

Emanu-El's Gallery of Notable Israelites of the Pacific Coast.

V. LOUIS SLOSS.
(See Frontispiece.)

written 1896

The life record of a pure man not only deserves publication, but a chronicle of its details is a paramount duty. Youth needs examples to form its character; and the story of Louis Sloss furnishes just such example. Strength of character is inherent, but circumstances may bring out latent force, an illustration of which we have in the record of the builders of our Californian commonwealth. The early chapters of that illustrious story indicate the great potency, the still greater possibilities of the men who created the fairest of States on the Pacific slope. Massed together from all parts of the world, the labors of each man were typical of the energies of his race, and Providence seemed to have brought together the best elements of every nation. Among the foremost representatives of the German-Jewish element that contributed so materially to the upbuilding of California and her varied industries, we place the name of the president of the Alaska Commercial Company, Mr. Louis Sloss, a citizen whose life presents many sides of study, and whose example has been an inspiration to the young men of San Francisco and the Coast.

Louis Sloss is of German extraction. Born July 13, 1823, in the village of Untereisenheim, near Wurzburg, in Bavaria, he spent the greater part of his busy life in the United States. The youngest of a family of five children, two brothers and three sisters, he suffered the misfortune of losing his father at the tender age of four, and his mother when he was but ten years of age. The Sloss family shared all the hardships of the Jewish villagers of Bavaria, which country kept the restriction laws against the Jews on its statutes until 1848. Still, the Sloss children found no difficulty in obtaining a good grammar school education, which was satisfactorily complemented by the religious ~~Schulmeister~~, who ministered to the spiritual wants of the seven Jewish families in the village of Untereisenheim. Leaving the grammar school, Louis Sloss was compelled to strike out for himself. His parents had left him nothing, and he and his elder brother had virtually no one to whom they could look for support or guidance. He became a clerk in a country store, and eked out existence until the forces inherent in him prompted him to seek a happier life and better fortune in the New Country.

It is a subject of absorbing interest to students of contemporary history to ascertain, as far as possible, the reasons that prompted strong men like Louis Sloss to come to the United States. A man's success in life is not always the result of accident, or a concurrence of fortunate circumstances. Strength of character, the awakening of dormant energies, and the possession of civic virtues have much to do with it. A man's youth is generally the index of his future. Mr. Sloss states, somewhat facetiously, that he came to the United States because he had nothing to lose in coming, which means that his growing energies found no outlet in Germany, and that he felt destined to greater things and a better future than a village clerkship in his native home. What is of peculiar interest in determining the subtle influences that moved so intrepid a pioneer as Louis Sloss is the fact that, though but a mere stripling of past twenty when he left Germany, he had already determined to be menial to no man, and no matter in how small a way to be "his own boss." Such young strength, born of mental ruggedness and pertinacity, is apt to discern fortune at its flow, and make a bold strike for it. It works hardship at first, for fortune is both coy and fickle; but persistence, patience, and love of honorable occupation will conquer her, if the champion be mentally endowed to enter the lists. The success of an honorable merchant like Louis Sloss lies then, not in the bold enterprises his business capacity enabled him to set on foot, but in the mental and moral make-up of the man himself, an endowment with qualities and characteristics, absolutely necessary for the inauguration of great tasks. These qualities are born with us, and need opportunity for development.

Louis Sloss landed in the United States in 1845 and settled in Louisville. The staid Kentucky town offered little inducement to his enterprising spirit and accordingly he looked around for more favor-

able opportunities. Attracted by reports from the gold country he crossed the plains on horseback in 1849, his companions being Dr. Macdonald and the late Judge Swift. Mr. Sloss located in Sacramento, then the principal centre of the new mining interests, and with Simon Greenwaldt, one of his life long partners, established the mercantile house of Louis Sloss & Co. Sacramento was then virtually the principal town in the State, and men were gathered there from whose ranks graduated the State's illustrious citizens. Among them the young Hebrew occupied a conspicuous position, not only as a progressive merchant but as an exponent of that high conception of citizenship that since then has made the name of Louis Sloss proverbial in California. In 1855 Lewis Gerstle joined the partners and the fortunes of the house grew apace. Mr. Sloss, always an ardent Israelite, gifted with an insight into the forces that should move his religion and race to high places of honor and usefulness, became the Parnass of the new Jewish congregation of Sacramento, a position he soon resigned because of the growing demands upon his time and energy. In 1860 the firm moved to San Francisco, and from that time dates its eminent position among the mercantile houses of the United States. In 1868 the Alaska Commercial Company was organized, with Louis Sloss as President, and its stupendous business transactions, ramifying throughout the world, can find no place in this personal sketch, which is designed to do honor to the man and citizen rather than to the merchant.

Since he became a citizen, Mr. Louis Sloss has exhibited a fondness of politics in the best, not the vulgar, sense of the word. His political creed stands on the highest basis of honorable citizenship. Machine politics he deems as great a profanity as stupid sectarianism. His doctrines are exalted. Duty to God and country means the same thing to him. He will honor his country's demand with the same alertness as he would do a deed of love to his wife and children. It is not strange that such a man becomes a strong factor in political matters not as an agent of, or in political conventions, but as the friend honored adviser and trusted councillor of the leaders themselves, a veritable power behind the throne using his influence not for good it may accomplish, and never thinking to gain personal ends. Such an influence is remarkable, the strongest a citizen can exercise, and withal Mr. Louis Sloss never cared for and never occupied a political office, except in the national campaign of 1868 when he was an elector on the national Republican ticket, which resulted in the seating of General Grant in the Presidential chair. The only semi-public office Mr. Sloss holds is that of Treasurer of the University of California. When the Society of California Pioneers organized, Mr. Sloss was one of its founders, and subsequently became its President. That position alone explains the judgment of his contemporaries regarding his career.

When we award to Mr. Sloss the crown of civic virtue, we find the motive of his life, which is like an open book to the citizens of our community. There is no better instance among us of a life, the harmony of which is so conspicuous. His character has been moulded in a heroic cast. The trifling spots on it, arising from ordinary human imperfections, are wholly obscured by the loveable traits he exhibits, by the strong intrepid personality of the man. He is, pre-eminently, a man to look up to, to learn from, to ask advice of, and yet there is no more modest, humble, or unostentatious man in San Francisco than the President of the great Alaska Commercial Company. Therein lies the great secret of his personality. He infuses strength into everything and everybody without having the faintest appearance of doing so. His human sympathies are as strong as his intellectual attainments. He has no adjective for his charities, he ignores creed and denomination when his aid is needed. It is nothing to say that he gives, but his heart is the strong test of his gifts. He loves the poor, he commiserates the helpless, and there is no charity in the city that has not felt his quickening influence. Of such a Jew we may well pray God that "many like them may rise up in Israel."

Mr. Sloss, in his seventy-third year, is still vigorous and in the enjoyment of a fair share of health. Leaving the more arduous tasks of his extensive business to his partners and his sons, he enjoys a degree of leisure that sits well on him, and make him a pleasant companion and raconteur. His wife, the noble partner of his benefactions, often the inspiration of his gifts,—herself one of the leaders in both sectarian and unsectarian charities—abides with him, a sweet complement to so rugged a constitution. No one who knows the venerable Sloss as we know him, will not join in this prayer,—that the evening of his life may be like a flood of glorious sunlight, in which he may repose in well-earned peace and honor, blessed alike by the love of his wife, the affectionate obedience of his children, and the respectful, grateful encomiums of a commonwealth that is not insensible to the virtues of its distinguished citizens.

Pioneer San Franciscans

Louis Sloss, Orphan Immigrant, Founded Business Success In Stirring Gold Rush Days

By EUGENE B. BLOCK

Ambition, determination and adventure were the guiding forces in the lives of those sturdy empire builders of early days, stout-hearted pioneers who came west to lay the foundations of a great commonwealth.

Louis Sloss was no exception.

There was that fateful day in 1849 when he rode into Maxwell, Kentucky, a lone immigrant boy from Bavaria, and met his brother who had preceded him by a few years from the Old Country.

At 26, Louis had come to America to seek the opportunities in a new land that was talked of across the seas. His brother met him with a puzzled look. "Louis," he said after they had talked about the trip and the folks at home. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. There is nothing for you here in my business and I don't really know where you should go. By now this country is all filled up."

Not Discouraged

Louis Sloss was not disturbed. He had heard of the gold rush to the West. Perhaps, as his brother told him, the new country was "all filled up." He decided to see for himself. Soon he was aboard a covered wagon train headed across the plains.

On the way sickness held up the party. But Louis Sloss was in no mood for delays. With two of his buddies, he separated from the train, and the three made their way to Sacramento on horseback.

Arriving there at the height of exciting mining days, they sold their mounts, their only stock in trade. The proceeds from his horse was all the start that Louis Sloss required. From that time on he engaged in business. But little did he dream, despite his youthful ambitions, that he was destined to become a founder of so huge an enterprise as the Alaska Commercial Company, which stands today as one of the greatest of its kind in America, a monument to the enterprise and perseverance of an indomitable emigrant boy.

Community Leader

As Louis Sloss is remembered for his business sagacity, so he is revered as a leader in his adopted city's growth, as a stalwart pillar in the Jewish community of San Francisco.

He was born July 13, 1823 in the village of Untereisenheim near Wurzburg in Bavaria, son of Lazarus and Laura Sloss. Youngest of a family of five children, two boys and three girls, he found himself orphaned at the age of ten. His father had died six years before.

All of the hardships of Jewish villagers in Bavaria faced the little family. Although that country imposed its restrictions on Jews until 1848, the Sloss children found no difficulty in obtaining a good grammar school education, strengthened by sound religious teachings.

At the end of grammar school, Louis Sloss was obliged to strike out for himself. With no resources, he found work in a country store. It was a mere existence, little pay and no future. Ambition welled within him. Like many others, he decided to seek his fortune in the New World.

Beginnings Difficult

His early beginnings in Sacramento were difficult. Life was strange and rugged. Learning the ways of a new society came only from experience—by hard knocks. And there were plenty along the way as the young man from Bavaria started out trading, putting meager profits together, struggling against the business hazards of turbulent gold rush days.

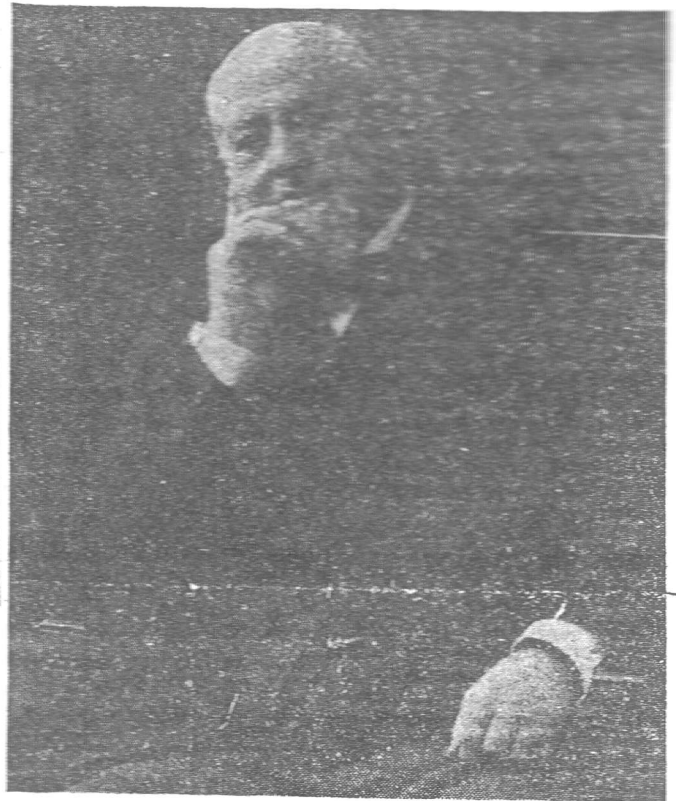
After a time he met Simon Greenwald, and the two established a mercantile firm, Louis Sloss & Co. They were destined to become lifelong business partners.

Their business prospered and grew rapidly. Louis Sloss had learned fast. Besides keen business acumen, he had a warm personality and a way of readily making friends. People trusted him instinctively and respected his integrity. As time passed, he became more and more engrossed with public-spirited interests in the life of his community.

Leader in Jewish Life

He always was interested in its affairs, not only civic but religious as well. Always devoted to his Judaism, he won the high esteem of his co-religionists among the pioneers. In Sacramento he became a leader of the new Jewish congregation.

In 1851 Lewis Gerstle, another builder of the West, joined the firm and its progress was still faster. Nine years later Sacramento was swept by devastating floods. Losses were disastrous. But they failed to dampen the spirits or ambitions of Sloss and his associates. They moved to San Francisco. Soon the business took its place in the forefront of



LOUIS SLOSS—1823-1902

the city's commercial enterprises.

Meanwhile, the bonds between Lewis Gerstle and Louis Sloss had been cemented closer. They had married sisters. Sloss' marriage to Sarah Greenebaum took place in Philadelphia in July of 1855.

Saw New Opportunities

Together the brothers-in-law saw new business opportunities in the waters of the Far North. They realized the potentialities of a rich fur and fishing trade in the Alaska region.

For eight years they dreamed and planned. Then they founded the Alaska Commercial Company and prepared to obtain the necessary concessions from the American and Russian governments.

In 1868 Sloss and his wife went to Washington and secured the approval of the United States. He planned next a hurried departure for Russia but there was a brief interruption. In February, 1869, a son was born in New York. Judge M. C. Sloss, now a pillar in the life of San Francisco, a beloved leader in the Jewish affairs of America, was that child.

As soon as he could leave his wife and son, Sloss went to Russia and returned with concession papers.

Expanded Rapidly

The company chartered ships, established stores, and began many other operations. Expansion came quickly. The enterprise prospered and grew, and became as it remains today, one of the

West's greatest commercial institutions.

Business, however, came far from absorbing all of Louis Sloss' interests. He was a leading figure in San Francisco's civic life

and took an active part always in Jewish affairs. He was a member of Congregation Emanu-El and of all local Jewish charitable and welfare organizations.

A kindly man, humble and whole-hearted, he was sought by many for help and guidance. Aiding his fellowman to him was a part of life itself.

He regarded the duties of citizenship as something sacred. He was interested in politics as a part of civic service, though he never held public office, excepting in the national campaign of 1868 when he was an elector on the national Republican ticket which placed General Grant in the presidency.

He was treasurer of the University of California and president of the Society of California Pioneers.

Five children were born to the Louis Sloss and of these only Judge Sloss survives. The others were Mrs. E. R. Lilienthal, Leon, Louis and Joseph Sloss.

Death came to Louis Sloss in 1902 at the age of almost 79 but his lifework has left its mark inscribed indelibly in the history of his adopted city.