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A Different Kind of Gelt

Yosemite Valley offers a rich history of the gold rush

December 10, 2009 - Elyse Glickman, Jewish Exponent Feature

When many Jews think of the Gold Rush, one thing that often comes to mind is Levi Strauss and his watershed invention -- blue jeans. While his fortune is forever associated with San Francisco, it is important to note there were other Jews who traveled west to find gold, but ended up prospering in other ways.



Of vistas and the historic Ahwahnee Hotel (below)

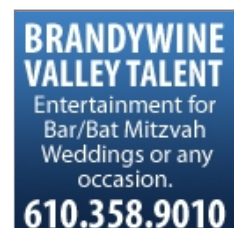
Back in 1978, the *Jewish Sentinel* published an historic account written by Norton B. Stern, summarizing Jewish life in the Yosemite Valley and Mariposa County, the epicenters of the Gold Rush in the mid-1800s. Though their numbers were small, Jewish immigrants (mostly from Central Europe, though a few came from France and Bavaria) built their fortunes through dry goods and clothing businesses that in turn provided much needed supplies, services and necessities for miners and others settling into the West.

Many of the Jewish residents were also simultaneously active in politics and civil posts in townships dotting the area, including Bear Valley, Coulterville, Hornitos, Agua Fria and Mariposa.



The short but fact-filled 30-year-old article was sourced in the archives of the Mariposa Museum and History Center, a spot small on space but rich in substance. The prolific collection of Gold Rush-era artifacts is lovingly organized thematically and exhaustively catalogued in a way that brings textbook American history into three dimensions.

Though most Jews living there in that period settled in San Francisco, Los Angeles and other centers of



commerce, the majesty, history and natural allure of Yosemite roused North Hollywood native Scott Gediman to stake his figurative claim in and around the national park.

Though he muses that some visitors are surprised when they meet a Jewish park ranger, he says that he was always serious about working in Yosemite, even with the nearest shuls located in Stockton and Fresno, well over an hour from the park's boundaries.

"When I was growing up, our family came up here on vacation every year, and we rented cabins and camped," recalls Gediman. "As long as I can remember, I knew I wanted to be a park ranger in Yosemite.

"What was interesting was that although most of my friends regularly went camping and backpacking in Yosemite, I went to a mostly Jewish high school, where becoming a park ranger wasn't the most popular ambition. Even with [eliciting] some raised eyebrows, this was something I really wanted to pursue.

"I began my career at Lake Powell in Arizona and Utah, then worked at the Grand Canyon before moving on to Yosemite. I have been here for 14 years now, and it's really a dream come true."

As he lead my group down some of the park's most popular trails -- past Half Dome, El Capitan and Bridal Veil Falls -- and pointed out the park's recent improvements in infrastructure (making it more accessible to visitors in wheelchairs and with other disabilities), it was not a stretch to see why Gediman and his wife both found bliss in the park ranger profession, especially in an environment, which by nature, is ideal for raising a family.

"Though there is no temple in the Yosemite Valley, my wife and I have found that it isn't that difficult to practice a Jewish lifestyle in Yosemite, even if there are very few Jewish park rangers," continues Gediman.

"Naturalist and preservationist John Muir" --who petitioned Congress for the 1899 National Park Bill that helped establish Yosemite National Park -- "talked about the notion that one could find God everywhere in Yosemite," he says. "With that, my family and I are able to observe all the major holidays in the Valley."

The tour continues to the landmark Ahwahnee Hotel, a majestic craftsman-like structure blending seamlessly into the mountainous landscape. It's worth a visit, as many elected officials and diplomats broke bread during the 20th century.

The ranger explains that while the kitchen is not kosher, the hotel has the capabilities to stage most Jewish wedding receptions, while the park hosts several Jewish ceremonies every year. This in turn segues to more insight on how Jews struck gold in the 1800s, often without picking up a shovel and axe.

"Today, there is a fairly big Jewish population in Stockton and Modesto, and during the late 1800s, Jewish families served as early concessioners to miners before settling in those places," he continues. "Before the federal government came to California, Jewish pioneers ran some of the stores, hotels, photography businesses, souvenir stores and things like that. Though many of these businesses are long gone, they made their mark on history."

Just inside the park's southern boundaries, the Wawona Hotel allows visitors to go even further back in time, to around 1876. Even if some travel budgets may not allow for a week's stay at the lovely and historic Ahwahnee Hotel, visits to both these properties are essential, and one night or even a meal at both places is worth the investment.

The Wawona Hotel is ahead of its time when it comes to embracing the slow-food



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movement making its way into the U.S. from its Piemonte, Italy, origin. While the breakfast is as good or better than Grandma made (the blueberry pancakes are worth every calorie), the kitchen from top to bottom is all about everything organic, sustainable, free-range and supportive to local farms and businesses.

Some locals insist, meanwhile, that to get a true feel for the region, it is best to stay for a week, and try out different lodges for size. The Yosemite Bug (www.yosemitebug.com) cleverly merges boutique lodging, camping, a spa/yoga retreat and a European youth hostel into a very progressive way to rough it.

Though the Yosemite View Lodge (www.yosemiteresorts.us/yosemiteviewlodge) at the other end of the park is deceptively plain on the outside, the rooms are charmingly comfy, well-appointed (a modern working mini-kitchen), and nicely suited for families and large groups.

For more information about the Yosemite/Mariposa Country region, visit:
www.yosemitepark.com.

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