

Put's Levi Strauss, shoes to show, we think! - Love Hig Page

Our Pioneer Heritage

Louis Sloss

**By Norton Stern
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Born in a Bavarian village in 1823, Louis Sloss became one of the grand figures of pioneer California Jewry. After receiving an elementary education, he clerked in a country store. At the age of 22, in 1845, Sloss came to the United States where he soon found work in a small town in Kentucky. As with so many other Jewish young men who had little to lose, news of the gold discoveries drew him to California.

He left for the West in the spring of 1849 with a covered wagon train, but soon left that group to journey on by horseback with a Dr. Richard H. McDonald and a Mr. Swift. After a perilous cross-country passage the three arrived in Nevada City, Calif. on July 18, 1849.

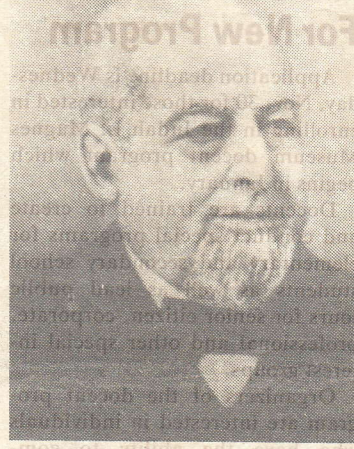
Shortly afterwards they arrived in Sacramento where they formed a partnership to conduct a business selling everything needed by other new arrivals. They bought and sold horses, mules, oxen, milk cows, wagons, harness, etc. Their store was a seven-foot space between two tent stores, whose walls became their walls, and they completed the shelter by stretching

canvas over the top. In the rear they purchased a lot where they kept their stock and feed for the animals.

Daily auctions were conducted on the lot by Louis Sloss. The partnership was highly remunerative and lasted about a year. McDonald and Sloss spent that first winter of 1849-1850 in a tent.

In 1850 Sloss formed a partnership with Simon Greenwald, which Lewis Gerstle joined in 1851. They operated a wholesale grocery and provisions firm. In 1855, Sloss traveled to Philadelphia where he married Sarah Greenebaum. Five children were born to them: Bella (Mrs. E.R. Lilienthal), Leon, Louis, Joseph and Judge Marcus C. Sloss.

During the 1850s Louis Sloss served on the board and as president of Congregation B'nai Israel of Sacramento. By the winter of 1861, the first three of the Sloss children and their parents were living in a brick house at the corner of Fourth and M Streets, and when the waters of the big flood of that year reached the second floor bedroom windows, the family was taken out by row boats to a steamer and brought to San Francisco.



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In San Francisco, Sloss established himself as a stockbroker with Gerstle as his partner; then in 1868, with the United States just having purchased Alaska from Russia, Sloss formed the Alaska Commercial Company. He and his partners had the foresight to see that the resources of Alaska promised much and in 1870 the company signed a 20-year lease agreement with the Treasury Department for the seal concession of the Pribilof Islands.

During that period, Sloss' company actually opened up Alaska.

And they also set up and maintained schools, built houses and provided provisions for the Aleut Indians on the Islands. It was later noted that unlike William Penn, who traded with the Indians and cheated them in the process, Sloss saw to it that the Indians got their full share and more.

One public office that Louis Sloss held was that of treasurer of the University of California. He was on the Board of Regents for many years. He was also a trustee of the San Francisco Public Library. When the Society of California Pioneers was organized, Sloss became one of its founders and served a term as president of that prestigious group.

When Louis Sloss passed away in June 1902, one newspaper referred to him as California's "best citizen." His reputation for business ethics, personal morality and philanthropy was without equal. Though a rich man, he had no enemies! Another publication made the point that he "was easily among the most distinguished and the most admirable" of the generation of forty-niners. Sloss provides an outstanding example of a Jewish pioneer who built California, Alaska and the Jewish community of the Far West.