

**CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITY, CONSTRUCTING SECTION:
REGIONAL CULTURE AND JEWISH COMMUNITY ACROSS THE UNITED STATES**

by

Amy Hill Shevitz

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On the evening before I started writing this paper, I picked up our as-yet-unread copy of the LA Times' Sunday magazine. The cover story, coincidentally, was an exploration of Western American identity. (Interestingly enough, the Times has just re-named its magazine "West"). The author, Rick Bass, starts from a perception of "the inexplicable awareness that there is a difference between the West and the rest of the country, and that it is no less profound for its ungraspable immeasurability."¹ Delivering primarily an environmentalist rumination, he waxes romantic: "Why should it surprise us so . . . that one can know one is in the West upon first awakening in the morning, even before one opens one's eyes? That one can know and sense and hear and taste and feel and see Westernness intimately, without being able to measure it?"²

I am sure some hard-headed historians will roll their eyes and sigh impatiently at such loosey-goosey literary stuff. But I look at my notes from a graduate seminar in 20th-century Western history and find – along with discussions of economics and politics – a concern with "spirit" and "state of mind." My professor didn't spend as much time with spirit and state of mind as with farming, state-federal relations, and (his specialty) water rights, but there was no question that the West has been defined, and has defined itself, in ways that carry powerful

¹ "Lost in Space" by Rick Bass, 16 April 2006: 16.

² Bass, 43.

meanings in American history. With the West always in danger of being “lost” (like the Jewish people, the American West is “ever-dying”), it serves as a template for Americans’ hopes and fears for the future.

In studying the role of regionalism in Jewish life in the United States, we need to take note of these sorts of discussions about the nature of regional identity generally. In their introduction to a book on the topic, historians Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf remind us that “regions have *always* been complex and unstable constructions, generated by constantly evolving systems of government, economy, migration, event, and culture.” And while one can “measure regional identity according to a set of distinctive attributes or attitudes,” this approach is insufficient, not taking into account processes of change. “History,” Ayers and Onuf argue, “creates all sorts of latent meanings in a place, meanings that may not be visible at any given moment but that can quickly come to the surface as events change.”³

In looking at the development of Jewish communities across the country, then, we need to consider that how (and to what extent) Jewish communities differ across the country is not only a function of observable and measurable traits such as economic profile, intermarriage and affiliation patterns, etc. It is also a function of Jews’ interaction with the constructed identity of the region. As Ayers and Onuf point out, “regional identity is usually more about belonging than it is about exclusion. People seem able to ‘become’ Southerners or Westerners in a way that they cannot become black or white, Italian or Puerto Rican.”⁴ I don’t think we need such an extreme example as Kinky Friedman of *The Texas Jewboys* to recognize the possibilities of this process for Jews.

³ Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf, All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4-5.

⁴ Ayers and Onuf, All Over the Map, 4.

This paper will look at two regional case studies of Jewish communities with which I am familiar, focusing on the construction of regional identity. These two regions are defined very differently. The first, the Ohio River Valley, is defined by relation to a feature of physical geography that sprawls across many political jurisdictions and creates a border between some of them. The second, the state of Oklahoma, has a specific political definition. Of course, in both of these cases, a single designation does not exhaust the scope of regional identification. Those who live on the banks of the Ohio are also, for example, Ohioans or Kentuckians. The Ohioans might identify as Northerners and the Kentuckians as Southerners. The point is that regional definitions are historically contingent; accidents of time and of the human use of space are part of the equation.

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The Ohio River Valley was the first self-consciously constructed section in the history of the United States. Paradoxically, this new sectional identity consisted in a conviction of having overcome previous sectional differences to create a truly American identity, and in this, the region was seen to represent the American future. From the colonial era through the nineteenth century, white Americans talked about the Ohio River Valley as a special place, particularly in terms of the development of American democracy. “There will be no rubbish to remove before you lay the foundations,” wrote Manasseh Cutler in 1787 of the upcoming project of settling the Ohio River Valley; both geographically and morally, “the seat of [American] empire” would be on the Ohio. In the early nineteenth century, Ohio River Valley boosters used this construction of their region – a special place, a harbinger of America’s future – to attract settlers and

investment from the East and even from Europe. With the Ohio River as “the central artery of a dynamic, interdependent [American] political economy,” the region would serve as a powerful model for national development.⁵ Looking back from the twentieth century, Frederick Jackson Turner, who tended to identify regions with sequential frontiers, argued that the Ohio River Valley was the first place to manifest what he identified as “the Western point of view,” an outlook that is capitalist, democratic, anti-aristocratic, anti-hierarchical, innovative, and individualist.⁶

The nineteenth-century Ohio River Valley was also an important locus for the creation of American Jewish identity, and the Jewish experience and the regional experience reflected and reinforced each other. Jews who settled in the Ohio Valley from the 1820s through the mid-nineteenth century saw themselves as participating in the special mission of the young American nation.

They were also participating in a special mission for the Jewish people. In 1825, the nascent Jewish community of Cincinnati sent a fund-raising letter to the long-established congregation Beth Elohim in Charleston, South Carolina. Appealing for financial assistance in building a synagogue, the Cincinnatians emphasized both their spiritual closeness to other American Jews, who were all “children of the same family and faith,” and their physical distance, “separated as we are and scattered through the wilds of America.” The Charlestonians were being asked to contribute not only to the growth of Judaism but also to the growth of America. As the only Jewish congregation in a five-hundred-mile radius, the Cincinnatians averred, “we have always performed all in our power to promote Judaism, and for the last four or

⁵ Ayers and Onuf, All Over the Map, 30.

⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Section in American History,” in History, Frontier, and Section: Three Essays (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 93-116. Quote from Cutler on 100.

five years, we have congregated, where a few years before nothing was heard, but the howling of wild Beasts, and the more hideous cry of savage man.”⁷ More than merely a dramatic fundraising device, this letter expresses the early Cincinnati Jews’ consciousness of their pioneering role as Jews **and** Americans.

Within the next decade and a half, as Cincinnati became a manufacturing as well as a regional market center, the Ohio River Valley gave birth to the nineteenth century’s classic liberal bourgeois society.⁸ This society would be particularly receptive to America’s growing Jewish population. The antebellum Valley’s meaning as a cradle of bourgeois America fit very well with the middle-class aspirations and achievements of German Jewish immigrants. Through market activity, settlement in towns and cities, and civic participation, Jews helped create this classic bourgeois society. Cincinnati Jews were especially successful; contemporaries thought that the community had “a spirit all its own.”⁹ Jewish population and institutions proliferated rapidly throughout the Valley, with Cincinnati (and to a lesser extent Louisville) serving as centers of networks of Jewish communities and business interests.

In turn the regional ethos provided a context for (and in no small part helped inspire) the development of a self-consciously American Judaism, epitomized by Isaac Mayer Wise’s notion of *minhag Amerika*. Developments emanating from the Ohio River Valley in the mid-nineteenth century – the creation of a movement for religious reform, with a structure of institutions – changed the face of American Judaism. The new American Reform Judaism was rational and

⁷ Representatives of the Hebrew Congregation in Cincinnati to The Elders of the Jewish Congregation at Charleston, South Carolina, July 3, 1825, Bertram W. Korn Collection, American Jewish Archives (AJA), Hebrew-Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁸ Andrew R.L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 53.

⁹ Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, The Jews of Cincinnati (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience/Hebrew Union College, 1989), 1.

dignified and (for a while at least) really did seem poised to become the *minhag shel Amerika*. In the growing cities and towns of the Ohio River Valley, where this was the dominant form of Judaism, religion was a marker both of Jewish separateness and of sameness. Jews were immigrants and non-Christians, but they were also merchants and citizens. They shared the regnant notions of moral character signified by religious affiliation. They understood Judaism as essentially compatible with American life and undertook to nurture both.

It was a two-way street: through their participation in the evolution of the small-town middle class, Jews in the nineteenth-century Ohio River Valley helped create a powerful model of American culture. And by building Jewish religious, social and cultural institutions, they helped build American pluralism at the same time as they transformed Judaism into an American way of life. Being a Jew in the Ohio River Valley in the nineteenth century meant being part of a great project of the creation of a society where Jews – as Jews – could also be Americans. Cincinnati in the 1870s struck one Gentile observer as “a sort of paradise for the Hebrews.”¹⁰

Even after the nineteenth century, the effects of chain migration and regional networks of associations supported Jewish regional consciousness; the patterns of Jewish interactions in the Valley expressed a sense of connectedness that clearly defined this as a community. But as economic conditions changed, the Ohio River Valley was no longer a “center of the action” for an expanding United States. The sense of specialness and mission faded; Cincinnati’s role as a Jewish center was eclipsed. In the late 1980s, state humanities councils of the Ohio River Valley undertook a series of programs, exhibits, and publications to, in their words, “re-ignite and sustain public education and dialogue about the history and culture of the Valley.” This effort took as its starting point the recognition that “whereas in a previous generation the Ohio River

¹⁰ Quoted in Sarna and Klein, The Jews of Cincinnati, 4.

was . . . ‘a pregnant term with which to conjure,’ we seem to have largely lost a regional consciousness in our own time.”¹¹ Over the years, the meaning of the region changed. But in the nineteenth century, when Jews first settled in the Ohio River Valley, this regional consciousness was alive and well – and relevant to their lives.

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In my second example, we move from the first national frontier to one of the last, Oklahoma, and into the present. Oklahoma, which entered the Union as the 46th state in 1907, was the last major chunk of land wrested by white Americans from Indian hands. The nation watched with fascination the land runs (1889 and 1893), which seemed “a dramatic articulation of a traditional American dream” of independence and security.¹² But much of it was not particularly desirable agricultural land and the climate was unpredictable. The image of the state was, of course, forever fixed by John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath: the poor Okie redneck driven from the “Dust Bowl” to the fields of California. (This despite the facts that more Kansans than Oklahomans migrated and that the “dust” was worse in Colorado.)

Oklahoma’s identity stems from an historically conditioned sense of isolation and inferiority. Part of Oklahoma’s peculiarity stems from the fact that it’s sort of hard to say where it is. It is really a region by default, lacking a distinctive sense of place.¹³ As a transitional area

¹¹ Kenneth Gladish, “Foreword” to Robert L. Reid, ed. Always a River: The Ohio River and the American Experience (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), vii.

¹² Howard Lamar, “The Creation of Oklahoma: New Meanings for the Oklahoma Land Run,” in Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill, eds, The Culture of Oklahoma (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 45. The Oklahoma Land Run was in 1889 and Cherokee Outlet Run in 1893.

¹³ H. Wayne and Anne Morgan, Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History (New York: WW Norton, 1977), xiv.

between South, Midwest, West, and Southwest, it partakes of all those cultures with no distinctive unifying motif.¹⁴ Oklahomans' "sense of alienation from mainstream culture, together with a fear of mainstream culture, precipitated an identity crisis which found resolution in Oklahoman nativism."¹⁵ That is, Oklahomans adopted a cowboy ethos and image through which their state could continue to "occup[y] a role, fantasy, and identity in the life of the nation."¹⁶

This cultural insecurity has its roots in "the residual defensiveness epitomized in 'Okie'" – originally a scornful epithet that has been, in a feat of reverse snobbery, co-opted as a badge of pride. Practically speaking, the result is an insular pride in local institutions and people, and an unwillingness to demand too much. But, as two scholars who are long-time Oklahoma residents analyze it, this defensive pride is "often worked out in acceptance of the mediocre and the undistinguished."¹⁷

In many of the measurable aspects, the profile of Oklahoma Jews is more similar to that of other American Jews than of Oklahomans generally. They are far more urbanized and professional; they are wealthier and more politically liberal. But living in the Okie culture has an effect on the way in which these Jews *perceive* themselves as Jews and as Okies.

As with the state itself, Oklahoma Jews lack a larger context for their sense of place. Isolation is a prominent fact of Jewish life; there are no strong connections with major Jewish

¹⁴ Douglas Hale, "The People of Oklahoma: Economics and Social Change," in Oklahoma: New Views of the Forty-Sixth State, e.d. Anne Morgan and H. Wayne Morgan (Norman: OU Press, 1982), 90.

¹⁵ Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill, "The Culture of Oklahoma: A Group Identity and Its Images," in Stein and Hill, eds., Culture of Oklahoma, 226.

¹⁶ Stein and Hill, "The Culture of Oklahoma: A Group Identity and Its Images," in Stein and Hill, eds., Culture of Oklahoma, 226.

¹⁷ Morgan and Morgan, Bicentennial History, 179.

communities. Oklahoma Jews generally share the Okie defensive pride. Some of it is rather inevitable: how else to react to the near-universal incredulity with which most non-Okie Jews greet them. (“You live where? Omaha? Ohio?” I am not making this up.) But it runs deeper than instinctive emotional reactions or even a shared attachment to football that makes Shabbat services end early on the Saturdays of “big” games. At Purim, slipping into a different identity through costume, many Oklahoma Jews break out the Western wear: fancy cowboy boots and string ties mark the carnivalesque alter-ego. Through something as apparently simple as clothing, they can also share in the cowboy image that Oklahomans cultivate.

There is a deep conservatism in the Jewish community that has nothing to do with halachic observance; the tradition, the “heritage,” that they cling to is, essentially, “the way it’s always worked.” At least in the second-largest community, in Oklahoma City, there is an institutionalized distrust of ideas from “outside” – and no small amount of paternalism from representatives of national Jewish organizations. (Oklahoma City’s small, and now defunct, Solomon Schechter School was exempted from the system’s academic requirements in Judaic studies, as if it was an unrealistic expectation.) At least when I last measured, the city’s synagogues were very stable institutions: in the mid-1990s, I calculated that at one congregation, a third of its members had been members for at least 25 years and 6 percent for more than 50 years. There is no reason to think this has changed significantly in the last decade. Oklahoma’s Jewish communities tend to locate themselves primarily in a narrow context, turning isolation into a celebration of “family.”

And not only Jewish family: in the wake of the federal building bombing, the identification of Oklahoma City Jews with their city was evident. Organized by the local Federation, Jews were part of the volunteer effort that served the professionals who were

rescuing and, later, retrieving; Jews raised impressive amounts of money from other Jewish communities. These tokens of particular identity did not in the least keep Jews from sharing in the mythology of the event, that is, that “the response would be recalled as a heroic saga, a moral lesson to be told and sung and celebrated for generations to come.”¹⁸ They shared the local pride that with this event, Oklahoma again (as in the land rush) served the nation as a “dramatic articulation” of American values. To one Oklahoma City rabbi, the response to the bombing was a “magnificent statement, it was America at its best. . . . Part of our remembrance is that we’re a city which has met the challenge.”¹⁹ This sharing of what one scholar has called “the progressive narrative” of the disaster prevailed despite the marginalization of Jews from the equally powerful “redemptive narrative.” In this narrative, as explained by Billy Graham at a mass memorial a few days after the event, there was no human explanation for the tragedy, but still – God had created an opportunity for Oklahoma City to come to Jesus. At this so-called community memorial, the rabbi quoted above sat on the podium as Graham made any religious response other than evangelical Protestantism irrelevant. The rabbi had tried to expand the scope of the memorial by suggesting to the planning committee that they also invite representatives of the large local Muslim community, to be told that he was lucky *he* was included.

In a sense, Jews had their own version of the redemptive narrative: the motivations for the bombing were essentially they same as those for the Holocaust. “The senseless loss of men, women, and children in Oklahoma City,” declared a Jewish communal leader, “underscores that the cruelty and blind hate which were so much a part of Nazi Germany still exists [sic] today.” In other words: we have suffered as Jews, we have suffered as Okies. For Oklahoma City Jews,

¹⁸ Edward Linenthal, The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 46.

¹⁹ Linenthal, Unfinished Bombing, 55.

pride in their city overcame any latent feelings of marginalization as downtown's tallest building left lights on at night to create the shape of a cross that would watch over the city.

Though Oklahoma City provides the clearest example of Okie identity, I am not suggesting that it is comprehensive. In fact, the relationship between the two Jewish largest communities of Tulsa and Oklahoma City reflects another Oklahoma reality, that is, sectional divisions and competitiveness within the state. These divisions have long historic roots. Tulsa, in the northeast of the state, self-consciously developed itself as a city of regional, even national, economic importance, by becoming a center for oil refining, transportation, and distribution, even though it has no oil production of its own.²⁰ In terms of culture, Tulsa and Tulsans identify strongly with the Midwest, looking to St. Louis and even Chicago as civic soulmates. Tulsa Jews also look farther outside their geographic space. Money – and Tulsa is a rich Jewish community – has aided their particular construction of an identity as (certainly) a regional, and even a national, leader. The funding that flows out of Tulsa to creative Jewish projects of national scope creates approbation from the outside that attenuates the Okie-ness. There is seldom any organized contact between the Jewish communities of Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

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I wanted to use these two limited case studies to start asking different questions about the nature of the relation of American Jews to American regional identity. The question of whether Jews are “really” (e.g.) Southerners or Westerners – whatever that means – is to me less interesting than the fact that many – even most – have seemed to **think** they are. One thing that is quite apparent is the essential fact – which, as American historians, we should never overlook

²⁰ Morgan and Morgan, Bicentennial History, 159, 177.

– that these questions of regional loyalty and identity arise precisely because, in America, Jews are **citizens**. So we might ask: What do Jews **say** about themselves as participants in regional culture? Do they **feel** like merely tolerated outsiders or like people who, though different in some ways, also have a stake in their corner of the world? How do they **see** their place in the pluralist American landscape? What do they want their synagogues to **mean** to the larger community?

Looking forward, we can ask: Might the importance of region to Jewish identity actually **increase** in the future, to the extent that Jews no longer put the Jewish component of their identity at the forefront and therefore share more social and cultural characteristics with non-Jews around them? Rather than homogenizing American Jews, might mobility in fact create **stronger** regional sensibilities through selective cultural affinity, as demonstrated, for instance, by the Conference on Judaism in Rural New England? We need to ask the broadest possible range of questions and engage the broadest possible understandings of Jewish identity.