

Happyville, the Forgotten Colony

ARNOLD SHANKMAN

With few exceptions, Jewish agricultural colonies have not prospered in the United States. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries poor land, dread diseases, inexperienced farmers, enormous expenses, and miserable weather have combined to terminate more than a dozen Jewish farming colonies. Also operative is the fact that after 1880 the trend was *from* the farm *to* the city as the mechanization of agriculture made capital investment larger, increased productivity, and rendered many farmers superfluous, thus driving them to the city. Only in southern New Jersey, where they were close to large urban centers and could supplement farming with local work in industry, did large numbers of Jewish farmers organized in colonies thrive for any significant number of years. Historians have long been fascinated by the attempts of Jewish idealists to establish agricultural settlements in such unlikely locations as Sicily Island, Louisiana, Painted Woods, North Dakota, and Bad Axe, Michigan. One short-lived colony, however, is invariably absent from the various chronicles of Jewish agricultural experiments. That colony, Happyville, was established in December, 1905, near Montmorenci, in Aiken County, South Carolina, and was hastily abandoned about two years later. Like the colonies at Beersheba, Kansas, Cotopaxi, Colorado, and New Odessa, Oregon, Happyville was not destined to be a financial success.¹

The writer would like to express his appreciation to Morris U. Schappes, Ben Axelrod, Harold Rudnick, and members of the Surasky family for their help in the researching of this article.

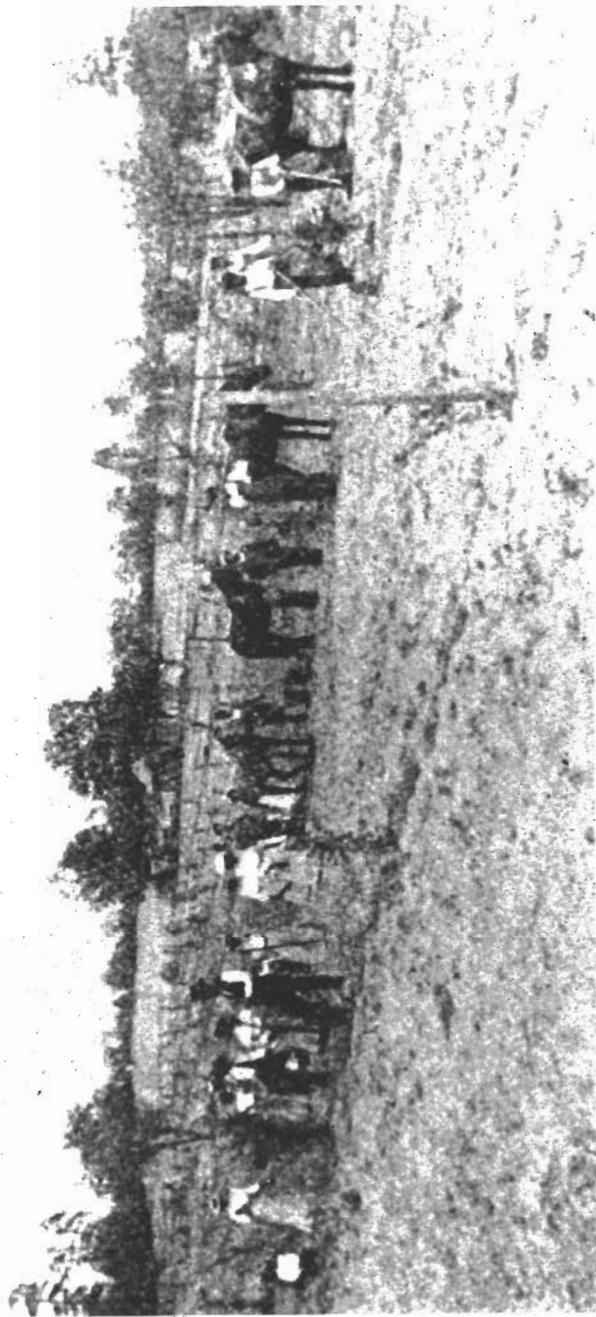
¹ Studies of Jewish agricultural colonies in the United States include Leo Shpall,

That Happyville has been forgotten is not particularly surprising. Incomplete files of Aiken County newspapers and the absence of any surviving manuscript material have helped to obliterate the memory of the small colony. Also, Happyville was more a product of Ebbie Julian (E. J.) Watson, South Carolina's Commissioner of Agriculture, Commerce, and Immigration, than of the Jewish Agricultural Society. For obvious reasons, after Happyville was abandoned, Watson, who was still trying to attract the "better element" of Europeans to the Palmetto State, no longer mentioned the "Russian colony of Aiken" in his official reports.²

Watson's activities were not notably different from what was then going on in other nearby states. Throughout the South in the early years of the twentieth century there was considerable interest in the subject of immigration. White Southerners became angry and frustrated that in contrast with the rest of the nation their region was not prospering and that Dixie was not attracting her fair share of factories. By Northern standards even Dixie's farms seemed impoverished and underdeveloped. Many whites, seeking a scapegoat for this sad state of affairs, blamed their black agricultural workers, whom they accused of being inefficient, unreliable, dishonest, and lazy. According to the influential Baltimore *Manu-*

"Jewish Agricultural Colonies in the U.S.," *Agricultural History*, XXIV (1950), 120-46; Gabriel Davidson, *Our Jewish Farmers* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1943), and his "Colonies, Agricultural: United States," *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1941), III, 268-69; Joseph Brandes, *Immigrants to Freedom, Jewish Communities in Rural New Jersey* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971); Leonard Robinson, *The Agricultural Activities of the Jews in America* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1912); Ezekiel Lifschutz, "Jacob Gordin's Proposal to Establish an Agricultural Colony," in Abraham Karp, ed., *The Jewish Experience in America, IV: The Era of Immigration* (5 vols., New York: Ktav, 1969), 253-61; George Price, "The Russian Jews in America," part 2, trans. Leo Shpall, in *ibid.*, pp. 300-355; "Jewish Farmers," *The American Review of Reviews*, XXXVII (May, 1908), 617-18; Ande Manners, *Poor Cousins* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1972), pp. 164-97; Samuel Lee, *Moses of the New World* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1970), chapter 18; "Jewish Colony Prospers [in New Jersey,]," *Baltimore American*, n.d., quoted in the *Charleston (S. C.) News and Courier*, February 2, 1906.

²Occasionally this colony was called the Polish colony. In either case the colonists were refugees escaping tsarist persecution. On the question of immigration to South Carolina in this period, the best study is Mildred Louise Pettus, "European Immigration to South Carolina, 1881-1908" (master's thesis, the University of South Carolina, 1954).



Life in the Jewish agricultural colony
of Happyville, South Carolina

Courtesy of Arnold Shankman

manufacturer's Record, which had a wide circulation south of the Mason-Dixon line, "slothful" Negro fieldhands were unusually prone to "drinking, gambling, and other forms of dissipation." The natural inclination of Afro-Americans, added the *Manufacturer's Record*, was "to trifle, to loaf, and to frolic."³ Others conducted surveys that uncovered the disturbing findings that 30% of the tillable land in Georgia was idle and that fully 59% of South Carolina's farm property was unimproved.⁴

Search For Prosperity

In their frantic efforts to find a way to bring prosperity to Dixie some Southern leaders decided that what their region most needed was hardworking European immigrants who would be able to put "untilled . . . acres under cultivation and fil[1] southern shops and factories with competent and faithful workers." It was further alleged that competition from foreigners would force Negroes to abandon improvidence and "cheerfully [to] meet the demands upon [the]m in the fields and workshops of labor."⁵

Since immigrants did not voluntarily settle in the South in large numbers because economic opportunities were better for them in the industrial North and in the West, it became necessary to induce them to come to Dixie. No ex-Confederate state was more innovative in promoting immigration than South Carolina. In 1900, the Palmetto State had a population of just under 1,350,000. More than 58% of the state's residents were black, and of the whites in South Carolina a mere 5,528 were of foreign birth. Russians, mainly Jews, represented 316 of these immigrants, a relatively small percentage of the estimated 2,500 Jews living in the Palmetto State. Before 1905, in a typical year, only a few hundred—often under 100—immigrants would come to live in South Carolina, and of these very few chose agricultural occupations.

³ *Manufacturer's Record* (Baltimore), XLVIII (July 20, 1905), 5.

⁴ E. J. Watson, comp., *Handbook of South Carolina* (Columbia: State Company, 1907), p. 259, hereafter cited as Watson, *Handbook*; *Savannah Tribune*, February 2, 1907.

⁵ Birmingham (Ala.) *Age-Herald*, June 14, 1905; Huntsville (Ala.) *Mercury*, June 18, 1905.

Plainly, something had to be done if the Palmetto State really expected to attract foreign-born farmers.⁶

In November, 1903, A. J. Matheson, a successful banker from Bennettsville, and himself of Scottish birth, held a meeting on immigration in Columbia, the state capital. Eighteen of the state's forty-two counties sent delegates, and these men called upon South Carolina legislators to establish a bureau of immigration.⁷ Governor Duncan Clinch Heyward was receptive to this suggestion, and encouraged the state general assembly to create a department that would promote South Carolina to industrious aliens. In 1904 the legislature established a state immigration bureau and appropriated \$2,000 for it to carry out its work.⁸

E. J. Watson, who was selected to head the bureau, was a thirty-five-year-old Columbia newspaperman and secretary of that city's Chamber of Commerce. Despite the lack of an adequate departmental budget, he enthusiastically and capably presented the case for encouraging immigration to those South Carolinians skeptical about the need for attracting foreign-born settlers. Watson quickly realized that published literature alone would not entice many aliens to the state, and so in the spring of 1905 he established a New York office at 35 Wall Street. Operating expenses in 1905 totalled a paltry \$95.65, but sometime before April, 1906, Watson hired Raymond Griffis to work at the office. One of the primary goals of the New York bureau was to establish a colony of desirable Russians to farm in South Carolina.⁹

Watson was an exceedingly competent and persuasive man. On

⁶ Watson, *Handbook*, pp. 250, 524, 531; Jack Diamond, "A Reader in Demography," in Morris Fine and Milton Himmelfarb, eds. *American Jewish Yearbook for 1977*, LXXVII (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), pp. 256-57.

⁷ Pettus, "Immigration," pp. 10-12.

⁸ Watson, *Handbook*, p. 518.

⁹ "Russian Jews Made Unhappy in South Carolina," *Di Varheit* (New York), August 21, 1906 (article located by Ben Axelrod and translated courtesy of Morris U. Schappes), hereafter cited as "Russian Jews Made Unhappy"; *Charleston News and Courier*, January 6, 1906; E. J. Watson, *Second Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture, Commerce and Immigration of the State of South Carolina* (Columbia: Gonzalez and Bryan, 1905), p. 930 (pagination for all state documents cited as given in *Reports and Resolutions of the General Assembly of South Carolina* for the respective years), hereafter cited as *Annual Report* with appropriate year indicated; *Who's Who in America*, VI (Chicago: A. N. Marquis, 1910), 2022-2023.

one of his many visits to New York, in 1905, he befriended Charles Weintraub, who had been a piano polisher in St. Petersburg before he immigrated to the United States. Weintraub, who was fluent in seven languages, had no experience at farming, but shunned materialism and was looking for a quiet life and happy home for himself and several of his friends. Watson, unaware that these Jews were socialists, persuaded Weintraub that in South Carolina a peaceful lifestyle would be possible for Jewish immigrants.¹⁰

At Watson's behest, Weintraub and his friend and business associate, Morris Latterman, journeyed to the Palmetto State in search of vacant land on which they could establish a cooperative agricultural colony. Weintraub, an idealist, did not want to purchase expensive land that had already been farmed successfully. Rather he sought less desirable soil because he believed that "poor land improved was the land that brings forth the best results under proper cultivation." Perplexed by this logic, yet persuaded that Weintraub and his friends were honest and upright men, Watson arranged for the two Jewish immigrants to be shown several pieces of property. Weintraub and Latterman hoped to locate their colony near the seacoast, but Watson convinced them that this was impractical. No suitable site could be found, and the two Russians returned to New York still hopeful of locating a satisfactory colony in Dixie.¹¹

Watson was too determined to give up on his plan to create a Russian colony, and in August or September, 1905, he again invited Weintraub to South Carolina to inspect several tracts of land in Aiken County that were being sold by Captain J. R. Wade, an Oakwood real estate dealer. Weintraub readily accepted the invitation, and so he and Latterman again journeyed to the South. The two had just formed the Incorporative Farming Association. This was composed of twenty-five Russian and Jewish immigrant

¹⁰Watson, *Second Report*, p. 914; Columbia (S.C.) *State*, August 6, 1907; Aiken (S.C.) *Journal and Review*, August 9, 1907; Robert Hitt, "The Happy Town of Happyville," *Charleston News and Courier*, January 13, 1908, hereafter cited as "Happyville." Mina Surasky Tropp, who grew up in Aiken at this time, confirmed that the colonists were socialists and she thinks that a few were anarchists. Telephone interview with Mina Tropp, October 17, 1977.

¹¹*Ibid.*

families who subscribed funds to finance the association and also of several others who promised to work in any colony that would be formulated. Colonists would be employees of the corporation and would be paid wages for their work; they would also be entitled to a certain portion of the crops they raised.¹²

Late in September Weintraub, Latterman, and Watson inspected a 2,200-acre tract owned by Thomas and M. M. Coward. This land was located less than three miles from Montmorenci and only seven miles from Aiken, the county seat. The land, called the Shefield Phelps Plantation, was then being used as a hunting preserve. It was mainly forest except for a small area that had been cleared but which was subsequently abandoned because of the poor quality of its soil. Although several local farmers doubted that the land, situated on a hillside, could "sprout peas," Weintraub was satisfied that the well-watered tract would be good for growing fruits and vegetables, for manufacturing naval stores, and for raising poultry and livestock. On October 3rd, after he had contacted other members of his association, Weintraub purchased the land, some livestock and farm implements and several buildings located on the plantation, for \$6,500, which he paid in cash. He announced that fifty cottages would soon be constructed for settlers, and predicted that 200 immigrants would live on the Phelps tract before February. Since formal transfer of the land was not effected until December, it was not before the middle of that month that Weintraub and ten families of colonists arrived. On January 11, 1906, they were joined by fifteen more settlers.¹³

¹² According to the charter for the Incorporative Farming Association, twenty-five shares of capital stock were sold, each worth \$200. It is hard to determine how many, if any, of the association members had prior farming experience. Mina Tropp still has a few volumes from the colonists' library including volumes on anarchism, socialism, drama, and the French Revolution, but nothing on agriculture or saw mills. Telephone interview with writer, October 17, 1977; Tropp to writer, October 18, 1977. On the other hand, Esther Surasky Pinck believes that at least some of the colonists had farmed in Jewish agricultural settlements in New Jersey. Most accounts emphasize the inexperience of the colonists, but a story in the *Charleston News and Courier* on December 23, 1905, seems to agree with Mrs. Pinck's recollections. Charter of Incorporative Farming Association, Records of the Secretary of State, Charter Private Companies no. 4002, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.; Esther Pinck to writer, August 7, 1977.

¹³ *Columbia State*, October 6, 1905; *Aiken Journal and Review*, January 16, 1906;

The Path to Success Proves Rocky

What was Aiken County like in 1905? What type of home had Weintraub selected for the Russian colonists? Most of the 43,358 people who lived in the 1,096-square-mile county were farmers who grew corn, cotton, wheat, hay, or rye, cultivated fruit orchards—mainly peaches—or raised livestock. The 3,000 residents of the town of Aiken lived 120 miles from Charleston and 17 miles from Augusta, Georgia. Because of the county’s celebrated mild winters and high elevation, scores of wealthy Northerners patronized local hotels each January and added to the coffers of grateful innkeepers and merchants. Even though the county’s citizens were overwhelmingly Protestant in religion, the Sisters of Mercy in 1900 had established St. Angela’s Academy in Aiken, and it was reportedly one of the finest Catholic schools in the region.¹⁴ Several of Aiken’s leading merchants were Jewish, and on the High Holy Days “Rabbi” Joseph Silber conducted services in a rented hall. It is unlikely that many of the colonists would attend these religious services. Weintraub was an atheist, and, as Esther Pinck recollects, the newcomers were “considered ‘free thinkers,’ a common expression at that time for people with no religion.”¹⁵

Local Jews, however, did welcome the colonists to the county, and though most of the colonists were socialists, relations between the two groups were reasonably cordial. Mina Tropp remembers that her parents often entertained the immigrants. The first time they came to her house one of the immigrant girls wore a taffeta dress and high heels, and Mrs. Tropp recollects that she incredulously asked her mother, “How will that girl be able to plow dressed like that?”¹⁶

Hitt, “Happyville”; Watson, *Second Annual Report*, 1906; Hitt, “Happyville”; Watson, *Second Annual Report*, p. 914. In contrast with other sources and with the Hitt article it later published, the *Charleston News and Courier* on October 5, 1905, described the Phelps tract as fertile, well watered, and good for stock raising and general farming.

¹⁴ Watson, *Handbook*, pp. 67, 71, 208, 252, 269, 527; *Charleston News and Courier*, October 5, 1905.

¹⁵ There is no information available indicating whether or not Silber was ordained. It is, however, doubtful that, as an Aiken newspaper clumsily wrote, he officiated at the “christening” of newly-born Jewish infants. Esther Pinck to writer, August 7, 1977; telephone conversation with Mina Tropp, October 17, 1977; *Aiken Journal and Review*, August 23, 1907; see also *ibid.*, October 6, 1906; August 16, September 6, 13, 1907.

¹⁶ Telephone conversation with Tropp, October 17, 1977.

Also welcoming the newcomers was E. J. Watson, who came to Aiken in January, 1906. Doubtless he discussed with Weintraub the charter for the colony for which Latterman and he had applied on December 30, 1905. On January 22, 1906, corporate status was given to the Incorporative Farming Association, which then valued its capital stock at \$5,000.¹⁷

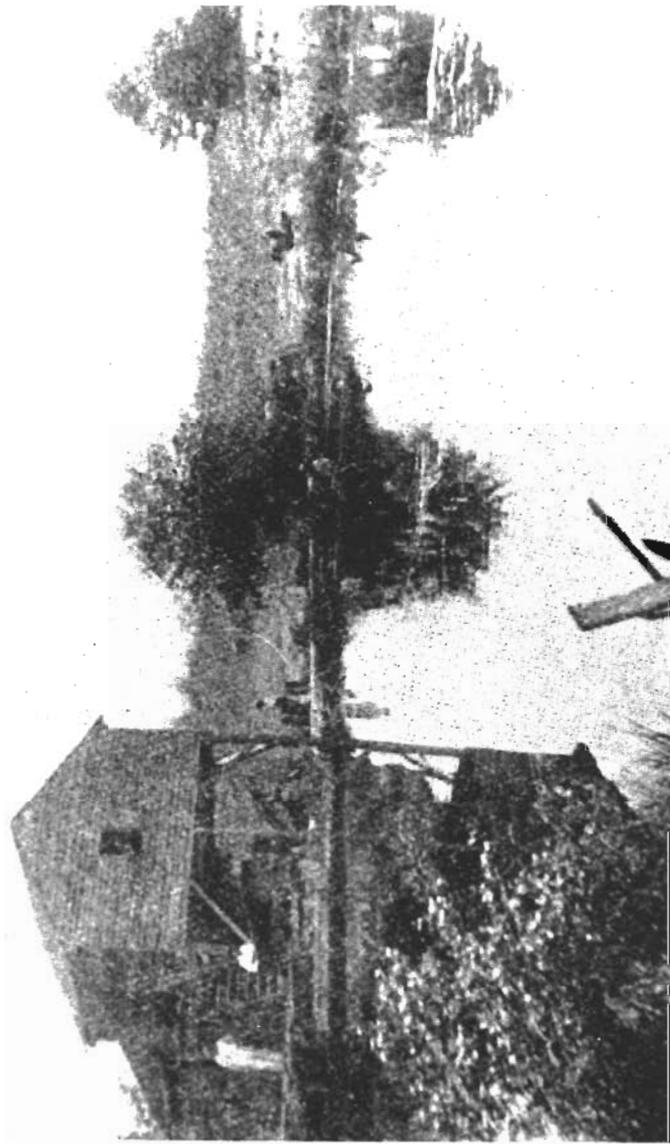
Almost before they unpacked the colonists had to make preparations for a first crop. This was no easy task, for the cleared land was sandy, hilly, and unterraced. Aiken County boasted 87 days of precipitation in an average year. After each rainfall in the wet winter and spring of 1906 soil washed down to the lowlands. Nonetheless, colonists diligently cleared straight furrows, and in their spare time they built several houses and started to dam the creek that ran through their property. Hoping to take full advantage of the water power of the creek, they made plans to purchase equipment for a grist mill, saw mill, and cotton gin. Ignoring farmers who feared they would starve but who were amazed at how hard they worked without an overseer supervising their labor, the Russians optimistically named their colony Happyville.¹⁸

Weintraub was eager to promote his colony, so he traveled to Newberry in May, 1906, hopeful of influencing several Jewish families in that town to move to Happyville.¹⁹ These Russian Jews, who had arrived in the United States in April, originally intended to become agricultural workers in California. A Mr. Yanovsky urged them to settle in the South and introduced them to Griffis, who persuaded them to go to South Carolina. In New-

¹⁷ Aiken *Journal and Review*, January 16, 1906; August 9, 1907; Watson, *Second Annual Report*, p. 909; *Report of the Secretary of State to the General Assembly of South Carolina for the Fiscal Year Beginning January 1, 1906, and Ending December 31, 1906* (Columbia: Gonzalez and Bryan, 1907), p. 158; Charter of the Incorporative Farming Association. It is unknown whether the colonists received any financial assistance from Charleston's Hebrew Benevolent Society, which raised money in 1905 to assist Jewish immigrants to settle in South Carolina as farmers. Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950), p. 225.

¹⁸ Hitt, "Happyville"; Aiken *Journal and Review*, May 25, 1906.

¹⁹ In January, 1906, Jews met at the home of M. Cohen in Florence, S. C., to discuss forming an agricultural colony. This apparently was never formed. There is no evidence that Weintraub was present at this meeting. *Columbia State*, January 2, 1906; Pettus, "Immigration," p. 25; Aiken *Journal and Review*, May 25, 1906.



A river scene of the Happyville colony

Courtesy of Arnold Shankman

berry they were shown land and were sold 1,700 acres for the sum of \$24,000 "on condition that they pay 10 per cent down and the remainder should be a mortgage at 8 per cent. But they soon found out that they had been overcharged for the mortgage because Mr. Griffis of New York had written that he requires 10 per cent as a brokerage fee." The immigrants, angry at having been misled, were ready to leave Newberry, but it is unknown how many—if any—went to Happyville. The Newberry immigrants were fated to have more problems in their search for satisfactory farming land in the Palmetto State.²⁰

After he left Newberry Weintraub journeyed to Columbia, bringing Commissioner Watson photos of industrious colonists working in the fields and tending livestock. Watson would later use these photographs in his promotional literature.²¹

By late spring, 1906, Happyville seemed to be on the road to prosperity. Weintraub assured the editors of the *Aiken Journal and Review* and the *Columbia State* that all was well in his colony, that "the crops on the farms are fine and that the colony is splendidly situated." He expected a dozen families to arrive shortly to supplement those already at work at Happyville, and he expressed the desire that county authorities soon establish a school for the education of the Russian children. Over and over again Weintraub articulated the gratitude of the Jewish immigrants, all refugees who had fled tsarist oppression, to experience "the freedom they enjoy here."²²

Unfortunately for Happyville, the weather in Aiken County in the late spring and in the summer of 1906 was terrible. Even before Weintraub claimed that the crops were "fine," a heavy frost had damaged cotton plants, requiring the replanting of seeds.

²⁰ Subsequently the Newberry immigrants purchased 947 acres of land elsewhere in the state for \$800. However, "it turned out that one third of the land, the best soil, did not even belong to those who sold it, another third is swampy, and a large part has tree stumps so overgrown with shoots that you cannot tell what kind of soil it is." After considerable difficulty the immigrants recovered \$150 of the purchase price, but had to pay \$50 to a lawyer and more than \$60 to a surveyor. Each family involved lost at least \$400 in South Carolina. "Russian Jews Made Unhappy."

²¹ *Columbia State*, May 24, 1906. Some of these photos can be found in Watson, *Handbook*, and in his *Third Annual Report*.

²² *Aiken Journal and Review*, May 25, July 31, 1906.

Then, exceptionally heavy rains in July destroyed more than 60% of the cotton plants able to survive the frost and completely ruined the peach crop. A Montmorenci correspondent reported to the *Aiken Journal and Review* that "few if any [peaches] will be marketed this season. Fruits of all kinds are badly damaged and the crop will be shot."²³

Determined not to reveal the full extent of damage to their harvest, an unnamed Happyville spokesman reported that "the crops are as good as could be expected, considering the seasons." In truth, nearly all of the corn stalks were carried into "nearby creeks on account of the absence of the proper terrains." The cotton plants were completely ruined, and the colonists were upset because all of the time they had spent completing the dam on their land, installing water wheels and assembling machinery for a ginny, saw mill, and shingle mill was wasted. The heavy rains, Robert Hitt later reported, carried the nearly-completed "dam to regions other than theirs, thus rendering void their hard toil and expenditure of money. This amounted to several hundred dollars."²⁴

Despite the weather, morale was surprisingly good. Colonists had been told that the 1906 weather had been atypical, the worst in years, and so they patiently looked forward to a better crop the next year. Time was spent constructing new homes to replace several makeshift dwellings in which colonists had been living since December. By November, 1906, the Russian colony was asking "all parties having notes signed by Chas. Weintraub as president of the Incorporative Farmers [sic] Association . . . please [to] present the same, Nov. 23 to us at our office at Happyville."²⁵

When he wrote his 1906 report to the governor, E. J. Watson tried to view events with as little pessimism as possible. He noted that the thirty-three colonists had begun their agricultural endeavors "in a systematic manner. They seem to be doing exceedingly well." Perhaps Governor Heyward was somewhat skeptical, for in his January 8, 1907, message to the legislature he spoke of

²³ *Charleston News and Courier*, May 12, 1906; *Aiken Journal and Review*, June 29, July 17, 31, September 4, 1906.

²⁴ *Columbia State*, August 24, 1906; *Aiken Journal and Review*, July 31, 1906; Hitt, "Happyville."

²⁵ *Aiken Journal and Review*, November 16, 23, 1906.

South Carolina's need for selected immigration, not the "hordes of undesirables pouring into our great ports." He particularly spoke highly of encouraging the importation of north Italian and Greek farmers. Nothing in his message referred to Watson's pet project, the Russian colony of Montmorenci.²⁶

Watson wanted Happyville to succeed, and so in 1907 he brought a Professor Benton of the U. S. Department of Agriculture to Happyville to instruct the Russian immigrants on how they could best develop their land. Weintraub was eager to accept Watson's assistance and Benton's suggestions. Because of the weather problems of 1906 money was getting scarce, and rather than spend the last of their savings, the colonists, who now numbered 54, had been selling timber cleared from parts of the forests.²⁷

Fortunately for the immigrants, the weather in 1907 was good, and farmers all over the country predicted above-average crops. These predictions encouraged Weintraub, and he spent \$1,000 for a planer and a chopper to clear off the rest of the land. Colonists planted a large cotton and corn crop.²⁸

Early in August, 1907, Weintraub traveled to Columbia to purchase some machinery for the colony, and to boost interest in Happyville he met with newspaper reporters. Describing his colony as an unqualified success, he spoke enthusiastically about the \$16,000 worth of equipment he claimed was at the colony. The colonists, he noted, had installed a 36-inch turbine at the creek, now "dammed up," and this was to be used for the Happyville saw mill and cotton gin. Never one to underestimate the success of his project, he quoted a nameless agent of the federal department of commerce and labor as having called Happyville the best immigrant colony in the nation "on business acumen and success." Weintraub also quoted Commissioner Watson as having boasted that the achievements of the immigrants at Happyville would advertise South Carolina all over the United States.²⁹

²⁶ Perhaps the governor did not want to mention Russian immigrants because of the unhappy experience of the Jews in Newberry. Watson, *Third Annual Report*, p. 523; *Message of D. C. Heyward, Governor, to the General Assembly of South Carolina, January 8, 1907* (Columbia: Gonzalez and Bryan, 1907), p. 3.

²⁷ *Aiken Journal and Review*, August 9, 1907; *Columbia State*, August 6, 1907.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, *Aiken Journal and Review*, August 13, 1907.

²⁹ *Columbia State*, August 6, 1907.

As early as August 16th Weintraub began soliciting business in the Aiken *Journal and Review* for the Happyville Saw Mill, which had already opened for public business. "We would be pleased to receive orders for lumber," the advertisement read. "All orders will receive prompt attention." Other advertisements announced that on September 15th Happyville would open its shingle mill, grist mill, and cotton ginnery. Weintraub was rather pleased with his ginnery and "guarantee[d] prompt work. Our ginnery is operated by water power, which is well known to be superior to steam."³⁰

Colonists were delighted to learn in October that the Southern Railway Company was building a new depot at Montmorenci, for this would make it easier to market their produce and to attract patrons to their various mills. Evidently residents of Montmorenci also thought that Happyville would become a permanent and successful fixture of the county. By 1907 the local post office was delivering mail directly to the colony each business day. Moreover, the county school board announced in early October that it would open up the Happyville School for the education of the immigrants' children. Because the county school board "realized that an experienced, capable and patient teacher would be necessary on account of the large foreign element in the scholars," it selected as instructor for the school Mrs. E. F. Moseley, one of the ablest veterans in the Aiken County school system. When Robert Hitt visited the school late in 1907 he found the teacher extremely competent and the students unusually bright and eager to learn English.³¹

Beginning of the End

By the fall of 1906 to most observers Happyville was a success. Commissioner Watson in his annual report observed that the colony "is doing well and steadily growing." According to state records, the Incorporative Farming Association had raised its capitalization to \$7,200, and there seemed to be every reason to think that the colony was in good financial shape.³² Robert Hitt's

³⁰ Aiken *Journal and Review*, August 16, 23, September 6, 17, 1907.

³¹ *Ibid.*, October 4, 22, 1907; Hitt, "Happyville."

³² Watson, *Third Annual Report*, p. 782; *Reports and Resolutions of the General Assembly of South Carolina for 1908* (Columbia: Gonzalez and Bryan, 1908), II, 1207.

description of the colony's agricultural operations, which appeared early in 1908, also accentuated the positive:

On their land they did not, as is the general rule in this State, confine their labors largely to cotton. Only a moderate acreage was planted in this staple. Cow peas, corn, potatoes, and other tubers, succulent food for hogs, foods for cattle, etc., were some of the commodities raised, thus curtailing their farm expenses to a minimum. General gardens furnished palatable foods for the table; the large swamps fenced into pastures were ideal for hogs and cattle, large numbers of which were raised for market, and furnishing meats for the table; a large lot fenced with a high wire netting served well for the purpose of keeping goats, numbers of which have been raised.³³

Hitt's article was so optimistic about the prospects for Happyville that *News and Courier* readers doubtless were surprised to learn on May 6, 1908, that Happyville was to be abandoned. Several factors prompted the demise of the colony. When he visited the settlement Hitt either had not observed or had chosen not to mention that there was increasing dissension at Happyville. For reasons not made public colonists quarreled about the management of the Incorporative Farming Association in November, 1907, and had elected new officers. Notice was given in the *Aiken Journal and Review* "that Mr. Charles Weintraub is no longer connected with the Incorporative Farming Association and that it will not be responsible for his contracts."³⁴

Even though the specific morale problems at Happyville were kept private, probably they were not dissimilar to those experienced by the Newberry immigrants. V. Elpidi (Elpedi), one of the Jews associated with that group, complained about his experiences to the editors of *Di Varheit*, a Yiddish newspaper. He noted:

I am not saying that the South is bad in general. South Carolina, however, is not good for us. It is an area only for cotton plantations, and anyone who wants to turn to that must have a lot of money. We did not have the money for that. Moreover, we do not have the skills for that. We wanted to be ordinary farmers as we had been in Russia. But the soil to which they led us is not suited for that. Not only are vegetables, potatoes and fruit brought there from the North, but even hay for the livestock. The

³³ Hitt, "Happyville."

³⁴ *Ibid.*, *Aiken Journal and Review*, November 29, 1907; *Charleston News and Courier*, May 6, 1908.

soil is poor except for the growth of cotton, and each fruit turns rotten on the second day . . . who can compete with the Negroes, who work for 50 and 60 cents a day?³⁵

Conditions at Happyville were usually better than what Elpidi reported, but given the unrealistic optimism of Weintraub, it is not unreasonable to assume that some Happyville colonists became disillusioned when things went poorly.

Whatever the morale of the colonists, it is clear that one of Happyville's persistent problems concerned finances. To build their saw mill and ginnery Happyville colonists had encumbered themselves with several large debts from the Coward brothers and others in 1907. These obligations were still outstanding in the spring of 1908. But relatively few farmers had been patronizing the Happyville mills and ginnery. Even worse, farmers in Montmorenci had organized a joint stock company in 1908 to erect a large and modern ginnery and cotton oil mill near the newly-constructed town railroad depot. This would, of course, lessen business at the Happyville Ginnery and deprive colonists of anticipated revenue.³⁶

Finally, there were weather problems. The winter of 1908 was unusually severe, and this inhibited the planting of crops. An especially unwelcome "cold snap" descended upon the region in late April. A correspondent, writing for the *Columbia State* on May 2nd, noted that "ice and frost are reported from all parts of the county." Farmers visiting Aiken sadly reported "that about all young cotton and vegetation are killed."³⁷

It was plain to the colonists that Happyville could not, in economic terms, survive another year without getting further into debt. Credit had easily been obtained in the past, but with the disastrous weather, there was little likelihood of borrowing large sums of money. Therefore Happyville's residents decided to turn over their property to their creditors. On May 4th they auctioned

³⁵ "Russian Jews Made Unhappy." On August 31, 1906, the *Aiken Journal and Review* offered a garbled account of Elpidi's story which is full of inaccuracies. The paper commented, "As a matter of fact, several of Elpidey's party are in this county now and are at work."

³⁶ *Charleston News and Courier*, April 4, 7, May 2, 6, 1908.

³⁷ *Columbia State*, May 2, 1908.

off some of their equipment and livestock and made arrangements with their lawyer, Julian B. Salley, to sell their farmland at a later date.³⁸

By July, when the Happyville tract was sold, virtually all the colonists had left Aiken. Most had returned to New York or New Jersey, but a few remained in the South seeking non-agricultural jobs.³⁹

M. M. Coward and Thomas Coward, who had sold the Phelps Plantation to Weintraub in 1905 and who had subsequently lent money to the colonists, reported on July 6th that they had received a \$3,300 bid for the 2,200 acres. A few weeks later it was announced in the *Aiken Journal and Review* that Happyville, including its mills, barns, and homes and what was left of the growing crop, had been sold to Charles Weintraub, Baruch M. (B. M.) Surasky, Hiram (Chaim) Surasky, Solomon Surasky and Sam Surasky; the purchase price was given as \$5,000. The Suraskys, prominent merchants in Aiken, and Weintraub publicly announced that they were going "to prove to the people that a Jew can make a success on the farm."⁴⁰

Such proof was not forthcoming. New colonists never arrived, and before long Weintraub, who did not get along with his new partners, sold his interest in Happyville to the Suraskys. He also sold the colony's library to Hiram Surasky.⁴¹ It is thought that he went on to Atlanta. In Aiken County the summer of 1908 was marked by a long drought. This was followed in September by a severe flood that ruined those crops able to survive the May frost. Surasky's Ginnery, as the Happyville Ginnery was now called, advertised "reasonable" prices for ginning cotton and assured farmers that "cotton ginned by water power brings a better price

³⁸ *Charleston News and Courier*, May 6, 1908; Harold Rudnick to the writer, July 28, 1977. Mr. Rudnick is a lifelong resident of Aiken.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Aiken Journal and Review*, July 7, 17, 1908; Mandle Surasky to the writer, August 7, 1977.

⁴¹ Most of the volumes of this library were subsequently donated by Mrs. Tropp to a Jewish old age home in New York. The dozen volumes she still owns were published in New York, Poland, and possibly Russia. They are marked with the stamp "Hebrew Literary Library, Aiken, S. C." *Ibid.*, telephone conversation with Mina Tropp, October 17, 1977; Tropp to the writer, October 18, 1977.

than that ginned by steam.”⁴² But there was no cotton to gin either way.

Because Aiken obtained its drinking water from artesian wells, and the existing wells in the town were proving inadequate to meet increased water demands, the city council authorized the securing of new sources of supply. B. M. Surasky offered to let the city secure its water from the “clear springs” of Happyville. The council evidently did not accept his offer. The Suraskys leased their land in 1909 to Louis Cabot. Lillian Surasky Alberts, too young to remember the Russian colonists, recalls “as a child going on picnics on a farm with our uncles & their families too. I assume that must have been the site of the Russian colony.” Around 1916 the tract was sold to a Mr. Corliss; currently it is owned by Gilbert E. McMillan.⁴³

Happyville was never to be resurrected. The only Jews known to live on a farm in Aiken County in 1910 were Isaac Danon and his ten-year-old son, who resided near Burkhalter Settlement. Danon was no farmer, though, for he earned his living as a rural crossroads merchant.⁴⁴

Nor was farming popular with the other 2,500 Jews in the state. In 1910 Leonard Robinson estimated that only ten Jewish families owned farms in South Carolina. The total size of these ten farms was a mere 766 acres, or barely more than a third the size of Happyville.⁴⁵

Happyville failed for the same reasons that virtually all the other Jewish agricultural settlements were abandoned. Colonists who settled in Aiken County, much like the idealists of the *Am Olam* movement, had inadequate experience with farming.⁴⁶ As the *Charleston News and Courier* noted, few of the colonists stayed in Aiken more than a year. Though the population of Happyville typically hovered around fifty, few of those around to

⁴² *Aiken Journal and Review*, August 18, 21, September 4, 1908.

⁴³ *Columbia State*, June 24, 1908; *Aiken Journal and Review*, July 27, August 4, 7, 14, 1908; September 21, October 19, 23, 30, November 2, 12, 1909; Mandle Surasky to the writer, August 7, 1977; Lillian Alberts to the writer, September 14, 1977.

⁴⁴ *Aiken Journal and Review*, July 10, 26, 1910.

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Agricultural Activities*, p. 59.

⁴⁶ On the failure of Jewish farming colonies, see Brandes, *Immigrants to Freedom*, pp. 4-7; Shpall, “Jewish Agricultural Colonies,” pp. 145-46.

abandon the colony in 1908 had arrived before 1907. Especially vexing to colonists was the unusually severe weather, which ruined crops and devastated fields of veteran farmers. But even if the weather had been favorable, one wonders about the long-term success of a colony planted on land generally considered too poor to sprout peas.⁴⁷

Lastly, since the immigrants were so interested in educating their children, it seems likely that before many years would have passed some of the Russian colonists would have longed for a richer cultural and social life than that available in Aiken. Mina Tropp remembers that the colonists staged Yiddish plays and that Weintraub's library had several volumes with the stamp of a Hebrew literary society and other books by Tolstoi and Anatole France.⁴⁸ As socialists, they doubtless would not have easily made friends with their conservative neighbors. What is surprising is not that Happyville failed, but rather that it was able to last for more than two years.

⁴⁷Hitt, "Happyville"; *Charleston News and Courier*, May 6, 1908.

⁴⁸Telephone conversation with Mina Tropp, October 17, 1977.

The first issue of the new semi-annual *Journal of the Jewish Historical Society of Canada* has been published. It is edited by Dr. Jonathan V. Plaut of Congregation Beth El, Windsor, Ontario, Canada. Subscriptions may be obtained by writing to the Editor, c/o Congregation Beth El, 2525 Mark Avenue, Windsor, Ontario N9E 2W2.