

**Four Alsatian Jewish Families
Shape Albuquerque**

2004



Published by The New Mexico Jewish Historical Society

Introduction

The booklets presented in this series are the product of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society's (NMJHS) Jewish Pioneer Oral History Video Archive Project, conducted in partnership with the department of History and the Center for Regional Studies at the University of New Mexico. The purpose of the project in accord with the NMJHS, is to preserve a valuable historical record. It is composed of recollections of the family members whose forefathers settled in New Mexico in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

It should be noted that the use of the term "pioneer" has several definitions for the Project. Families were included whose presence in New Mexico predated the coming of the railroad in 1879-1880. That is, perhaps, the classic definition of "pioneer" since such persons usually traveled at least part if not all of their journey on the Santa Fe Trail. The Project also employed an expanded definition for some who came later and move into areas remote from large population centers –Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Las Vegas– and who engaged in economic activities that differed from the usual depiction of the Jewish pioneer as merchant. These include ranching and mining entrepreneurs whose existence justifies the term "pioneer" as fully as that applied to the earlier settlers.

The recollections gathered do not of course include all of the Jewish families who settled in early New Mexico. Inability to find descendants proved one hindrance. And, the all too common issues of cost and the need to exercise dispatch to complete the work forced a limit upon the numbers who could be included with a reasonable hope of success.

Given the relative small number of interviews, the geographic dispersion they represent in New Mexico is quite broad. It extends from Clayton in the northeast to Las Cruces, Carlsbad and

Columbus in the south, to Gallup in the west and to the above cited cities if the north central Rio Grande and Taos.

A few of these families built large enterprises and acquired considerable wealth. Most, however, were only moderately successful. Yet, their influence should not be measured solely by their monetary accumulation. They had a significant impact on business and commerce in their local communities and on the territorial and regional economies. They took risk and introduced important innovations. Further, far from isolating themselves in their own enterprises, they participated in the social and political life of the communities which they lived, often too small in number before 1880, and even afterwards to create their own social and religious organizations, they nevertheless participated in the broader society by assuming local political positions –from mayors, to county commissioners, to judges, to postmasters. Such outreach allowed them to serve the general community in ways that reached beyond the paucity of their numbers and beyond the limited path involved in their own economic endeavors. Meanwhile, many Jewish pioneer families maintained their Jewish identification and the rudiments of Jewish life and, in some cases created Jewish institutions.

Our project, with its limited means, can only scratch the surface of what might amount to claims of completeness. As a start, however, we hope that it conveys some of the richness that even a small group of persons can offer to the history of a region and recognition that all does not lie with quantity –quality provides its own unique dimension of social value.

Dr. Henry Tobias

Professor Emeritus, University of Oklahoma

July 2003

Mandell-Weiller-Benjamin-Dreyfuss Family History

I think the big family and the closeness of the family kept us all together... united and strong. A big family... yes...

Jane Thompson Weiller "Reunion Keynote Address" 1999

Sometime in 1880, Kaufman Mandell got off the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe trans-continental railroad on a barren stretch of mesa in central New Mexico. The Santa Fe Railroad had wanted to locate the station and important railway yards one and a half miles to the west, closer to the old Spanish settlement known as Old Town (or Old Town Albuquerque), but its residents opposed the plan. The railway, which was aggressively pushing the completion of the line to the Pacific Coast, had previously been denied a terminal and railroad yard in the old village of Bernalillo, some fifteen miles to the north, and was in no mood to put up with further delays and attempts to extract higher payments for the right of way. Within a few years the area around the terminal had become known as New Town, and thanks to the Santa Fe's decision, it bustled with construction and commercial activity. In 1890, New Town's population approached six thousand. A few years later it was renamed Albuquerque, and within three decades it was the commercial, financial, and transportation hub of the forty-seventh state in the Union.

Kaufman Mandell quickly decided that the area held out the promise of great economic development and opportunity. The Alsatian Jewish immigrant demonstrated his faith in New Town's

potential by purchasing a large tract of land he intended to sell as house lots. Subsequently named the Mandell Business and Residential Addition, it later became part of McClellan Square and Addition. It was located north of what became Lomas Boulevard, between Fourth and Sixth Streets, NW. Kaufman returned to New York City to manage his extensive business interests. But he encouraged his future son-in-law, Michael (generally known as Mike in New Mexico) to move from New York to New Town and look after his affairs in New Mexico.

Kaufman Mandell did not know it at the time, but his vision of Albuquerque's bright future would subsequently bring members of four related families of Alsatian Jews to settle permanently in this new and dynamic city: the Mandells, Weillers, Benjamins and Dreyfusses. Bound by blood, marriage, business interests, social activity, and religion, these families would plant deep roots in the Duke City. Many of their descendants still reside in it. And over the course of the next hundred years, they would make important contributions to the economic, social, and Jewish life of Albuquerque.

These families have traced their lineage to an Alsatian Jew named Solomon, but there is no substantive information about him. The lineage is clearer from Solomon Mandel who married Judel Galtetts; they produced a son Jacques (d. 1813), who is probably the paterfamilias of our subjects. It is doubtful the first Solomon had a family name, but the second Solomon was obligated under Napoleon's decree to take a surname. It appears the original name was spelled "Mantel," but a descendant substituted the "d" in the name and that form was widely adopted. Most of the family in France spelled the name with one "l" while those who settled in the United States used two.

Located in the Rhineland, Alsace and its sister province Lorraine had originally been in the German sphere, but Alsace was wrested away by Louis XIV during the course of his many wars. It remained part of France until the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, when it was ceded to Germany. Alsace was returned to France

under the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, which ended World War I.

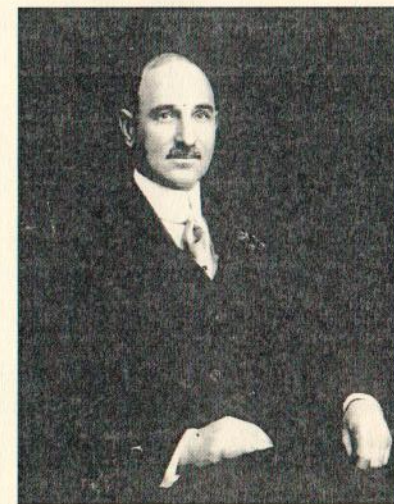
As a result, members of the four families spoke either French or German, although their mother tongue was Judeo-Alsatian, a form of Yiddish. For Alsace had been the home of traditional Orthodox Jews since Roman times. After the First Crusade of 1096, they became victims of Christian anti-Semitic persecution: they suffered massacres, restrictions on their occupations, and ghettoization. The French Revolution brought them emancipation and gradual political and economic freedom, but ancient prejudices and traditional attitudes did not disappear. Many Alsatian Jews lived in small towns and villages where they pursued their historic occupations as cattle dealers, butchers, petty traders, and forms of banker/pawnbrokers. But by the mid-nineteenth century, most Alsatian Jews had gained secular educations, started to abandon Orthodoxy, achieved a degree of modernization, and acquired middle class aspirations.

Kaufman Mandell, who was born and reared in Dauendorf, Alsace, near Strasburg, in 1840, shared this new outlook. The son of Solomon and Marie (Bunela) Mandell. Kaufman attended the Royal Gymnasium in Pfaffenhofen in 1854 and soon after left for the United States. The reasons for his immigration are mysterious and lead to speculation: Were desperate family circumstances responsible, or was the young lad restless, adventurous, and seeking a fortune? The account of his life in the *New York Evening World*, June 2, 1926, raises these questions, especially since he received a good formal education. According to that story, his mother sent him on his way to America, after tying a tag to his coat asking the stage coach conductor and ship's captain to look after him and safely deposit him into the hands of friends in New York City. The note also declared his parents' love for young Kaufman and reminded him to "always tell the truth."

"I do not know much of our ancient family history, but I must have inherited some of the spirit if not the blood of the Maccabees."

Major Kaufman Mandell, interview New York Evening World June 4, 1925

Whatever the circumstances, Kaufman arrived in the bustling, dynamic port of New York and found work as the errand boy for a butcher in the Washington Market. He quickly moved up in the business and by the age of twenty, he risked his savings with other young immigrants in a trading venture that took him to Africa's west coast. There he found an outlet for his adventurous spirit and made some money. Returning to the United States just as the Civil War broke out, Kaufman joined the Union Army as a private in the cavalry and by 1865 was promoted to major. He served under General Nathaniel Banks and was the bodyguard for General Ben Butler, who was reviled by Southerners for encouraging slaves to flee their masters.



Solomon Budd Mandell, courtesy of Natalie Glasgall

During his service, Kaufman Mandell met and married Caroline Schwartz, the daughter of Jacob Schwartz, who owned a general store in Woodville, Mississippi. After his discharge from the army, he tried to settle in Woodville and worked for his father-in-law, but encountered hostility because he was a "hated Yankee." Kaufman and Caroline moved to New Orleans, where he built a thriving mercantile business. Seven years later, Kaufman relocated his then growing family to New York where he developed a highly successful import-export business headquartered on Rector Street in Lower Manhattan. In the early 1920s, his son Budd (Solomon) took over active management of the concern. Kaufman was a member of Temple Emanuel, New York's noted Reform congregation and devoted himself to philanthropic causes.

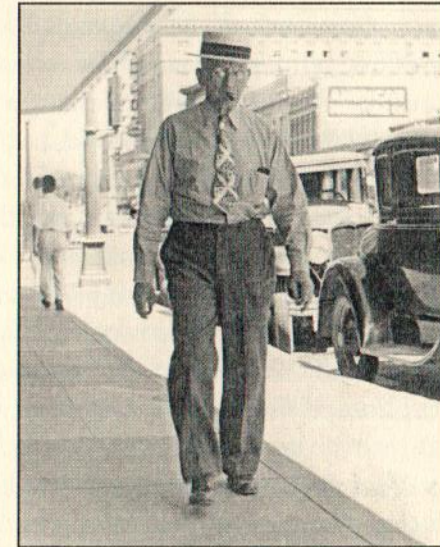
Mike Mandell was a cousin of Kaufman and would later marry his daughter Marie. Mike was born in 1858 in Dauendorf, Alsace. The bloodshed of the Franco-Prussian War and the cession of Alsace to Germany prompted him to emigrate to the United States. He entered the country through Galveston and probably joined Kaufman's business in New Orleans and later in New York, where he met and fell in love with his cousin Marie. Mike Mandell moved to Albuquerque in 1882 and initially worked as a salesman for Ilfeld Bros., while also looking after Kaufman's landholdings. Mike then started his own hardware business, along with a brother, Felix, and possibly other relatives. Mandell Bros. & Co. both retailed and wholesaled hardware, agricultural and mining implements. The firm apparently went bankrupt in 1890.

Oh, he [Mike Mandell] was full of mischief. I remember, at that time, he ... had to be in his 90s, and he was dancing.... Oh, he was so cute. And, they were just so nice.

Jane Weiller Thompson, interview

But this new American had quickly developed an itch for politics. At less than five feet tall, Mike Mandell was not physically impressive. He used a walking stick for effect and became known as a dapper dresser who wore spats at parties, political and social occasions, and at his temple on the holidays. He was also gregarious, sociable, and had an easy way of connecting to people. Mike also had a mischievous side to his family and close friends, He became a popular fixture in local Democratic Party politics. From 1887-1890, Mandell served on the city's Board of Trustees (similar to a City Council) and was an active member.

In 1890, he was elected the sixth mayor by the narrow margin of eleven votes. Like his predecessors, he came from the ranks of the town's leading merchants. He thereby became the second Jew to be elected mayor; Henry Jaffa, a highly respected merchant with interests in Albuquerque, Roswell, and Trinidad, Colorado, had been elected the town's first mayor in 1885. Both demonstrated that Jews found few barriers to political and economic advancement in Albuquerque.



Mike Mandell, downtown Albuquerque, 1910s, courtesy of Rosemarie Gruenberger

After his one-year term ended in 1891, Mike Mandell temporarily stepped aside from electoral politics. That same year, Albuquerque was incorporated as a city with a new charter and a more formal structure of government, including an elected city council. Mike returned to retailing and owned a dry goods store on Central and Third in partnership with a cousin. In 1913, Mike was elected Bernalillo County Treasurer and may have served several terms in that office. After that, he apparently did not run for any more offices, although he remained involved in Democratic Party activities.

Meanwhile, Mike had a family to look after. He and Marie had been married in a lavish ceremony on November 30, 1887 at Temple Emanuel in New York. They had seven children, but only three survived childhood. Marie and Mike almost always attended the four families' many social and holiday gatherings, where they were well-loved and known as Uncle Mike and Auntie Mike-- to distinguish her from Marie Benjamin. After their wedding, Mike and Marie may have moved into "an elegant" house on Tijeras Canyon Road (later shortened to Tijeras Avenue), one of two that Kaufman built in Albuquerque. Mike and Marie later built a home far out in the "country" that the family referred to as the "ranch," on present-day Menaul Blvd. between Second and Fourth Streets. There was also a Mandell Avenue, between Tenth and Twelfth streets NW, until it was changed to La Poblana, during the city's comprehensive renaming of streets in 1952.

Mike remained active in both civic and Jewish affairs. Mike was a founder of Temple Albert, established in 1897 as Albuquerque's first Jewish congregation. Like most of the other family members, the Mandells had moved from their Orthodox roots into the Reform movement when they settled in the United States. In fact, especially in the West, Reform Judaism was the leading-- and in many places-- the only form of organized Judaism in America.



Mike and Marie Mandell, Los Angeles, 1940s, courtesy of Rosemarie Gruenberger

Mike suffered financial reverses in his later life, perhaps due to the Great Depression. In his later years, he essentially lived off the sale of lots his father-in-law had wisely purchased. Mike and Marie moved to Los Angeles in the 1940s to live with their daughter Gladys Epstein and her husband Harold. Their daughter Rosemarie Gruenberger provided very helpful information on Mike and Marie. In 1950, both Mike and Marie died within months of one another in California.

In the meantime, the Weillers, the second of the four families had established themselves in Albuquerque. The first was David Weiller who worked for the Charles Ilfeld Company--the largest mercantile enterprise in New Mexico with headquarters in Las Vegas and branches all over the territory, including Albuquerque. The company had a standing invitation to young German and French Jewish boys to train in its stores; many of them later built successful businesses of their own. David was highly regarded and eventually became the manager of the Ilfeld warehouse in Albuquerque. He later moved to Chicago with his brother Benjamin.



*Charles Iffeld Co., c. 1915, David Weiller behind desk,
Courtesy of dbmw website*

Another brother, Benjamin Weiller also lived in Albuquerque for a dozen years before settling in Chicago. For most of his time in New Mexico, Ben worked as a traveling salesman for Gross-Kelly, a leading wholesaler in the state. Ben was famous as a bicycle racer and took home many prizes.

My grandmother was a Benjamin, so it was her brother and my grandfather that opened the store in New Town or Albuquerque where he moved from Old Town.

Jane Weiller Thompson interview

In 1882, their younger brother, Solomon, was sixteen when he made his way to New Mexico. Apparently his mother had worried that another war would erupt in Europe and he would

be conscripted into the German Army. Solomon was supposed to work for the Iffeld company in Las Vegas, but-- accidentally or intentionally-- stayed on the train and wound up in Albuquerque. He likely worked for the Iffelds in Albuquerque for some years before opening his own store on Romero Street in Old Town. But realizing that New Town was fast becoming the commercial hub of the area, he formed a partnership with Solomon Benjamin to open Weiller-Benjamin on the south side of Central between Second and Third streets.

Enter the Benjamins, who also came from Alsace and were related to the Weillers and Mandells by marriage. Joseph (1844-1888) was the first of the Benjamins to come to New Mexico. He had settled in Mississippi, but moved to Socorro with his wife, another Caroline Mandell (1847-1917), seeking a cure for his tuberculosis. His condition improved, but he died at the early age of forty-four. He is buried in Albuquerque's Jewish cemetery, but it is unclear whether he ever lived in the city. After her husband died, Caroline opened a boarding house on Marquette Avenue and Second Street to support herself. Other Benjamins followed, including brothers Solomon and Harry and sister Marie. Solomon Benjamin (often called Solly to distinguish him from his partner) married Hortense, but her last name is unknown. They did not have any children. Harry Benjamin was a partner in Stamm Benjamin Fruit Company. He married Mamie Armijo, who came from an established Old Town family dating back to the 1700s.

Caroline Benjamin's boarding house became the first stop for many new Jewish immigrants to New Mexico, especially the growing Alsatian contingent. There they found familiar surroundings and companionship while struggling with their first jobs, generally working for their countrymen. There, they were also introduced to English, American culture, and retailing in New Mexico. Many would then go on to establish their own stores, often in partnership with fellow Alsatian Jews. Partnerships were favored by many because of the need for capital, risk sharing, a sense of security, and release from the stresses of the retail business. In many cases,

partners divided the tasks according to respective strengths and interests, whether it was dealing with customers, buying goods, or handling the books.

As they became settled and acquired a steady income, they moved into their own homes, usually after marrying. Many of them wed cousins due to strong family ties, the established pattern in the small Jewish communities in Europe, and the shortage of single Jewish women in New Mexico.

When he {Byron} was a young boy, he liked fire trucks and he liked fires. And when there was a fire, he would follow the fire trucks.

Celeste Mandell, interview

Solomon Weiller fit that pattern as he married his cousin Celestine Benjamin, who came from Mississippi. Celeste, as she was generally called, was a prankster in her early life, but she took her roles as family matriarch and society leader seriously. They had three children: David, Byron, and Florence Weiller. The brothers were pranksters, getting into all sorts of trouble. Byron liked to follow fire trucks, until he ran into one and was banned thereafter from fire scenes. Florence was the serious one in the family.



*Celeste Benjamin Weiller, Sol Weiller, with grandchildren
Carol May Bloch, David Weiller Jr. and Jane Weiller Thompson*

In the meantime, Weiller & Benjamin built a flourishing business and became a fixture in downtown Albuquerque's commercial life. The store sold men's and women's clothing yard goods, and also catered to the Mexican and Indian trade with blankets, hats, and accessories. Meanwhile, finding opportunities and few barriers, Sol Weiller had interests in banking, ranching, and mining. In the 1890s, Sol bought a large ranch south of Carrizozo, near the mining town of White Oaks perhaps fueling his interest in mining. Indeed, a number of New Mexican Jews had large ranching operations. Sol was also a partner in the C&C gold mine in the Ortiz Mountains.

The ranch was lost in the Great Depression. As the story goes, Sol's son David had found a buyer for the cattle that Sol and other members of the family were driving to a big auction in Denver. But Sol told him to wait until they all had arrived in Denver. The next

day the stock market crashed, along with the price of cattle, and the deal fell through. The lingering effects of the depression took its toll and the ranch was lost due to the failure to pay taxes.

Sol Weiller retired in 1933 and shortly afterwards the partners closed their store. Sol died in 1946. But Solly Benjamin operated a grocery store on New York Avenue (now known as Lomas Boulevard) near Twelfth Street, NW.

Strangely, Sol Weiller had not considered his son David's future when he closed his business, although he had moved in with him after his wife Celestine died. David and his wife even built an extension on their home to accommodate him. David worked for Weiller-Benjamin for many years after graduating from Albuquerque High school. In 1920, he had married Naomi Boshwitz, who was born in 1897 in Memphis, Tennessee. She arrived in Albuquerque to recover from a serious case of pneumonia; her uncle Max Boshwitz had agreed to take her to the West for the remainder of the Memphis rainy season. When Celestine Weiller met this lovely Jewish girl, she wired her son David, who was working at the ranch, to come to Albuquerque immediately to meet Naomi at a party one of the Ilfelds was giving. David replied that "with a name like that [Boshwitz], I don't want to meet her." His mother won the argument and he had to ride a horse to catch the train to Albuquerque. They fell in love and were married at Temple Albert. They later bought a house at Eleventh and Fruit Avenue, NW.

David had been the only one of the children to enter the family business; his siblings left Albuquerque and made their way to California and Arizona. David now had to scramble to make a living after his father Sol retired. He wisely opened a liquor store in downtown Albuquerque, on Fourth, between Central and Gold Avenues, SW. In fact, it was the first package store in the city after Prohibition was repealed. He made a very comfortable living for Naomi and their two children, David Esterday (named for the physician who delivered him), born in 1921, and Jane Celeste who arrived in 1927. There was not yet a crime problem in downtown Albuquerque, but David Weiller decided he had enough of the

business and sold his license. He died in 1960; Naomi lived until 1980.



Naomi Boshwitz Weiller and David Weiller Sr., courtesy of Jane Thompson

David Esterday attended Eastern New Mexico University for a year after high school. He then helped out his father out in the liquor store and also worked at a variety of jobs in town, including as a security guard. He married Mina, an older woman from New York, and they did not have children. David Esterday died in 1981.

Jane Celeste was born in 1927, attended Albuquerque High School, and after graduation enrolled at the University of Missouri.

She stayed only one year because she had met and fallen in love with Myron "Buddy" Gins. Myron was from Cleveland, but was sent to El Paso during his training in the Army Air Corps. While stationed there, he dated Corrine Blaugrund, the niece of his future boss, Mannie Blaugrund, the founder of American Furniture in Albuquerque. American Furniture was started by the Blaugrund family, Czech immigrants, in El Paso.

Buddy did not actually meet Mannie until after the war. In a twist of fate, Mannie had heard about Buddy through Corrine and so he looked up the Gins family while he was stationed in Cleveland. As a result, Mannie met Buddy's sister, Frieda, and later married her.



*Myron "Buddy" Gins in front of his plane
Courtesy of Rand Gins*

Buddy enlisted in the Army Air Corps, becoming a Second Lieutenant, and was trained as a bombardier. Because of his aptitude, he was also taught to transmit coded messages and collect intelligence in case he was captured. After flying dozens of missions, Buddy's plane was shot down over Germany. When Buddy and the pilot, "Willie" were captured, the other officers were concerned that because both were Jewish they would not be treated according to the Geneva Convention and would be sent to a concentration camp, rather than a POW camp. But threats from the Red Cross and others forced the camp commandant not to inform the Gestapo that they were Jewish. During the year Buddy was a POW, Buddy drew on his training to craft letters to his family in which he talked about a fictitious girlfriend to pass on coded information to American intelligence.

After returning from the war, Buddy traveled to Albuquerque to visit his sister Frieda and look for work. In the meantime, Mannie had heard about Buddy's sharp mind and superb academic record (he had graduated magna cum laude from the University of Michigan) from his sister Corinne. Mannie was impressed when he met him in person, and needing help for the growing enterprise, he hired Buddy as his assistant. Buddy later became General Manager, a position he held until his death. Buddy was put in charge of designing and overseeing the construction of American Square, American Furniture's crown jewel and the largest home furnishing store west of the Mississippi.