

Passover Feature

IN HONOR OF PASSOVER, WHICH COMMEMORATES THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF THE ISRAELITES FROM EGYPTIAN BONDAGE, THE LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE WILL PUBLISH A SERIES OF FEATURES. THIS YEAR THE PASSOVER FESTIVAL IS INAUGURATED AT SUN-DOWN ON THE EVENING OF MONDAY, APRIL 24, AND ENDS ON TUESDAY, MAY 2.

THE SHOLOM ALECHEM OIL FIELD
Footnote to Oklahoma Jewish History
BY CHAPLAIN M. DAVID GEFFEN

Chaplain Geffen is on duty at
Fort Sill, Oklahoma

State Highway #7 in southern Oklahoma, from Duncan to Ardmore, is a very twisting route dotted by occasional oil wells. About half a mile before the Stephens-Carter County Line, the road climbs sharply, and at the crest of this rise, about seven or eight miles from the town of Velma, is a large sign that reads: "SHOLOM ALECHEM GASOLINE PLANT. Many of the local residents believe the name is of Indian origin but the history of its title is assuredly Hebrew.

The early 1920s was a period of oil fever in Oklahoma, and the state's leading newspapers added to the excitement by publishing a page of oil news every day. In southern Oklahoma, Ardmore was the center of this frenzy, and the oil editor of the Daily Ardmoreite was an unusual man by the name of William (Bill) Krohn. Krohn was Jewish and a resident of Ardmore, having arrived in the area several years earlier. It was Krohn's custom, according to Walter Neustadt Jr., a fourth generation resident of Ardmore, to greet people on the street with the expression "Sholom Alechem." In due course he educated people to respond with the phrase "Alechem Sholom."

In addition to offering the traditional Hebrew greeting, Krohn organized a Sholom Alechem Society. Frank Gouin, who has been a resident geologist and oil producer in southern Oklahoma for fifty years, knew Krohn well, and he described the Sholom Alechem Society as an informal social group for oil men visiting and operating in and around Ardmore. During the 1920s it was customary for people to come from all parts of the country to watch an oil well spew forth its first black gold. The Ardmore Hotel was the gathering place of these oil enthusiasts. In the evenings prior to a new strike Bill Krohn would be



JEWISH MILITARY CHAPLAINS RECRUITED, ENDORSED AND SERVED BY THE NATIONAL JEWISH WELFARE BOARD COMMISSION ON JEWISH CHAPLAINCY OFTEN UNCOVER INTERESTING FOOTNOTES TO LOCAL JEWISH HISTORY. IN HIS VISITS TO JEWISH COMMUNITIES NEAR FORT SILL, OKLA., WHERE HE IS ON DUTY, CHAPLAIN M. DAVID GEFFEN (LEFT) CAME UP THE SHOLOM ALECHEM OIL FIELD, OFF STATE HIGHWAY #7 IN OKLAHOMA. CHAPLAIN GEFFEN, A NATIVE OF ATLANTA, GA., IS THE GRANDSON OF THE VENERABLE RABBI TOBIAS GEFFEN OF ATLANTA.

at the hotel displaying true Oklahoma hospitality. He would wander quietly through the lobby until he saw an unfamiliar face. Then he would boom out "Sholom Alechem" and wait for a reply. Since he usually received no response to his greeting from the newcomer, he would invite him to become a member of the Sholom Alechem Society. If the stranger agreed, Bill took the neophyte in hand and then repeated this procedure with another person. After gathering several people together, he would escort his new acquaintances to the local confectionery shop for the initiation rite. This consisted of Bill's buying these newly arrived oil devotees a soda as a way of befriending them.

William Krohn was also responsible for the naming of the Sholom Alechem Oil Field. There are two versions as to the origin of this name. Louis Fischl, a lawyer in Ardmore, and Jerome Westheimer, a son of one of the part-owners of the original field, stated that Krohn named the discovery well of the field "Sholom Alechem" in the oil page of the daily Ardmoreite in late 1923 or early 1924. The name stuck. Usually an oil field assumed the name of the nearest town, but the initial well of this field was not adjacent to any municipality so Krohn's title was accepted by the existing oil agencies.

The second version is more plausible according to many residents of the Ardmore-Duncan area. It was told to me by Walter Neustadt Jr., who is also related to one of the original owners of the field. He described Bill Krohn as an excellent reporter and as extremely well-liked by the oilmen. On the night oil began to flow from the discovery well, Bill was on the rig floor with the drillers and the observers so he could have first-hand information to pass on to his readers. Because of his popularity among the entire oil fraternity and because of his presence on the rig floor, the well was named "Sholom Alechem." Bill Krohn, quite honored by the name, reported the discovery of the Sholom Alechem well in his oil column in the Daily Ardmoreite. With the successful drilling of more wells in the area, the title Sholom Alechem was officially ascribed to the entire field.

The first well in the Sholom Alechem Field was brought in in December, 1923 by the Humble Oil Company on land partially owned by Max and Simon Westheimer and Sam and David Daube of Ardmore. The geological report of the field shows that it developed through the middle twenties, but after the economic crisis of 1929 attempts to drill for more oil subsided. On August 26, 1947, a new well was discovered which has remained a tremendous oil producer. Since that time the field as a whole has been very active. Mobil, Pan-American, and Skelley all have wells in the field at the present time. Louis Fischl also emphasized to me that the Sholom Alechem Field has been very productive and is still producing a substantial quantity of oil. He suggested further that it might be successfully contended that "Sholom Alechem" had something to do with the oil field being a profitable one. Certainly the name has not hurt the field in any way.

This field is well known in southern Oklahoma. Morris Roth, a petroleum engineer of Duncan, called my attention to it. Nevertheless, it was not until I noticed the sign on the highway that I began to investigate the history of the field. Mr. Gouin informed me that Bill Krohn moved to Evansville, Indiana in 1938, but I have been unable to locate him. However, the existence of the Sholom Alechem Oil Field will always be a perpetual reminder of Bill Krohn's friendliness and hospitality in the Oklahoma oil fields.

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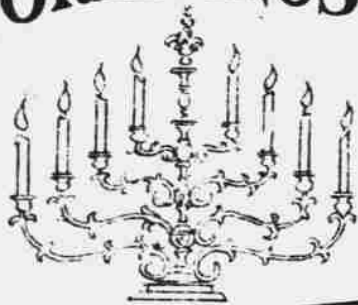
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