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Clarion: A Forgotten Jewish Settlement in Sanpete County, Utah

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For the National Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area*

GUNNISON, UTAH—A desolate and still sparsely populated region in southern Sanpete County was the scene of an unusual social experiment in the early twentieth century.

In 1911, a group of 200 Jewish families from Philadelphia, New York and other eastern cities created the farming community of Clarion, west of Centerfield and Gunnison. The settlement disintegrated within a few years because of an unsteady supply of irrigation water, the colonists' inexperience with farming, internal divisions, poor soil and growing conditions.

"The area where they were farming is an alluvial fan," says Diana Major Spencer, an English Professor and resident of Gunnison who is putting together a documentary on Clarion. "It's mostly gravel."

The settlement established by the Jewish Agricultural and Colonial Association in Central Utah was one of many Jewish farming colonies that were planted but failed to take as part of the "back to the soil" movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, then living in the Eastern United States, intended to return to the agrarian roots of their religion while demonstrating to a prejudiced world that "wherever the Jew has an equal opportunity and receives (humane) treatment, he throws off his peddling pack and yard stick and is off to the infinite bountiful prairies of the West..." according to one of the association's promotional pamphlets. In doing so, they would escape the crowded housing conditions and the dangerous, degrading low wage labor endemic to the urban centers of the east.



Clarion circa 1911-12: The colonists lived in tents until they could construct permanent dwellings. Cultivation began at the completed section of the Piute Canal at the southern end of the settlement, which author Robert Goldberg describes as "the worst land in the tract."

*Photograph by Sarah Sack Bober, Courtesy
Robert Alan Goldberg*

The area south and west of Gunnison had been promoted as excellent farm land by the Utah Land Board, which was selling it in parcels to pay for the sixty-mile-long Piute Canal that would eventually irrigate it. Governor William Spry later characterized the region as "among the very choicest agricultural lands in the state." The canal, with its promise of easy water, was the final deciding factor for Benjamin Brown, the association's leader and land scout, to site the colony in Sanpete County.

As the Jews discovered upon their arrival, the land and the canal had been oversold. As University of Utah History professor Robert Alan Goldberg puts it in his 1986 book *Back to the Soil, the Jewish Farmers of Clarion, Utah, and their World*:

Dry washes and gullies pierced the terrain, cutting the land into irregular strips. Small stones and large rocks littered the tract, conjuring up frightening images of what lay below the surface.

Closer inspection of the soil revealed a sandy, gravelly loam approximately a foot in depth under laid by hardpan subsoil (67).

As for the promised irrigation water, Goldberg records, “State engineers had been unduly optimistic about the construction schedule, the quantity of water that could be delivered, and even the quality of the canal itself” (81). When the Piute Canal did arrive, its flows varied in quantum leaps from nothing to sullen intermittence to catastrophic floods. In the wake of one such flood, according to an account by settler Issac Friedlander, “The place looked like the aftermath of an earthquake.”

On the few occasions when the canal did flow at a reliable rate somewhere above a trickle and below the threshold of a raging torrent, it was commonly stolen by Mormon farmers upstream, for use in their own fields.

Beyond their daily struggle with the dry earth and the fickle water supply, the Jews of Clarion had to contend with their own factious ideological differences. The settlers’ social philosophies ranged from nationalism to anarchism, and the tenor of their religious beliefs varied from orthodoxy to atheism. Their internal dissension came to the fore with the construction of a modest school in 1913. Contingents of nationalists, international socialists and orthodox Jews vied to set the curriculum for classes on religious instruction. The feud which followed exhausted all parties and nearly extinguished the collective morale of the budding settlement.

In the larger scheme of things, the farmers’ inexperience in their chosen vocation may have been the smallest obstacle to their success, though it was considerable. According to Spencer, “only two members of the colony had any training in farming and that was farming in Pennsylvania.”

In another setting, enthusiasm and hard work may have been enough to overcome the settlers’ dearth of practical skills. Here there were consequences for every one of the hapless farmers’ missteps. Even “successful” modern-day Utah farmers lose crops to the unpredictable weather, drought, insects and the “heroic storms” (108) which flatten vegetation.

A few seasons of poor alfalfa and wheat harvests put the association so far in debt that it couldn’t make payments on its own land. Most of the discouraged settlers had moved out by 1916, bound for the cities they had forsaken only a few years earlier. Ownership of their tracts reverted to the land board, which auctioned them to Mormon farmers. Within a few more years, those few families which had the resources to continue farming also finally gave up and left.

Very little remains of the Clarion settlement today. A few of the colonists’ houses were hauled off and replanted in Gunnison and Centerfield while others rotted in place. The school house was torn down. Many of the structures still standing in the vicinity of the Clarion intersection, about seven miles west of Centerfield, were constructed by a later wave of Japanese colonists who were marginally more successful in wresting a living from the desolate landscape. Near the intersection, the town’s cemetery holds the only emigrants to have made a permanent settlement in the former colony; two children and Aaron Binder, who was crushed beneath a load lumber he was hauling to his farm by wagon.

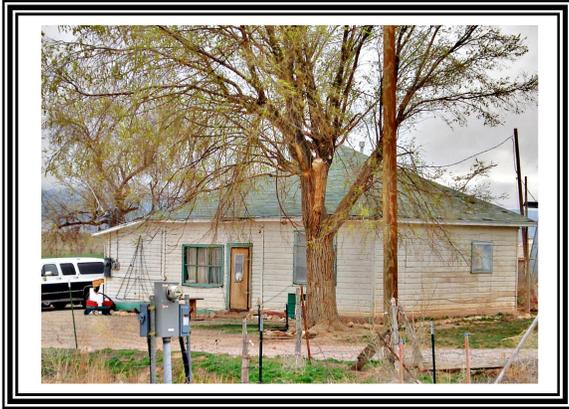
For its participants, the Clarion experiment was not an entirely negative experience. While the citizens of Clarion bickered amongst themselves, they formed a close friendship with the Mormons in Sanpete County, who considered the Jews their spiritual brethren. A few of the colonists were able to parley the skills they had learned in Clarion toward successful farming enterprises in more hospitable climes. Lessons gleaned from the colony’s brief tenure in Utah were also applied during the Jewish resettlement of their ancient homeland in Palestine, where farming conditions were equally difficult.

For some, the toil of farm work compared favorably to the hard labor which had barely sustained them in the cities. For a surprising many who lost their land and fortunes, such as they were, there were less tangible rewards, such as a the opportunity to make a living in the wide-open landscape of the



Clarion today: Improvements in the Piute Canal after the demise of Clarion made the farmland west of Centerfield more viable. Today, much of the area is as verdant and productive as the colonists probably envisioned it.

Photographs by Christian Probasco



West. As Barney Silverman, the Colonial Association's vice-president later wrote:

(The cold night air) did not hold back the pioneers from venturing out from their tents. They were well repaid for their courage in more than one way. The sky they beheld was not like anything they ever saw back East. The sky was always clear blue, with never a speck of cloud and studded with myriads of stars, and they never looked so near and so bright" (71).

Frandsen house: This clapboard house south of the Clarion intersection is one of the few surviving buildings constructed at the time of the colony's existence—though it was not built by the colonists themselves. The house was raised in 1914 by the grandfather of Allen Frandsen, who was born there and still lives in nearby Centerfield. Frandsen says his grandfather "bought up the best land" before the colonists' arrival.

Photographs by Christian Probasco

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