

Texas Merchants After the Civil War

1871

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

In January, 1871, one L. Mandelbaum set out from New Haven, Connecticut, with an unnamed companion to visit relatives in southern Texas.

The Mandelbaum family had three stores in that area—in the towns of Bryan, Bremond, and Kosse. Bremond had just been laid out, and the Mandelbaum store established there was run by one member of the clan. That was Asher. Philip was at Kosse, and Isaac, it would seem, was at Bryan. It was not, of course, unusual for Jewish families starting out in business to put a relative in charge of a store. This is the way in which the notable Seligman family expanded its interests, and a similar procedure was followed, very likely, by the Sangers of Texas, kinsmen of the Mandelbaums. Starting stores and shops was the next step after peddling. Frequently, however, jobbers and wholesalers in the East and in the larger cities established retail branches and put relatives and skilled clerks in charge of them.

L. Mandelbaum's very brief diary, published only partially here, presents a graphic description of how a small-town store was laid out and what it handled: anything from a pin to a buggy. It is obvious that in the Texas of the post-bellum period such businesses made a substantial contribution in creating—and raising—the standard of living.

The original of this diary is thought to be in the possession of Elise Haber, a granddaughter of L. Mandelbaum. The Habers now live in Waco. A typescript copy of the diary was presented to the American Jewish Archives through the courtesy of Rabbi Amiel Wohl, of Waco.

Diary of L. Mandelbaum of New Haven, Conn.,
Describing Trip to Texas and Return
January 11, 1871, to February 18, 1871

BREMOND

Thursday the 2d [of February]. Bremond is situated on a high prairie, as Asher has in former letters described to us. It is quite a

thriving little town. They [the partners] are very well acquainted, as it seems, with everyone they meet, and, what I have seen, the people have a good deal of confidence in them. I went about town through the day and was introduced to many merchants and friends of both of them. It extends about one-half mile north and south along the Railroad.

It might not be amiss to say something about Asher's store. It has a capacity about 50 feet by 25 feet. The front opens with three wide doors, which gives a fine view from outside, for the display of the goods. Shelves running along on each side stocked with all sorts of dry goods, fancy goods, ribbons, hosiery, gents' furnishing goods, and a variety of hats, ladies' garters, etc. On each of the counters on the front is placed a large showcase filled with samples of all sorts of fancy goods, fine cutlery, trimming, velvet ribbons, perfumery, jewelry, pistols, small pipes, fiddles, etc.

In fact the store looks much better than what I would ever have believed if even so described to me by anyone, without being convinced by my own observation. I have omitted to say, through the center of the store a wide counter runs through the whole length of the store, well-stocked with domestics, flannels, blankets, oil cloth, etc. Under this counter are placed trunks and boxes containing boots and shoes. Overhead on the ceiling is a display of saddles, valises, traveling bags, and saddle bags, which are much used in these parts, as horseback riding is a common thing for those coming in from the neighboring country, men as well as ladies.

The town of Bremond was started in June last and has since that time grown up as above described. When first started it was thought in general that the International Railroad would cross the Houston & Texas Central Railroad at that point. This would have made this a thriving business place, but by some cause the place was changed and this Railroad crosses at Hearne and takes another course.

Thursday the whole day passed as a very fine one. I passed up and down the street several times and engaged the day very pleasantly and much to my satisfaction by observing how they handle those "country jokels." The opinion I formed of them I must say I am deceived. Their outside appearance, it is true, looks very rough, but their manners and behavior is quite calm. I have not heard since

I am out here not the least unbecoming expression by anyone. If they come with their ladies, the man generally sits down, holds the baby, if they have any with them, and let the ladies do their trading. After they get through they come up to the counter and settle the bill without any hesitation. If the merchant or clerk finds out that there is any money left, he tries to get it by showing him a coat, a pair of boots, a hat, or a gun, or whatever he can. The manner of their trading is quite different as in our parts; the mode of beating down is not much known. There is one thing certain, if a countryman comes in to a store and gets out his memorandum, if the merchant succeeds in making the first sale, he surely gets the whole what there may be on his list. The profits they get are on many articles very good, as on clothing, boots, and shoes, fancy goods, jewelry (combs [are] what they only keep), guns, and pistols, occasionally a fiddle or accordion.

KOSSE

In the evening we took the cars at Bremond for Kossa [Kosse], where we arrived about 9:00 in the evening. We were heartily welcomed by Philip and Isaac [my relatives], the three clerks, and porter. The head clerk, Jos. Loewenstein, a very fine, energetic young man, as a salesman he is not likely to be beat, very industrious and never seems to get tired to work. The other two, Henry Kensler and Leop. Wallenstein, also very good and faithful young men. The evening passed off finely in social conversation, eating New York wurst and drinking bottled Bremer beer. Describing the lodging room which is over the store: finished off[f] a very commodious need [neat] room, which holds two large bedsteads, the trunks of the clerks, a table. The beds consist of good mattresses, pillows, and plenty of blankets, much better than I expected to find. I rested through the nights first-rate, notwithstanding the many changes of my lodging places which I was obliged to make. I have finally reached the terminus of the Houston & Texas Central Railroad, 205 miles from Galveston.

To give some idea about the place I will first say the day Friday the 3d appeared fine, the whole day was a lovely one, warm and

pleasant. As the morning advanced the whole street was soon lined with bks. [blacks?], mule and horse teams coming in from the country loaded mostly with cotton. The price that day was rather unsettled, prices from 10—10½ [cents a pound]. The business was pretty fair; our folks sold that day about \$400.00 worth, which is called a fair day.

The store they occupy is the best in town for capacity, orderly kept, and, best of all, the large stock and assortment they keep. This is the principal store of the three [cities], for supplying the others. The capacity of it is 75 ft. by 30; the main floor with an addition of about 40 by 20 for storing buggies and carriages. The arrangement of the store is fine, laid out with three counters as described above by Asher's store. The shelves on each side are stocked with anything a lady or gentleman would ask for an outfit. On the counters, in the front, are placed on each of them a very fine showcase, silver-plated, mounted with a variety of samples of fancy goods. A high glasscase, of the same pattern as the showcase, stands a ways down on the counter, exhibiting ladies' hats, ribbons, flowers, etc., such as are usually found in first-class fancy stores. The center counter is very wide, containing, [for] the whole length of the store, whole pieces of goods, viz., calicos, gossamers, flannels, bleached and unbleached cotton, crepe goods, shawls, Dickin's canton flannels, blankets. Under the counters, which are three of them, are placed, the whole length through, boxes with boots and shoes. In the rear part of the store are piled up the full cases of boots and shoes and bales of domestics and blankets.

In the afternoon Asher left again for Bremond, and I consented to stay over Sunday, to witness another lively day if it should happen to turn out so.