

# The Jews of Alaska

JESSIE S. BLOOM

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

*Alaska is one of the newest of the United States of America, and one would expect that, if the new state lacked anything at all, it would be a Jewish history. And yet, in 1869, only two years after the United States acquired the territory from Russia, a Sitka Jew named A. Levy reminded the readers of San Francisco's Hebrew that "there are Jews close to the North Pole . . . ." The year before, Emil Teichman, a non-Jewish businessman visiting Sitka, had found "an assembly of some twenty men all of the Jewish persuasion . . . holding their Sabbath services and reading their prayers under the leadership of the oldest man present . . . ." To Teichman, whose diary — A Journey to Alaska in the Year 1868 — was published in 1925, "it was a memorable thing to see this religious gathering in so strange a setting and it said a great deal for the persistence with which the Jews everywhere, even in the most remote countries, practise their emotional exercises."*

Clearly, Jessie and Robert Bloom, who came to Alaska some four decades later, were not the first Jews to take up residence "close to the North Pole" — but they were certainly among the most energetic to do so. Jessie Bloom, whose recollections of Alaskan life are reproduced below, stemmed from a Lithuanian background, as did her husband. Their parents had settled in Ireland during the early 1880's, and Jessie was born at Dublin in 1887. Her husband Robert, she tells us, was "just a lad when he came to Dublin, but he is almost as Irish as Paddy's pig."

Jessie's parents were cultured people who quickly learned English — "using the newspaper as their medium of English, through which they always kept in touch with international affairs." Her maternal grandfather had been known in Shavli, Lithuania, as "Avram der Shreiber" — Abram the Writer. Her mother, she recalls, acted as his secretary and learned Russian, Hebrew, and German from him. When he died, she was only sixteen, but she assumed his duties and wrote letters for the townspeople who needed to communicate with their families in foreign

parts, because of the general exodus of the Jewish population at that time from Czarist Russia.

Jessie married her second cousin Robert Bloom at Dublin in 1912. Robert had left Ireland in 1897 to live with an uncle in Seattle, Washington, but remained there only a year and then joined the gold rush to the Canadian Klondike in 1898. He returned to Ireland to marry Jessie, and the newlyweds journeyed to Alaska in 1912. Robert Bloom was instrumental in developing Alaska's agricultural, educational, and transportation facilities, and his wife, too, made her contribution to the progress of what became, in 1959, the forty-ninth state.

The editors of the American Jewish Archives acknowledge with gratitude the editorial assistance of Mrs. Miriam Dreifus, of Cincinnati, Ohio. Mrs. Dreifus was most helpful in revising Jessie Bloom's story, which — brought to the attention of the American Jewish Archives by Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, of Rochester, N. Y. — begins with Robert Bloom's initial trip to Canada's nearby Yukon Territory in 1898.

When Bloom arrived in Dawson, Yukon Territory, in 1898, he found that there were Jews in the camp, and services for the *Yomim Noraim* (High Holy Days) were held that year at the Yukon Pioneer Hall. Bloom attended these services and established with members of that congregation friendships that continued throughout the years. The men were about the same age, and all had the same ambition to make a place for themselves in a new country.

The first Jewish burial service in Dawson was held for a young Jewish man who had been accidentally drowned while on a prospecting expedition up the Fortymile River, a tributary of the Yukon. This was in 1900, and Bloom officiated.

When gold was discovered in Alaska's Fairbanks District in 1902, many of the men from Dawson followed that stampede. Bloom joined them in 1904, and this group gave Fairbanks a Jewish community from its inception. When Fairbanks set aside land for a cemetery, the Jewish community was contacted and given a plot there; this place is still available for burials.

Bloom remained in Dawson, Y. T., until 1903, and then followed the stampede to Fairbanks. He prospected for gold at different periods, and then would go back to peddling, or some other work,

even driving cattle. He always made money trading and then would lose it prospecting, and he decided that mining was not for him.

Bloom opened a general store in Cleary, in the Fairbanks mining district, in 1905, and then set up in Fairbanks in 1906. He had his store on Front Street from 1906 till 1941, and that store was so much part of the community that it would take a special chapter to describe it.

### THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF FAIRBANKS

The Jewish community of Fairbanks was never very large, and it was difficult to have a *minyán* on Friday night or for Sabbath services, though services were held during the High Holy Days each year until 1908. In that year the majority of the Jewish community left to try their luck in the Iditarod stampede, and in 1910 the rest followed to the Ruby stampede. The last sizable gathering in Fairbanks was a *seder* (Passover meal) held at the home of the Barney Elsters, in 1910. Mrs. Elster was a true mother in Israel, and with the help of some of her Gentile friends, she put on a real *hemishe* (family-type) *seder*. The Elsters left Fairbanks the following year and settled in Everett, Washington. Their only son, Max, a gifted violinist, was a great favorite with the people of Fairbanks in the early years. Everyone enjoyed his fine playing, and when I arrived in 1912 I heard many favorable comments about his artistry. He continued with his music in Everett and other parts of the States.

When I arrived in Fairbanks in 1912, there were only a handful of Jews left, and the majority of military age departed during the First World War. Among those remaining were the Simpson brothers, Abe, Ben, Lipman, and Alec. We, the Blooms and the Simpsons, were the only Jewish families in the town for many years. There were no regular worship services from 1912 until 1939. All through those years Bloom religiously kept his store closed for both days of *Rosh Hashonoh* (Jewish New Year) and the one day of *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). These days stand out in the memory of the Bloom children as very important, not only because they did not go to school, but because Bloom stayed at home to pray and talk to them about their Jewish heritage. On Friday nights, we observed

the Sabbath Eve in our home with the ceremonies of *kiddush* and lighting the candles, and Bloom closed the store early that evening. This gave us an opportunity of instilling in the children the significance of our traditional ceremonies. We also observed the Passover with two *sedorim* (the ritual meals held on the first two nights), although we did not always have *matzos* (ritually prescribed unleavened bread). But we endeavored to have the children take part, and one *seder* stands out in my mind, in 1923, when our oldest daughter, Meta, was ten and our youngest, Ruth, four. The former found in one of her books Israel Zangwill's poem that described *Pesach* (Passover), and she asked to be allowed to recite it at the *seder*. We consented, and all listened as she spoke those inspiring words, "Yet in ten thousand homes this April night." It gave us an opportunity to discuss the ceremony and to explain that, to us as Jews, *Pesach* was as important as the Fourth of July was to Americans.

It was a challenge to keep the Orthodox tradition in a community of Gentiles, but we managed with the aid of some fine books which were sent to us by our interested friends. We received from London a book called *Little Miriam's Bible Stories for Little Jewish Readers*, written by Lady Katie Magnus, and that book was read and reread religiously in our home. We first started to read a portion of it on Friday nights, and gradually, as the girls grew older and were able to read for themselves, they would read these stories, and they would have their Gentile playmates read them. These stories became so much a part of our everyday living that the children used to make up plays with one or another of the Bible stories as the motif.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGRICULTURE — 1911-1960

An Agricultural Experimental Station was established in the Fairbanks District in 1907 with J. W. Neal as superintendent, and he, in conjunction with the homesteaders, developed wheat which could mature in six weeks. This wheat is a cross between a Manitoba and a Siberian wheat. At the present time Bloom is interested in reviving the production of this wheat, and it is due to his foresight and that of Milton D. Snodgrass, of Palmer, that the farmers of the Tanana Valley and the Matanuska Valley are planting wheat regularly,

though it is not yet grown in quantities suitable for commercial purposes.

Snodgrass was in charge of the Experimental Station at Kodiak from 1907 until 1912. The eruption of Mt. Katmai that year destroyed the Station and the ashes covered most of the island, so Snodgrass was appointed to take charge of the Station at Fairbanks, as Neal was ready to retire. Snodgrass is a real pioneer and a great believer in the agricultural potentialities of the Tanana Valley. When he first saw the Valley and learned of the wheat which Neal and the farmers had developed, he prophesied that the Tanana Valley would one day be the granary of Alaska.

In 1911 an agricultural fair was held in Fairbanks at which the homesteaders exhibited the various produce grown on their farms. Among the homesteaders was one in particular, John Adleman, who had a very fine display of grain, and this has helped to make history.

During that year, 1911, Falconyn Joslyn, who was the president of the railroad that connected Fairbanks with the mines, was on his way to the States to try to raise capital to extend the railroad. While visiting the fair, he noticed the display of grains that John Adleman exhibited, and he remarked, "May I take this with me outside to show the folks who think Alaska is an icebox and let them see that we can grow things here?" John consented, and Joslyn took the display with him, stopping at St. Paul, Minnesota, where he exhibited the grain. As a result of that exhibit, a cup was awarded to John Adleman. The cup is now in the possession of Bloom, and the inscription on it reads as follows:

Presented by the St. Paul Association of Commerce to John Adleman for the best display of cereals from Alaska, at the Northern Land Show, St. Paul, Minn.

During the First World War there was an opportunity for the development of agriculture. We realized that, if we could feed ourselves with what we grew in the Tanana Valley, we would be better able to contribute to the war effort, by releasing space for that purpose. Snodgrass helped the farmers of the Tanana Valley organize the Tanana Valley Farmers Association, and encouraged them to plant wheat with the other food on their farms. The merchants,

among whom was Bloom, supported the farmers by subscribing sufficient money to purchase a mill and help them dispose of their produce. The mill was erected in the warehouse belonging to the Tanana Valley Farmers Association, close to the railway depot. The people of the Tanana Valley used the flour ground from the wheat grown in the Valley all through the First World War, and continued to use it until 1923. That year there was some dissension among the farmers, and to that was added the fact that the Experimental Station was under the jurisdiction of the College, which was then encouraging mining at the expense of agriculture. As interest in farming dwindled, the seed from which this wheat was grown was lost to the Valley, and were it not for the Adleman cup, people would not believe that we ever had a wheat that could mature in our short growing season.

In 1957, Bloom and Snodgrass were together at the Matanuska Valley Fair. They got to talking about the economy of the Territory, wondering what would happen if the Federal Government should withdraw its support and curtail its defense spending. Mining was on the wane, all the gold having gradually been extracted from the ground with nothing left but a lot of tailings (waste) and broken rocks. The talk drifted on to the possibilities of developing different kinds of agriculture. The Matanuska Valley was now well established as a dairy farming section with work going ahead in improving the various herds. Snodgrass remarked that he felt that grains could be grown better in the Tanana Valley than in the Matanuska Valley, and from that they talked of the famous wheat that we had had during the First World War. They tried to get some and made enquiries among the homesteaders in the Tanana Valley section, but none of them had any. Some remembered that we had had it at one time, and others could not believe that we ever had had such a wheat. Were it not that we had this cup of John Adleman's, we might have been accused of daydreaming. Snodgrass made some enquiries among the farmers in the Matanuska Valley and, fortunately, found one dairy farmer who had some. The farmer let Snodgrass and Bloom have some, and Bloom brought it to the Tanana Valley, where he had a friend of his, a rancher, put in a few acres with that seed. Fortunately, 1958 was a very good year for wheat, and the

yield was exceptional. That crop was kept mainly for seed, and next year more ground was under cultivation, and so on through 1960-1961, each year increasing the yield. Bloom kept the crop for seed, and now there is sufficient seed in the Tanana Valley to make it worthwhile for the Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce to handle the project. We are proud of the part played by Bloom and Snodgrass in this wheat revival and know that it will be of great benefit to the new state. Flour is now shipped in from the "mainland," and the cost of living is very high; bread is flown in by air. Since bread is the staff of life, we feel that, when we have an active group of young homesteaders who are encouraged to grow their food in the Valley, we will be able to reduce Alaska's high cost of living and will have done something worthwhile towards eliminating the artificial economy now prevalent in our state due to inflated defense spending.

#### ROADS AND RAILROADS

Bloom's Store was the place where most of the homesteaders congregated when they were in town; their problems and activities were freely discussed there. Snodgrass was also a frequent visitor at the store. It was in the store that the idea developed of having the Alaska Road Commission put in a road to connect the farmers' homesteads with the existing road. Snodgrass was instrumental in presenting the problem to the Road Commission and having them put the road through. It is called the Farmer's Loop Road, because it forms a loop from the Fox road to the Ester road and connects the homesteaders on the hill between with the main road. Both Ester and Fox were mining sections, and naturally they would have had the first chance at having roads. The idea of a road for homesteaders was something new, and this road, built in 1914-1915, has proved a boon to the people living in that section.

James Wickersham, who was our delegate to Congress, was instrumental in inducing the Government to sponsor the building of a railroad from the coast to the interior with Fairbanks as the terminal. The bill passed in 1914 and marked a great step in the progress of the Territory. There were hardly any roads; we were dependent on river transportation for our supplies, and the rivers

were icebound for eight months of the year. This meant that we had to get everything in during the four months when they were navigable, but with the railroad we could have transportation all year round. The Alaska Railroad was the first railroad backed by the Government, even though it was not a paying proposition, but was developed to help the economy of the Territory.

The railroad was completed in 1923, and President Warren G. Harding officiated at the opening. It was an exciting experience for all of us living in Fairbanks to know that we could travel all year round in comparative comfort to the States. The previous year the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines had been opened. The College was a land grant college, and its establishment in the Territory was also due to the vision of our delegate, James Wickersham.

#### JEWES OF ANCHORAGE

The first survey of the railroad chose the mouth of Cook Inlet as the point from which the road should start. The Government plotted out a townsite on several acres on the shores of Cook Inlet. This townsite was plotted out in building lots and was auctioned off to the public in 1916. The townsite was called Anchorage.

The mining camps of Iditarod and Ruby were no longer paying, and the Jews who had settled there decided to try their luck in the new railroad town. Among those who bid on the lots were the following: Ike Bayless, Zachary Loussac, Nathan Jaffe, Edward Seidenberg, Michael Gottstein, Ian Koslowski, and Lipman and Alec Simpson. The spot chosen by the Government for the start of the railroad did not prove satisfactory, and so the Government had to build as far as Seward, since that town had a fine natural harbor. That left the town of Anchorage in the lurch, but these men stayed on and helped to develop other sources of income. With the expansion of the railroad, that brought in a good payroll. All the Jews who remained in Anchorage throughout the lean years contributed to the development of the town, and now their children and grandchildren have great satisfaction in seeing this town become one of the finest in the state and an inspiration to all pioneers.

Loussac's contribution was outstanding. Apart from the fact that he was elected mayor of the town, he donated to the town a site for a library, which stands now as a fitting monument to a forward-looking, dynamic citizen. It is the finest library in Alaska, and the facilities available can compare with any progressive library in the United States.

Many of these pioneers in Anchorage have since passed on, but their descendants are still in the town, helping to maintain the Jewish community established there.

I was in Anchorage in 1959 and spent *Rosh Hashonoh* and *Yom Kippur* there. It was a thrill to take part in the services at the Elmendorff Base Chapel. As the officiating chaplain was Orthodox, the services were Orthodox. It was to me a deep spiritual satisfaction, difficult to explain, to be privileged to have lived in a community for almost fifty years, to look back on a life packed with many different pioneering experiences, and then to find, at long last, that we could participate in the same kind of Orthodox services that we had when we were children. It gave us a feeling of the value of tradition, a value that cannot be expressed in words, but has to be lived to be understood.

We spent some time at the home of Mr. and Mrs. David Green. Their home was the centre for the Jewish community, and we were happy to find that the traditional forms of our faith were there adhered to. They are delightful hosts and are always ready with a real Jewish welcome to all the G. I.'s stationed at the different Army posts in the neighborhood. Though Beth Sholom, the official congregation in Anchorage, is Reform, the Greens maintain a strictly Orthodox home. Having adherents of both forms of worship in a growing community is a democratic trend and brings respect for each other's ways. Anchorage Jewry shows unity when it comes to representation before the general public.

#### THE MATANUSKA VALLEY JEWISH COMMUNITY

Some of the Jews moved fifty miles from Anchorage to Palmer, an important railroad town, which supplies the farming country of the Matanuska Valley.

The Matanuska Valley was developed as a colony during the depression years of the 1930's, when whole families left the Middle West and were given homesteads and land to develop in Alaska. Except for a small percentage, the original settlers did not remain on the land. Snodgrass, who was with the Department of Agriculture, is a graduate of Kansas State College, and was the first to suggest the Matanuska Valley as suitable for agriculture. He induced some farmers from Kansas to take up the abandoned homesteads. These people are now responsible for the rapid growth of this section, which is one of the finest dairy farming centres in the state and has a very progressive and prosperous Co-operative Association with headquarters in Palmer. The first modern department store in the town was opened by the Koslowski Brothers in 1959. It is a very fine store, much appreciated by the whole community and filling a need for the farmers of the surrounding country.

#### ALASKA COLLEGE

My husband has been closely associated with the establishment of Alaska University ever since the first time that Delegate Wickersham, a close personal friend, spoke of it in our store. Another friend, Mary Lee Davis, called the store "The Intellectual Delicatessen." She said that every time her husband, John Allen Davis, Superintendent of Mines, came home from town with a choice bit of philosophy, he always mentioned that he had been to the store. Wickersham said he would try to get a college for the Tanana Valley. That was in 1915, and the cornerstone was laid that year. Recently the University authorities removed the stone and replaced it in the same position, as they were enlarging some of the buildings.

In 1915 Wickersham learned that he could get a college under the Land Grant Act. When he arrived in Fairbanks, he mentioned that he had managed to get this college. Since, however, mining was the main industry in the Fairbanks district, he tacked on "School of Mines" to his bill in order to have the College situated in Fairbanks. He met in Bloom's store with his friends to tell them about the College, and many of them scoffed at the idea of a college

in the "sticks." Bloom was one of Wickersham's staunch supporters and was very pleased about the College.

Though the College was primarily an agricultural college, the agricultural development of the district was not encouraged. The Experimental Station, which had been established in 1907, was situated in the neighborhood of the College, and until the opening of the College it was administered by the Department of Agriculture. After the College was established, the Station was transferred to its jurisdiction. Around the time that the College opened, the mining industry was progressing again in the district, due to the Russian Revolution and the subsequent eviction of foreign capital from Russia. Much of that capital had been for the exploiting of the placer gold in Siberia, and the mining companies were compelled to look for ground for development in other parts. So they came to Alaska, and the principal company that helped develop the ground in the Fairbanks area was the United States Smelting and Refining Company, which formed a subsidiary company, the Fairbanks Exploration Company, affectionately called the "F. E." The mining department of the College grew in importance as the F. E. developed, and the agricultural department of the College sank further and further into oblivion. There was little research in that field, and the Experimental Station was at a standstill.

When the site for the College was picked, the scoffing became even more vociferous, since the spot chosen was four miles out of town, on a hill overlooking the surrounding country, very scenic, but still not very accessible. However, the cornerstone was laid, and with a very modest ceremony, the dedication took place in the spring of 1916. In the meantime, the Territory had held its first legislative session and appropriated some money to build the College. It was not until 1922 that any real work was done on the site. There was dissension in the original Board of Regents, and when it seemed as though the College would not be opened at the appointed date, Wickersham prevailed on Bloom to accept an appointment to the Board of Regents. Bloom, with the support of two other members of the Board, was instrumental in having the College opened at the appointed date, September, 1922. An interesting side light on the College is the fact that all through the years, as the College

progressed, many people would be given honorary degrees, or honorary membership in the University Alumni, but Bloom and Snodgrass were never mentioned until 1961. Then the Historical Society, looking over the early records of the College, realized the work that these men had done, and belated recognition was given them, Snodgrass getting an honorary degree, and Bloom an honorary membership in the University Alumni, with suitable citations about their pioneering work, and about their loyal support of the College in spite of the opposition.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF AVIATION

Bloom's association with the development of commercial aviation in the Territory has been of inestimable value to the economy of the Territory in general and of the Fairbanks district in particular. The Fairbanks Aeroplane Company was formed in 1921, the incentive coming from Ben Eilson, a veteran pilot of the First World War, who was a teacher in the Fairbanks High School. He often came into Bloom's store to talk to the men congregated there, among whom was William F. Thompson, the editor and proprietor of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*. The conversation often drifted around to the way things were shaping up in the town, which at this time was at a very low ebb. Mining was almost at a standstill, and the only chance for improving the economy was to find some means of getting the outlying districts to make Fairbanks their headquarters for supplies.

Ben Eilson mentioned that he could get a surplus Army plane from the Government if he could pay the freight to bring it in from the States. W. F. Thompson saw in aviation the possibility of connecting the outlying districts with Fairbanks. There were very few roads, and the navigable season for river transportation was limited to about four months at the most. Livingood was one of the busiest camps at that time, and although it is only about ninety miles from Fairbanks, it took almost a week to get there by boat during the summer, and two full days over the trail in the winter. It was decided to have Ben Eilson send for a surplus plane, a "Jenny," and the cost of the freight was paid by a few of the merchants. When

this plane arrived, Ben assembled it, and the first flight took place in the summer of 1921, with Dick Woods, the manager of the First National Bank of Fairbanks, as passenger. They flew to Nenana, fifty miles away, where there was a railroad construction camp at the head of the Tanana River, a tributary of the Yukon. They were gone about an hour. Practically the whole town was at the ball park to see them take off, and then waited around to see what would happen until they came back. Everyone was very excited about this flight, as the journey usually took a full day by boat, and even longer by road.

W. F. Thompson gave this flight a great deal of publicity in the Alaska press. The people of McGrath, in the Kuskokwim, hearing of the flight, sent letters to Dan Sutherland, then Alaska's delegate to Congress, to ask that something be done to enable them to get their mail and supplies more regularly. They were dependent on the boats and, being so far north, they could get only one or two boats a year. If the weather was unfavorable, these boats might not be able to land at all. During the winter, they were supplied by dog team, but that, too, was an endless journey, and waiting for mail was a common complaint in that section.

Dan Sutherland asked the Government's help in finding out if it was possible to fly in sub-zero weather, and he was instrumental in getting the Government to appropriate \$8,000 to defray expenses as well as lending a standard plane to make the flight. When the plane arrived, Eilson had it ready for flying in a very short time, and he started out for McGrath that day. Although it was forty below zero when he left Fairbanks, he flew to McGrath and back the same day, delivering the mail. The distance covered was 800 miles one way. When he landed in Fairbanks it was then forty-five below zero. This initial flight demonstrated beyond any doubt that it was possible to fly successfully in sub-zero weather. W. F. Thompson cabled the story of this flight "outside," with the result that Hubert Wilkins, a well-known Arctic explorer, contacted Ben Eilson to find out if he would accompany him on a flight over the North Pole. Ben accepted this offer.

Their first flight was unsuccessful, but they were determined to try again with a more suitable plane. They used a Lockheed Vega,

and that flight was successful. By this time the Fairbanks Aeroplane Company was progressing, and, at the recommendation of Ben Eilson, another pilot was hired, Noel Wein, who is still very active in commercial aviation in Alaska.

In view of the part which aviation is now playing in the development of the state, we feel that the contribution Bloom made in helping to bring this about shows remarkable vision on his part and on the part of his associates. The general conditions of flying around the Fairbanks section are as good as any to be found in the state; planes are able to land at the Fairbanks Field more often than at any of the other fields in Alaska, and the weather there has a record of being more suitable for flying than in the other sections.

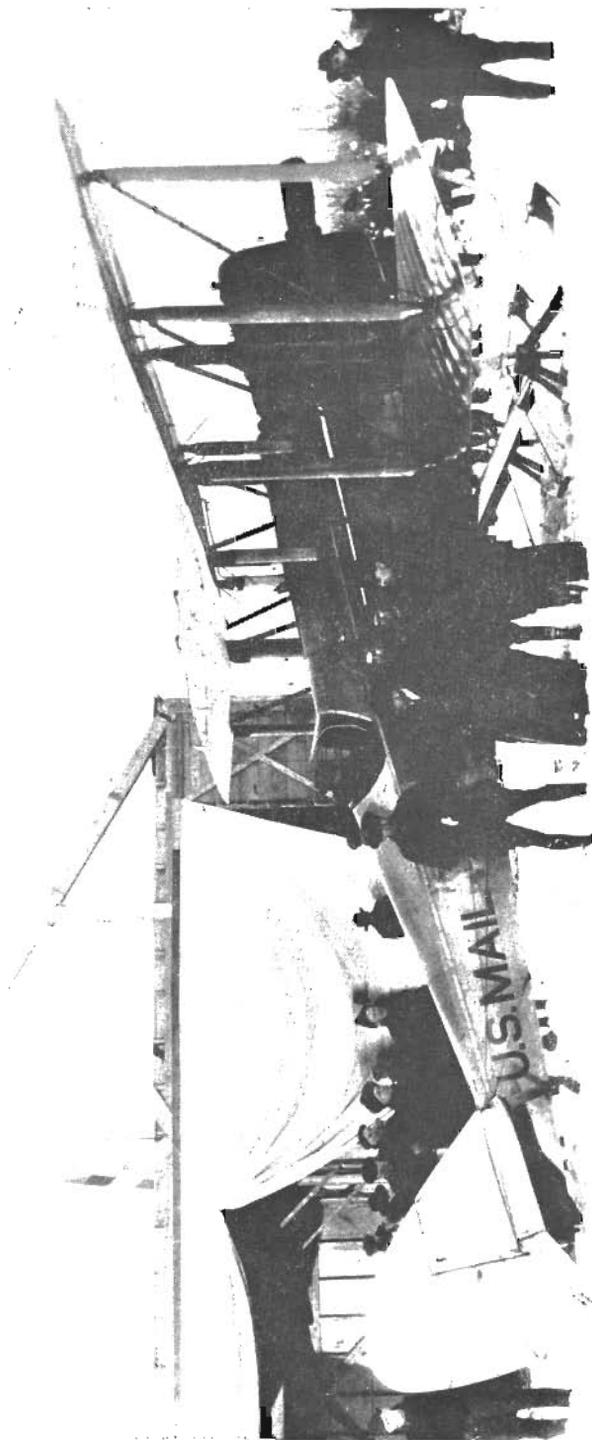
When we look back on the beginning of commercial aviation, we cannot help but be impressed by its rapid growth. With its growth, came the growth of the Territory and now the state. Because of the data about flying conditions in the Fairbanks section, the United States Government was induced to choose Ladd Field as its first air base. To go back a few years earlier, it was Eilson's demonstration of the feasibility of flying in sub-zero weather that brought about the Wilkins Arctic Expedition. Then, too, when it came to developing the placer mining ground by modern methods, aeroplanes helped to bring in the United States Smelting and Refining Company. The company made Fairbanks its headquarters, because our aviators were able to fly its officials from one mining section to another.

It seems almost incomprehensible to us who went into the Territory in the early days, when it took us anywhere from fifteen days to three weeks to come from Seattle, depending on what connections we made. Now we make the journey in three hours by jet.

It was not easy for the early pioneers of aviation, because they were all men with a keen sense of responsibility. When they sent out a young pilot on a journey, he flew by compass, with no radio communication, and no reliable weather reports, and if he was overdue, they had no knowledge of where he might be. I can well remember many a dinner getting cold on the table, while Bloom was out with the others scanning the sky when a pilot was overdue.



Robert and Jessie Bloom  
Pioneer Sourdoughs



First Alaskan Airmail Flight, Feb. 21, 1924  
Fairbanks — McGrath, De Haviland — U. S. Gov't. Plane  
Ben Filsen — Pilot

## PERSONAL DATA AND OBSERVATIONS

We did not encounter any prejudices until 1939 — during the Annual Winter Carnival. One of the automobiles had a sticker on it, to the effect that they did not want any Jews. My husband was away in Dublin at the time, but as we were the only Jewish family, we were concerned. Before we could even check it, however, Chief Marshal John Buckley, who was a personal friend of ours, had it removed.

We do not have any data on Jews as saloonkeepers or gamblers. There were a few miners; a man named Herbert Greenberg was successful in mining in the Nome area, and the Guggenheims did a lot to develop the mining in different sections of the Territory.

We encountered a great deal of good will everywhere, and our four girls were always regarded with great pride by the oldtimers, who took a personal interest in their academic successes.

Our biggest business mishap occurred in February, 1919, when the town burnt down and Bloom's store was among the places wiped out. Fortunately, Bloom had very fine credit with the "stateside" wholesale houses and got cables from some of them right away, offering all possible assistance. Many people who were burnt out at that time left the town, but we remained, as we had no place else to go. We had four daughters at that time. The oldest, Meta, was born in April, 1913; Deborah, the second, was born in December, 1914; Olga, the third, was born in May, 1917; and Ruth, the youngest, in September, 1918. The five years following the fire were very difficult. There was not much doing in the Territory, though the railroad was being built, which brought in a small payroll. There was little mining and trapping, but since we owned our little home and had facilities for raising our own vegetables and getting our own meat, we managed well.

Bloom kept the store until October, 1941, and then decided to sell it. He had a whole year to dispose of his stock, and so in 1942 he had most of his goods, which comprised almost every type of merchandise, stocked in his warehouses. We had intended to retire, but the attack on Pearl Harbor knocked those plans in the head. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, Bloom received a letter from Richard

Lang, of Seattle, asking him if he would assume the position of chairman of the Jewish Welfare Board in Alaska. Needless to say, we were happy at the opportunity to help. Military personnel streamed into our area. Many were Jews, and the impact of a cross-section of American Jewry on our isolated community was something that beggars description.

#### MRS. BLOOM'S CONTRIBUTION

As far as my personal contribution to the development of the Territory is concerned, I suppose that my having organized the first kindergarten could count as a contribution. It was in September, 1918. Ruth was a baby, and all during that summer there was a group of girls playing around our place with my three girls. Among them were three who were to be six years old and ready for the first grade at the public school. But the other five children, my two older ones included, would be left on their own. I had always been interested in children's activities and had been to kindergarten myself as a child in Dublin. My mother often played with us, teaching us through play, as she had studied the Froebel system when she was a girl. I suggested to one of the parents of the children concerned that perhaps I could have a little kindergarten class at our house, perhaps from one to three o'clock, when the older children could call for the kindergarteners on their way home from school. The mother said that would be wonderful, and since I would not take any pay, she said she would bake bread for me. The mother of another child helped me with my mending. So we started our kindergarten, which was a huge success, and we continued it until the establishment of a public kindergarten at the Territorial school in 1922. Naturally, we talked about the kindergarten class all over the place. At the suggestion of Mary Lee Davis, who was of great help to me in many ways, I wrote to the Bureau of Education in Washington, D. C., and learned that they had a reading course for kindergarten and primary teachers in the kindergarten department. They sent me a copy of their reading course as well as the books I needed to read and report on. They allowed two years to complete the course. I told them of my position and wondered if I would be able

to do it in the two years, but Miss Almira Winchester, who was in charge of that course at the time, wrote back that they would gladly allow me all the time that I felt I needed. I did complete that course, sent in summaries of my reading, did a written questionnaire, and got a certificate. It was one of the most stimulating courses I ever had.

Some of my kindergarten pupils are now grandmothers, and whenever I come to Fairbanks, they always give a special reception for me.

The other contribution I made that has prospered was helping to form a Girl Scout troop in 1925. And although there have been ups and downs in the camp since those days, there has always been an active Girl Scout troop in Fairbanks. My first registration card as captain is dated August, 1926. We established the first camp in 1926, and another in 1927. I was director of both those camps until I left with my four girls for Dublin in June, 1928, to supervise their education, and did not return to Fairbanks until 1937. I still kept up my interest in Girl Scouting and was happy to be able to help in the directing of the camp in 1950.

Our oldest daughter, Meta, now Mrs. Harry Buttnick, of Seattle, returned to Fairbanks after she received her degree in modern languages at Dublin University in 1935. She taught English, French, and Latin in the Fairbanks High School from 1936 to 1939. During those years she helped establish a branch of the American Association of University Women, and the first meeting to start the group was held at our house.

I have a feeling that there is many a town in the West with its particular Jew, who, like Bloom, did his full share in helping to bring out the best in the people around and in the facilities available.

I am very conscious of the importance of keeping records, as Bloom is also, since we have seen so much of the beginning of movements that have grown almost beyond our dreams, but with their roots lost in oblivion, because the founders did not have time to make notes. It is that particular phase of Alaska's development that concerns us at this stage — not alone the Jewish contribution, but every phase of Alaskan growth.

## A NOTE ON THE BLOOMS

*Rabbi Philip S. Bernstein, of Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, N. Y., served as Executive Director of CANRA, the Jewish Welfare Board's Committee on Army and Navy Religious Activities, from 1942 to 1946. His work with CANRA took him to Alaska, where he met Robert and Jessie Bloom. Asked about the Blooms, Rabbi Bernstein communicated the following remarks to the American Jewish Archives.*

Almost from the first moment that I began my work at CANRA in December, 1942, and came into contact through the mail with what was happening in Alaska, I heard of Bob and Jessie Bloom. These were good Jews who apparently had taken the Jewish G. I.s under their wing.

Then I went up to Alaska and the Aleutians for Passover, 1943, and early made contact with the Blooms. I found that Mrs. Bloom was cutting up tons of fish for gefilte fish for the boys. They were providing all the goodies for the Sedorim. I also found that prior to the arrival of Jewish chaplains they served unofficially as Jewish chaplains concerned with the religious interests of the Jews in the armed forces who were stationed there, and also rendering all sorts of personal services, including dealing with the personal problems of the boys who were stationed there. There was great appreciation for what they were doing, and warm respect for them.

After I got to know the Blooms I could understand the feeling toward them. They are remarkably fine human beings. Obviously they have sturdy character to have braved half a century of pioneering life in the Far North, but their Jewish character is equally sturdy, because through it all they remained devoted and loyal Jews, and raised their daughters not only to be educated persons, physicians, but also devoted and loyal Jews.