



BETH-EL
CONGREGATION
CENTENNIAL

FORT WORTH, TEXAS, 1902–2002

BY HOLLACE AVA WEINER

*The synagogue is the most enduring, most persistent, most resilient,
most participatory and least studied Jewish institution. . . .*

—Jack Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue:
A Sanctuary Transformed*

Writer/Archivist	Hollace Ava Weiner
Assistant Archivist	Esther Winesanker
Managing Editor	Nancy Siegel
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Indexers	Rosanne and Bill Margolis
Photographers	Marc Slotter, Buddy Freed
Designer	Garry Harman, The ArtWorks
Ad Coordinator	Alexa Kirk
Printer	Ben Herman and Associates/Graphics2
Researcher	Corrine Jacobson

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Introduction

In 1902, Teddy Roosevelt was America's young, ebullient president. His energy, like the charisma of John F. Kennedy six decades later, uplifted the nation, particularly its western reaches. The Rough Rider president was a big-game hunter and a conservationist comfortable on the frontier. His brash, can-do spirit helped move backwater towns like Fort Worth into the Progressive mainstream.

One hundred years ago, Fort Worth thought of itself as transitioning from a cow town into a cosmopolitan city. The Interurban, an electric trolley, began hourly commuter service to Dallas, giving locals easy access to the larger, rival city to the east and linking Fort Worth to the rest of the world. Two national meatpacking firms began constructing plants in the Fort Worth Stockyards, creating thousands of working class jobs as well as opportunities for land developers, retailers, and other entrepreneurs. A city that had once mocked the creation of churches began building them and promoting Fort Worth as a family town.

In this environment, Beth-El Congregation was born. Beth-El's creators were not newcomers to Fort Worth but old-timers. They organized a Reform congregation as an expression of civic pride, as an assertion of their collective religious identity in a city where churches were beginning to multiply.

Jewish pioneers who had come to Fort Worth in the 19th century were not looking for religion. They were lured by the frontier and the independence it promised. They came not because of family ties but because they wanted autonomy. Fort Worth was perceived as a peripheral place where they could function alone, free of communal expectations. Not for them the sweatshops or assembly lines of the North. They wanted to build their own business ventures. Jewish Texans who desired more *Yiddishkeit* or more organized religion settled in Dallas, Houston, or even Waco, where minyans and congregations began much earlier and grew more rapidly.

Fort Worth's organized Jewish community started small and has remained small. In 1906, U. M. Simon filled out a survey estimating the city's Jewish population at "roughly speaking . . . anywhere between five and eight hundred."¹ Today, the local Jewish Federation estimates the city's Jewish populace at 2,500. The city and county combined have around 5,000 Jewish residents living in 2,100 households. Since the post-World War II population boom, the Jewish population figures for Fort

Worth have remained fairly constant, while the city's total population has more than doubled to 516,000. Beth-El Congregation's membership today is just over 400 families. Ahavath Sholom, home to Orthodox and Conservative Jewish families, has around 500 families.

Meanwhile, Dallas and Houston each boast more than 50,000 Jews. Austin has one of the fastest-growing Jewish populations in the country. In those three cities, Jewish institutions have multiplied. Although Tarrant County has five congregations, Fort Worth still has only two, both strong.

Why doesn't Fort Worth Jewry multiply? That remains a persistent riddle. One reason seems to be the proximity to Dallas. Dallas got a head start. Dallas was cosmopolitan long before Fort Worth wanted to be. Statistically, Jewish families tend to move to urban centers with high concentrations of co-religionists, an indication that Fort Worth will never catch up to Dallas. Some would like to blame anti-Semitism for the community's failure to grow, but the historic record shows minimal discrimination. Anti-Semitism has historically been more blatant in Dallas and Houston, which attracted Jews even during the Ku Klux Klan era of the early 1920s.

While the Fort Worth Jewish community has not multiplied, it remains vibrant and has not declined in numbers, as so many Jewish communities have across the South. The long-established Jewish families in Fort Worth give the existing Jewish institutions stability, a deep financial base, and an emotional foundation. Many families' sons and daughters move to larger cities with more career opportunities, yet, in a large number of cases, at least one offspring remains to raise another generation of Fort Worth Jewry. Simultaneously, newcomers—many drawn from the military, the defense industry, and corporate relocations—infuse the Jewish community with energy and fresh ideas. Moreover, Jewish professionals and entrepreneurs wanting independence are still drawn here, finding in Fort Worth the same independent Wild West attraction it exuded a century ago.

This commemorative narrative celebrates the longevity of Beth-El Congregation. Its also serves as a case history studying the components of a vibrant, stable synagogue that has persisted and thrived throughout the ups and downs of a century. 🌟

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