied careers. Samuel Sussman Snow, who led a wagon train from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to Sacramento, later became in turn doctor, gold miner and rancher in the mining town of Placerville (formerly Hangtown).

Philo Jacobi was not only a journalist and publisher of San Francisco's weekly, *The Hebrew*, but a great amateur strongman and a professional sharpshooter.

Isidor Meyerwitz, a wildly romantic figure who had an Indian wife, was a friend and longtime companion of the famed pioneer miner Peter Lassen for whom Lassen County is named.

Simon Newman, a pioneer settler in San Joaquin Valley, placed his

BUILDERS OF SAN FRANCISCO



JEWISH FORTY-NINERS generally resisted the lure of gold and became merchants in the mining communities. The Levi pants worn by prospectors (above) were made from tent canvas by Levi Straus of San Francisco. Aaron Fleishhaker ran grocery and dry goods stores in mining towns, finally making his home (below) in Virginia City.

were to be made on the mercantile and money exchanges than in gold mining. Profit was often an incredible 100 to 500 percent. They set up shop in shanty and tent stores piled up with goods shipped by relatives and friends back east.

Many Jews became merchants in the small mining towns of the Sierras, dealing in dry goods, clothing, jewelry and tobacco. They were the first to erect fireproof brick buildings in settlements plagued by flash fires, thus giving their communities a sense of stability.

There was a world of difference between the Jews and the majority of adventurers who swarmed over California in pursuit of gold. Jews came to the gold country in family groups, bringing with them the Jewish religion with its distinctive rituals. Even in the most remote mining areas, the Jews succeeded in maintaining a quality of religious uniqueness, a sense of continuity and community with other Jews.

They organized synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, and sent money to help poor Jews abroad. A mere six months elapsed between the arrival of the first Pacific steamer in San Francisco on February 29, 1849, and the first High Holy Day services in September of that year attended by 17 Jews in Louis Franklin's tent on Kearny Street. Many Jews kept kosher in

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from a river landing to his store. He created the nucleus for the town of Newman, as well as a business in farm products, prize stock and custom feed milling.

Adolph Sutro devised a daring engineering feat in building a tunnel to rescue the flooded Comstock silver mines in Nevada.

The men of gold rush days were industrious and ambitious, working hard with few diversions. It was essential for them to possess unusual endurance and flexibility for the formidable journey to California and the adjustment to a tempestuously individualistic and virtually lawless society.

This was no less true for Jewish women. They had to be as courageous as their men in the face of frequent business reverses—fires and floods often wiped out their husbands' livelihoods. Their task was to make a home in the wilderness under the most primitive conditions, to create a haven of normalcy amid lawlessness and moral dissipation, to bring up their children as Jews in a completely non-Jewish environment, and to find some kind of social life in the bitter isolation of a mining settlement.

Many exhibited great courage and independence, perhaps traceable in some degree to the very nature of the gold rush. California's women were forced to be strong. Some worked alongside their men in the mines, dressed in the proverbial work pants and red flannel shirts.

Women were few, Jewish women even rarer. Although many of the gold country's Jews went back east to seek wives, there were others who found brides among the West Coast settlers. It was not uncommon for two friends or brothers to marry two sisters.

The scarcity of females tended to equalize somewhat the role of the sexes. In a society where, as late as the 1870's only one in two men could hope to marry, women had more of a choice of mates than would otherwise be possible. In 1860, San Francisco had 85 divorce suits, 65 initiated by women.

Jewish tradition tempered this kind of independence with a sense of family stability and loyalty; divorce was virtually unknown in the first and second generations of pioneers. But the situation did present Jewish women with a greater choice of husbands.

Bertha Roman was a gold rush bride. Born in a small town in East Prussia in 1841, she was one of seven surviving children of a miller. Obligated to help with housework and with the care of her younger brothers and sisters, she could only attend school for half of each year.

Bertha had a keen mind and spirit that rebelled at the political and economic injustices she witnessed in East Prussia. Having decided to find a home in a country where "cruelty is unknown," she came to New York with a brother, and embarked with him on a still longer journey in 1860 to the mining town of Diacoronville. Bertha

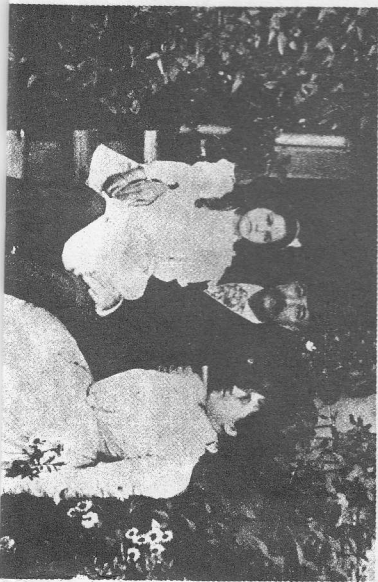
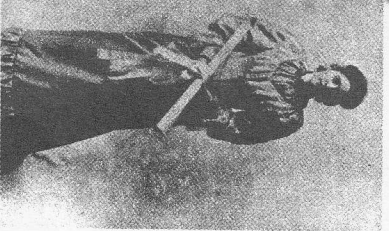
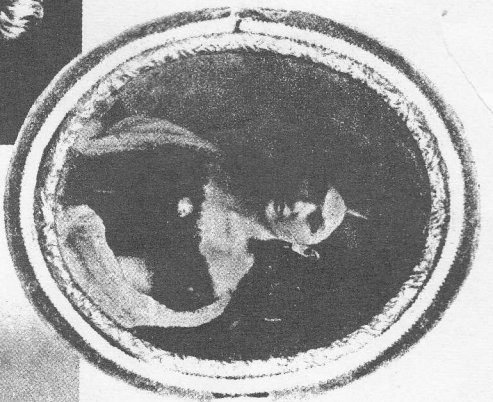
and headed west in 1853. Aaron opened a grocery and drygoods establishment, first in Sacramento, then Grass Valley, and finally in Virginia City, Nevada. In between storekeeping, he tried mining, but without success.

In 1857, Aaron went back east in search of a Jewish wife. He married Delia Stern of Albany, a strong personality and a lifelong optimist. Aaron brought her to California over the Isthmus of Panama, both riding on donkeys.

Delia's sunny outlook is best demonstrated by the fact that many years later she told her grandchildren about the beautiful orchids and multicolored parrots—her recollections of that journey. A granddaughter finally made the trip in style and looked in vain for her grandmother's vision of beauty. Shown the "pioneer trail," she was told it was still infested with snakes and yellow fever, details omitted by Delia.

THE Fleishhackers had eight children. Delia seemed to thrive on frontier life and found everything novel and exciting. Soon after her arrival, she was helping to deliver the babies of miners' wives.

In Virginia City, Aaron befriended two miners, Bill O'Brien and John Mackay. He liked Mackay particularly because, unlike other prospectors, he did not spend his time and gold



was 19 and apparently unafraid of hardship.

She was quite attractive and became engaged soon after reaching Placerville. She decided, though, that her fiancé was the wrong man and immediately broke the engagement, creating something of a local sensation. Bertha, a strong character, survived the "scandal," and, in 1862, she married Mark Levinson, a kindly, thoughtful clothing merchant from Holland, 17 years her senior.

A rabbi from Sacramento had been engaged to officiate at the wedding. The great flood of 1862 prevented his arrival; Placerville was isolated for three months. Mark and Bertha were married by a prominent local Jew, a common legal practice in the gold country. In the spring of that year, they moved to Virginia City, Nevada, following the discovery of the great Comstock silver lode.

Of all the wild West towns, Virginia City was perhaps the wildest. Yet young Bertha managed her household beautifully, cared for three children, and had a large circle of friends. Mark Levinson never made much money in his business. Nevertheless, their household was permeated with happiness due chiefly to Bertha's cheerful personality and her ability to give of herself to family, neighbors and friends. She left a fine legacy for her children—a sense of justice, high moral principles and a deep devotion to Jewish faith.

Aaron Fleishhacker came to the United States from Bavaria at age 25, became a peddler and general merchant in New Orleans and New York,

dust in saloons. He had a claim, hope and no cash.

One day, he asked Aaron to "grub-stake" him. With a couple of hundred dollars worth of food, picks and shovels from the Fleishhacker store, Mackay lit out for the hills. Aaron and Delia did not see him again for eight months.

Then Mackay returned, dumped a bag on the stoop of their little store, and said:

"You trusted me when I was broke.

This is for you."

In the bag was \$11,000 in gold dust, a small fortune. The Fleishhackers packed their belongings and moved to San Francisco, where Aaron opened a paper box business. Delia lived to a ripe old age, the respected matriarch of the large and important Fleishhacker clan.

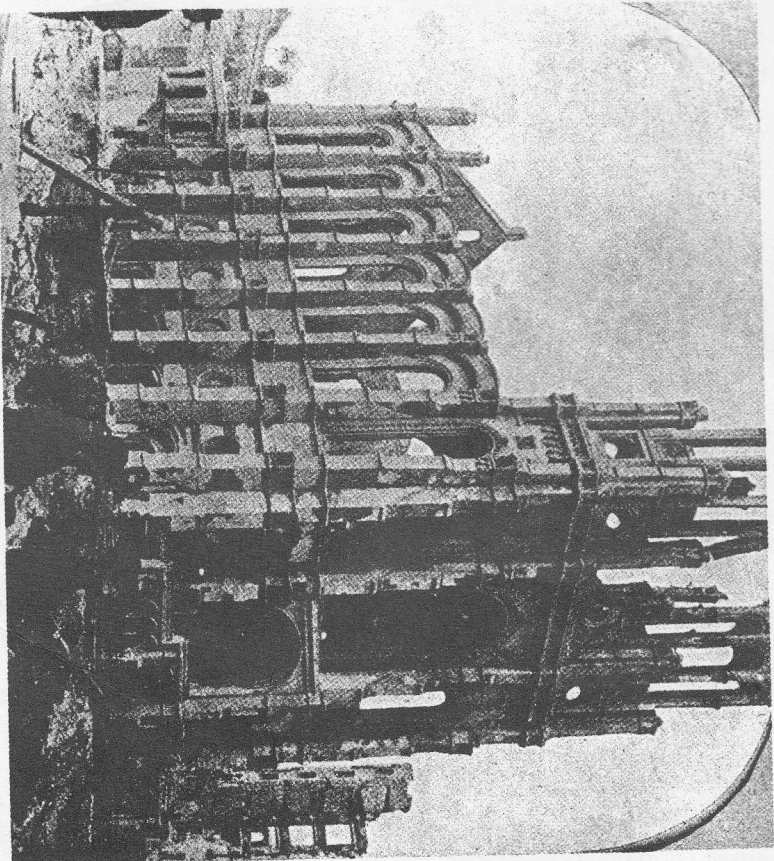
Sarah and Hannah Greenebaum spent their early childhood among a family of ten siblings in the industrial town of Kaiserlautern, west of the Rhine. Their mother died in 1838, when Sarah was five and Hannah three.

In 1847, their father Jacob took his youngest two boys and two girls to America. In Philadelphia, where they landed, the girls were virtually adopted by Jacob's friends, the family of Marcus Cauffman.

The Greenebaum boys joined the rush to California in 1850, becoming merchants in Sacramento. There they met Bavarian-born Louis Sloss, a dynamic young man on the move, who was then in the wholesale grocery business with Lewis Gerstle, a former

(Continued on page 20)

CALIFORNIA'S Jewish women had to be strong and resourceful to create a home in the wilderness. Hannah Solomon (top) arrived in the gold country in 1853, married for love and raised three talented children, among them Adele Jaffa (right), one of the first women doctors graduated from the University of California. In the second generation of pioneers, Rosalie Meyer Sierr, born 1869, shown in bottom photo with husband Sigmund and daughter Elise, studied social work and became a noted philanthropist in San Francisco. Sarah Greenebaum (left) married Louis Sloss, a sealskin and salmon entrepreneur, in 1855. She was active in San Francisco society for many years. Below, a synagogue in ruins after earthquake of 1906.



The Jewish Forty-Niners

(Continued from page 13)

pony express rider and prospector.

In 1855, Sloss, 32, made a buying trip to Philadelphia, armed with a letter of introduction from the Greenebaums to the Cauffmans. He promptly fell in love with 19-year-old Sarah, proposed, and was accepted.

After the wedding, Sarah and Louis Sloss went to California by way of Nicaragua, where Sarah became quite ill. She recovered and they continued to Sacramento.

Gerstle, also from Bavaria, boarded with the Slosses. In the spring of 1858, he went east and met Sarah's younger sister, Hannah. Gerstle and Hannah took to each other and they were married in May.

Both the Sloss and Gerstle families prospered and had children. Sacramento had a vibrant Jewish community, and they expected to go on living there comfortably for the rest of their lives. But the town suffered the worst flood in its history in the winter of 1862. The Sloss and Gerstle families were stranded in their homes and had to be rescued by rowboat. They boarded a steamer headed for San Francisco, never to return.

THE 1860's saw the gradual decline of business in mining towns. Primitive mining methods had depleted surface gold. The rugged individualist of the new frontier packed his gear, leaving the diggings forever.

San Francisco—the hub of banking and commerce—was opened to the rest of the continent with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Jews, deeply interwoven into the state's economic structure, grew in wealth and influence.

Sloss and Gerstle entered into a partnership in the Alaska Commercial Company which developed into an enormous business in seal skins, salmon fisheries and shipping. Most remarkable was the partners' fair treatment of their Aleutian Indian employees, for whom they built schools, free housing, hospitals and churches.

Diffident and retiring Hannah Gerstle, known as "little Grandma," was shielded by her husband from the vicissitudes of life. After his sudden death in 1902, she blossomed forth as an independent and sturdy spirit. Both she and Sarah Sloss, also widowed, lived with their children into revered old age.

The fact that Jews played a key role in the creation of the economic base of frontier society gave them entree to that society. All of California's upper strata was a product of the gold rush, and complete social acceptance of Jews was due to their arrival with other immigrants. Wealth and social position had come to these early Californians at approximately the same moment in history. They also shared memories of disappointment and incredible hardship, of floods and fires, and of that singular frenzy as well as the chilling loneliness of their beginnings. These experiences were a great equalizer.

This situation, unparalleled in other parts of the United States, may also account for the reluctance of California's wealthy Jewish families to back the Zionist movement and the State of Israel until fairly recently.

However, since the 1948 War of Independence, the Six-Day War, and the Yom Kippur War, old family names have been appearing more and more frequently on the lists of volunteers and fund raisers for Israel.

The strong commitment of the old Jewish forty-niners to Jewish charitable institutions has deep roots, and the hardy pioneer spirit has not been forgotten.