

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery Named to National Historic Register

12/6/2015 – Ashley, North Dakota - On November 17, 2015, the National Parks Service of the United States Department of the Interior named the Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery (“AJHC”) to the National Register of Historic Places. The AJHC (a/k/a Beth Itzchock Cemetery) is the only permanent physical reminder of the McIntosh County Jewish farming community --the largest Jewish agricultural settlement in North Dakota. North Dakota had the fourth largest number of Jewish homesteaders in any state in the United States from 1906 - 1915. 1200 Jewish farmers farmed on 250 homesteads in over fifty North Dakota settlements from the 1870s.

Over 400 Jewish individuals lived on between 70 and 100 homesteads near Ashley. The McIntosh County Jewish homesteader community was made up of Russian and Romanian immigrants escaping persecution, including the Russian prohibition against Jews owning lawn for farming. They came to America after pogroms in their native lands, with a migration of 1.25 million fellow Jews between 1880 and 1920. Unlike most of their Jewish brethren who remained on or near the east coast in bigger cities, they headed to “The Great Northwest” to become farmers – boarding trains from New York to the prairie, then climbing into horse drawn buggies or walking to Ashley in ruts of ox-cart trails from the train depot at Eureka, South Dakota, “Odessa of the North.”

Though McIntosh County was opened for homesteading in 1884, the Jewish homesteaders near Ashley did not arrive to stake a claim until 1905. The best land in the County had been claimed by that time, and most settled in the stony, hilly area later called “Judenberg” (Jewish hills) by their German-Russian neighbors. The Jewish farmers’ challenges were far from over when they arrived. Along with their inexperience, they faced drought, insects, early frosts, severe winters, prairie fires, the Spanish flu pandemic, and an economic depression. Nevertheless, through hard work and determination, these homesteaders generally made a success in growing wheat and flax, raising cattle and chickens, and selling cream from the sod houses. Most owned their land after the requisite five years under the Homestead Act, or purchased it sooner. With the money received from selling their land, many settled in towns where they maintained their independence as business owners.

These pioneers appreciated the freedoms and opportunities afforded them in America, and passed this feeling onto their children. It was possible to be a proud American and to mingle with neighbors of different faiths and backgrounds, while still maintaining one’s religious identity on this harsh prairie. They were a registered Jewish congregation in 1907, before they had a building for worship or a formally trained Rabbi. They were competent farmers and raisers of cattle and chickens, without any experience. They were Americans – free to practice their religion and to choose their livelihood. The AJHC stands as a symbol of the acceptance the Jewish homesteaders felt to remain true to who they were.

The complete Nomination, drafted by Ashley homesteader descendent Rebecca Bender, with research citations and more detail about the homesteaders’ lives -- from digging out countless rocks by hand from their homestead land, to riding wild pinto horses in Fourth of July races, to celebrating Jewish milestones with sponge cake, homemade wine and spirited violin-playing -- is available at the Historic Preservation Office at the State Historical Society of North Dakota in Bismarck. On August 28, 2015, the North Dakota State Historic Preservation Review Board unanimously voted to recommend historic site status for the Cemetery.

The Ashley Jewish Cemetery Corporation is a 501(c)(3) charity organized in 1971, which is accepting donations to maintain the monuments and site, as well as to install an explanatory memorial honoring the Dakota Jewish homesteaders. The McIntosh County homesteader family names represented in the Cemetery (on the homestead parcel originally owned by Sarah Schlasinger, nee Bendersky, and first used as a cemetery when owned by Wolf and Alta Feneck), include Auerbach, Becker, Bender, Berman, Bloom, Dorfman, Ewart, Filler, Friedman, Goldstone, Grossman, Jampolsky, Ourach, Parkansky, Raich, Reuben, Silverleib, Smilowitz and Weil. Tax-deductible donations of any amount are appreciated and may be made payable to The Ashley Jewish Cemetery Corporation, c/o its President, Stuart Kaufman. The mailing address for the Corporation is 6343 52nd Avenue South, Seattle, WA 98118.

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View of Cemetery
from adjacent country road



Portion of Monument at homesteader Kiva Bender's gravesite. Mr. Bender was the founder of the Sulzberger Jewish Farmers Association and lay leader of the Ashley congregation prior to Rabbi Julius Hess being sent by the Jewish Chautauqua Society.

Several of the Jewish symbols found on the monuments of homesteaders in Ashley:

Candelabra on Monument
of Mrs. Reuben



Star of David on
Isador Smilowitz Monument



Open book on
Yitzchak Grossman's
Monument



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