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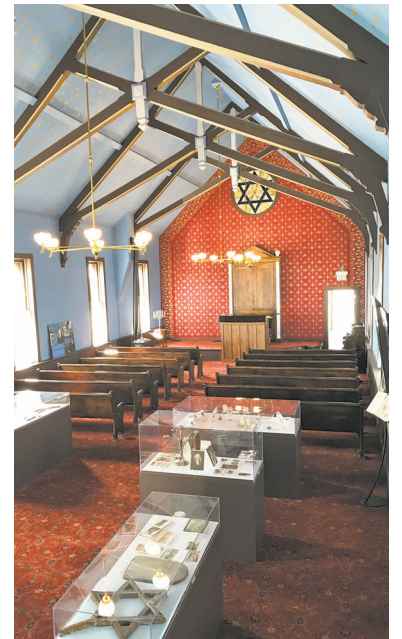
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A synagogue and cemetery
high above sea level

Outside and inside the Temple Israel synagogue. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOS

SANDY BORNSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

The first Jews who found their way to Leadville, Colo., the highest incorporated city in North America, came during the Gold Rush and then a bit later during the Colorado Silver Boom. These Jews, whose ancestors came primarily from Germany and western Europe, serviced the town as clothiers, office workers, liquor wholesalers, grocers, saloon keepers, mining and smelting industry employees, as well as other occupations. Jewish attorneys, doctors, dentists, and opticians also contributed their skills to a town that, in 1880, had the second largest population in Colorado.

Before Leadville's tiny Jewish population had the resources to build a synagogue, they worshipped at the Shoenberg Opera House for High Holiday services, at a time when Leadville had a reputation of being the "wickedest city on earth."

Living at an elevation of more than three kilometres (almost two miles) can be challenging. Back in the latter part of the 19th century, the hardships may have been insurmountable for youngsters. When I recently walked through Leadville's Hebrew Cemetery, located in the southwest corner of Leadville's Evergreen Cemetery, I stopped and paused at the numerous still-born, infant and young children's headstones. Considering the harsh climate and the remote location, approximately 160 kilometres from Denver, the percentage of younger deaths is not surprising. Of the 132 graves dating to Leadville's early years, about half are children. The JewishLeadville.org website includes an alphabetical list of the people buried in the cemetery,

along with their ages and plot location.

Each June, the Denver chapter of B'nai Brith organizes a clean up of the cemetery grounds. These efforts preserve the final resting place for Leadville's Jews. Approximately 100 volunteers, – adults and children – showed up for the 22nd annual event last June to clear debris from the burial areas, pick weeds, trim trees, and paint the perimeter white picket fence.

This historic Jewish cemetery was re-consecrated in the 1990s after almost seven decades of lying dormant. Since 2001, a few Jews have chosen to be buried in this serene mountain area, a part of Leadville's Evergreen Cemetery. This large cemetery includes other sections for Christians, secular societies, Masons, and war veterans.

The Temple Israel Foundation has set aside a previously unused section of the cemetery for new plots and has also been responsible for purchasing the Temple Israel building in 1992, rehabbing and maintaining the structure from 1993 to the present, creating a museum, and hiring a local curator, Trevor Malk.



It has been about a decade since I first visited Temple Israel and the Hebrew Cemetery. My first visit required a pre-arranged, private meeting with the foundation's director, William Korn. In 2012, the synagogue museum opened with permanent exhibits showcasing Leadville's history. Today, the Temple Israel Museum is advertised as one of the places to see in Leadville and offers free admission daily (except for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur) from the beginning of May through the end of October.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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The Hebrew Cemetery. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

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Great care has been taken to restore the Temple Israel structure by using historical records and photos.

In 1884, Horace A. W. Tabor, a non-Jew, donated the land for the synagogue. Tabor was one of America's wealthiest 19th century businessmen and then lost his fortune by using poor judgment. A synagogue association was formed to oversee the construction while other Jewish groups were created to meet the needs of the growing Jewish population. Rabbi Morris Sachs, a graduate of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, led Congregation Israel's first High Holiday services in 1884. Thereafter, lay members were left in charge of the pulpit.

A second synagogue, Kneseth Israel, was created in 1892 for the eastern European Jews who wanted to follow Orthodox traditions. This smaller group eventually purchased a former church on 5th Street, which was destroyed in the 1930s.

Great care has been taken to restore the Temple Israel structure by using historical records and photos located at the Leadville Public Library, the Rocky Mountain Jewish Historical Society at the University of Denver, the History Colorado Center in Denver, and the Jewish Museum of the American West. Curator Malk pointed to black and white interior and exterior photographs that were used during the renovation process. After peeling away layers of wall coverings, a five-star gold design on blue paper was detected. No one knows for sure why the congregants chose this non-Jewish pattern though the museum curator offered several hypotheses. Most likely this was the easiest to install or perhaps it is a visual representation

of Genesis 9:7 “...be fruitful and multiply.”

Driving down 4th Street, visitors will struggle to locate the synagogue without an address. The Carpenter Gothic-styled building fits right into the neighbourhood. The synagogue's pointed arched windows, and steep pitched roof with two tall towers with narrow steeples resembles a church. Unless you look upwards, you may not see the small Stars of David at the top of the steeples and the peaked roof. Nearby churches look very similar.

The front of the synagogue museum has a simple Aron Kodesh, several rows of seating, a 19th century heating system, and an organ. Enclosed display cases showcase artifacts with typed descriptions depicting Jewish and secular life in Leadville. Electronic posters, original black and white photographs, and documents line the walls.

I walked up the rear stairs to a small area. In earlier years, the choir used this balcony. Now an exhibit called “Selling History: Advertisements of Leadville Jewish Businesses” fills the space. The reproduced ads came from several Leadville newspapers and are organized chronologically.

A series of events affected the population of Leadville. At the height of the silver boom, a select number of individuals made massive fortunes. Starting in the mid 1880s, Jews and non-Jews began relocating to other cities. The repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act in 1893 caused a collapse in the mining industry.

From the 1880s until the early years of the 20th century, records indicate an active Jewish presence in Leadville. But by the beginning of the First World War, the synagogue was closed.

In 1966, 70 square blocks in Leadville were designated as a National Historic Landmark. The synagogue is just one of dozens of places that take you back in time. A self-guided walking tour of the downtown area with a stop at the Dexter House and Healy House Museum, operated by the Colorado Historical Society during the summer months, will open the door to 19th century American history.

A visit to the National Mining Hall of Fame Museum, or the Matchless Mine and Baby Doe's Cabin, may provide a better understanding of how the mining industry affected the mountain region. Several other smaller museums offer additional opportunities to learn about Leadville's history. Strolling along the town's streets may be challenging for people with underlying health concerns due to the high altitude.

Summer and early fall travellers headed to Summit County (Breckenridge, Copper Mountain, Dillon, Frisco, Keystone Resort), Vail, or Aspen should consider taking a day trip to Leadville. ■

Sandy Bornstein is a travel and lifestyle writer with an MA in Jewish studies.

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