

British Columbia's Provincial Archives and the Province's Jews

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Résumé

Monsieur Geoffrey Castle, archiviste en poste au Service des Archives Provinciales de Colombie Britannique — Division Bibliothèque et Cartes — fut invité à prononcer un discours le 7 juin 1983 lors de l'assemblée de la Société d'Histoire des Juifs du Canada qui se tint à l'Université de Colombie Britannique.

Dans son discours M. Castle s'est saisi de l'occasion qui lui fut donnée pour expliquer les rouages du fonds d'Archives que les diverses personnes du service ont manipulé et dont ils sont en possession au Service des Archives Provinciales de Colombie Britannique et des accès et facilités qu'il est possible d'avoir.

Ainsi, tout au long de son discours M. Castle brossa un tableau de certaines des personnes pour lesquelles les documents d'archives sont destinés et expliqua le recours au Service des Archives Provinciales en faisant état du type de services auquel on peut s'attendre.

Monsieur Castle fit pour cela une rétrospective historique et expliqua le service en détail.

It is both an honour and a pleasure to be invited to speak to you at this meeting of the Canadian Jewish Historical Society today, June 7, 1983 — 5743 here at the University of British Columbia.

It has become apparent that the Provincial Archives has a considerable amount of material relating both directly and indirectly to Jewish history in the Pacific Northwest. I propose to talk about some of the people for whom we have material and explain the use of the archives and the sorts of things you might expect to find.

Part of a lecture delivered to the Canadian Jewish Historical Society, Learned Societies Conference, University of British Columbia, June, 1983.

In 1858, only 11 years after the California gold rush, gold mining activity in British Columbia attracted thousands of people to Victoria, which was the supply and administration centre for this activity. In that year about 40 Jewish people arrived. Some of these would make a lasting impact on the growth of the area after undergoing the all too familiar experience of relocating in a new country and sinking roots.

The tiny Jewish community soon organized Holy Day services. Next, attention was directed to acquiring a suitable burial ground. On May 17, 1859 the *Victoria Gazette* announced that there was to be a meeting the following Sunday (22nd) at Mr. Simpson's store on Yates Street, near Broad Street, in Victoria to approve a purchase plan. The notice was signed "A. Blackman." It transpired that 0.7 hectares (2 acres) were obtained from Mr. Roderick Finlayson, north of Spring Ridge on Cedar Hill Road.

On Sunday, February 5, 1860, a meeting of the first Benevolent Society took place. It was held at the Royal Hotel on Wharf Street just before the dedication service of the new cemetery. The president of this society was E.H. Vaenberg. The researcher of Jewish history will find in the archives microfilms of newspapers describing these events.

David Rome estimates that the Victoria Jewish population increased to 146 between 1858 and 1860. By 1863, the year that the Synagogue was built on Pandora Street, the population was up to 242. A number of these pioneers are well documented, revealing their influence on business life, politics, art, music, teaching, medicine and entertainment.

An early significant event was the murder of Morris Price at Cayoosh (now called Lillooet). Murdered at his store on February 2, 1861, Morris Price was a Prussian who had in October 1859 joined the Victoria Hook and Ladder Firefighting brigade. He was a Freemason and belonged to Lodge No. 1085, for which the Archives has reports. The Lodge looked after Mr. Morris' funeral arrangements and the burial took place at Victoria. It was the first interment at the cemetery on Cedar Hill Road. The Library and Maps section of the Archives has an 1861 map of Cayoosh and surrounding district. Several buildings are shown, one of which might have been Mr. Price's.

Because the two main places on the northwest Pacific coast were Victoria and San Francisco, a number of businesses had branches in both places. This is evident from the first B.C. directory which Edward Mallandaine compiled and published in March, 1860. It is a very useful research tool.

It was from San Francisco that one of the earliest Jews arrived in Victoria. He was New York born Frank Sylvester and information in the newspaper clipping file in the Archives reference room states that Mr. Sylvester spent his first night

in Victoria in a tent where a main thoroughfare, Yates Street, is now located. From 1862-64 he was secretary of the Victoria (Tiger) fire brigade and married Cecilia, daughter of J.P. Davies, the auctioneer. Photographs of this couple are to be found in the archives.

Sylvester made frequent business trips to San Francisco and was one of the lucky survivors when the newly fitted steamer LaBouchere foundered. The Sylvester family home was on Balmoral Road in Victoria. This and similar residences are shown on the early fire insurance plans which may be seen in the Library and Maps section. This series of plans was drawn for the fire insurance underwriters for most cities across north America and they are another useful research tool, especially since they depict the number of storeys, type of construction and even basement and chimney details.

In the ensuing years as Victoria developed, a number of Jewish families made their mark on this coast. Simon Leiser, born at Kerpen, Germany, travelled to the U.S. when he was only 16. He came to B.C. in 1873 and opened a wholesale coffee and spice business on Johnson Street, in Victoria. It was his company that supplied the miners during the 1898 Yukon gold rush.

Fortunately there are several sources of information about the Leisers to be found in the Archives. These range from early advertisements in the directory and newspapers, through newspaper articles over the years. According to a clipping in the vertical files, Mr. Leiser was a moving force in raising funds to build the Royal Theatre in Victoria. The theatre enabled many fine orchestras and talented persons to perform there and delight many people. The Visual Records section of the Archives has photographs of the Leisers and these can be copied for a small charge.

Another important Jewish pioneer was Henry Emanuel Levy. Born in New Zealand in 1843, Mr. Levy came to B.C. in 1859 and worked a gold claim on the Leech River on southern Vancouver Island. He will be remembered for his famous Arcade oyster restaurant which remained in the family in Victoria for almost 50 years. He married Eva Rostein, a former Seattle belle. In later years his big interest was in real estate. He survived until 1929 but the family home still stands on Pemberton Road although it was converted to apartments a few years ago. Original photographs are among relevant items kept at the Archives.

Morris Moss, about whom Cyril Leonoff wrote in the *Scribe* recently, was a most interesting yet mysterious pioneer. The archives has numerous references to Moss who was an Indian agent at the time of Governor Seymour. Mr. Moss became a fur trader at Bella Bella on the B.C. west coast and built a fort on the old Hudson's Bay Company site there.

He discovered the Hebrew Mine for which he refused good offers although

there is doubt as whether the operation was really lucrative. Moss married the daughter of Hermann Bornstein, a prominent fur and hide dealer and, apparently at the height of his career, Moss disappeared. Although he was recognized elsewhere later he appeared not to remember. The researcher of Moss will not find the answer to this puzzle but, as in all searches, the side avenues will be fascinating to explore.

Yet another vital force in the development of British Columbia was David Oppenheimer. Born in Bavaria in 1834, Mr. Oppenheimer went to New Orleans with his brother in 1848. The brothers eventually arrived in Victoria in 1860 and opened several stores in British Columbia. David Oppenheimer was elected Vancouver's second mayor in 1888, succeeding M. A. McLean. The Archives has, among other things, photographs of Mr. Oppenheimer, one of which a San Francisco photographer took.

In addition to the information sources already mentioned, the library catalogue often has descriptive notes on the cards. There could also be examples of work to see. Pioneer photographers, such as Savannah, took pictures of Governor Sir James Douglas and Judge Matthew Baillie Begbie. Another example of this Jewish photographer's work is a picture of the first wheelbarrow in the Cariboo which in itself is a curiosity.

Among the paintings in the Visual Display section are ones of Jacob Moses Lenz and Esther (Neé Solomon) Lenz. There is also an interesting painting of Lillian Frieman's which she signed and is called the "Bird Market." Although Frieman is not a native of the west coast, it was a local resident who placed this particular painting in the Archives. It is on loan to the Victoria Art Gallery.

The Archives Manuscripts and Government Records Division has catalogued the collection of 23 volumes relating to the Congregation Emmanuel of Victoria under additional manuscripts (ADD. MSS #59). The synagogue was completed in 1863 and is Victoria's second oldest house of worship. The papers, which the Congregation saw fit in its wisdom to deposit in the Archives, include bills, receipts, miscellaneous pamphlets, papers relating to the Hebrew burial grounds, and general accounts. All except volume 9 have been microfilmed. Prints of microfilm frames are readily available but they are not of the instant variety so a day or two should be allowed for this.

Among the papers relating to the Jewish burial ground in Victoria are the names of those buried from 1862 to 1941 and a list of the occupied burial plots. Other registers of potential interest include the marriage register of Congregation Emmanuel 1884-1936; the register of births 1900-1940; and the register of deaths 1900-1939.

The archives' Sound and Moving Image Division has a number of tapes of

interest to students of Jewish culture and activities. This division publishes Sound Heritage, and the recent number 38 in the series, titled “Imagine Please” provides an excellent overview of early broadcasting in British Columbia. Names such as Ernie Rose and Allan Klenman will be familiar to many from the more recent past of radio.

Information sources for Jewish history in the B.C. Provincial Archives go far beyond western Canada. The card catalogue in the reference room refers to many books and pamphlets in the northwest collection. They include works on the pioneer Jews in California, in Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Manitoba and Oregon. There is a William Kurelek book on paintings and commentaries, David Rome’s reconstructed census for British Columbia Jewry, as well as Lodge reports and magazine articles. I should like to mention that there are a number of other sources of information to aid the type of research in which you would be interested, especially for the Canadian west coast. In Victoria, the City of Victoria Archives, Legislative and public libraries, and the University of Victoria are good possibilities. In Vancouver, the City of Vancouver Archives, public libraries and the University of British Columbia readily come to mind.

In conclusion, may I say how much I have enjoyed this opportunity to meet you and talk to you individually and to find how much we have in common through history. I wish you every success in your continued endeavours to build a Jewish Archives and hope that the Archives of the Province of British Columbia will prove to be an important source of historic material for your benefit.



Simon Leiser b. Kerpen, Germany, 1851. Arrived Victoria 1873. Opened a wholesale coffee and spice business on Johnson Street. Became a prominent businessman. Died at Victoria, 1917. (PABC photo number Pdp 355)



Mrs. Frank Sylvester. Photo: Maynard's Photographers, Victoria. (PABC photo number 4174)



Mr. and Mrs. Henry Emmanuel Levy. b. New Zealand 1843. Came to Victoria 1859. Operated a salmon cannery and was later in real estate (Mr. Levy). Wife was Eva Rostein, a one time Seattle belle. Mr. Levy died in 1929. Photographed 1882 at Portland. Davies Photographer. (PABC photo number 21901)



Mr. Morris Moss. Was 21 years old when he arrived in Victoria in 1862. Became son-in-law of Mr. and Mrs. Hermann Bornstein who were prominent fur and hide dealers in Victoria. (PABC photo number 3530)



Mr. David Oppenheimer. Born Bavaria in 1834, he accompanied his brother to New Orleans in 1848. They moved to Lafayette in 1853 where they entered business before moving to Sacramento. They arrived at Victoria in 1860 and opened several stores in the province. Mr. Oppenheimer was elected mayor of Vancouver by acclamation in 1888. Photo: The Imperial Photographic Gallery, 724-1/2 Market Street, San Francisco. (PABC photo number 6759)



Mr. Frank Sylvester. Was one of the first Jews to come to Victoria. New York born, he arrived on the S.S. Pacific and did some gold mining. Photo: Maynard's. (PABC photo number 4173)



Headstone of Morris Price, Victoria. Morris Price was murdered at his general store on the evening of February 1, 1861, and was the first person to be buried in the Jewish cemetery, Victoria. (Photo: G. Castle)