



The Forgotten Jews of Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana

Carol Mills-Nichol

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This is the first ever book written about the Jewish men and women who came to Central Louisiana to settle as early as the 1830s in Avoyelles Parish. Far more than a genealogy, the author takes the reader on a journey through time from the earliest beginnings of the parish, through the Civil War, and two World Wars, and finally, to the last man standing who practices Judaism today in this mostly agrarian section of the state. These families, their triumphs and tragedies, are treated within the context of the development of Avoyelles, as well as, to a lesser degree, Winn, Rapides, St. Landry, Evangeline, and Grant Parishes, where some moved on to find better opportunities. Formerly from Alsace, Bavaria, and later, Poland, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, these Jews were merchants and farmers, slave owners and Confederate soldiers, jayhawkers and prisoners of war, mayors, constables, aldermen, and builders and owners of shortline railroads. They founded towns, ran sawmills, discovered oil, and ginned cotton. For the earliest Jewish residents who often married out of their faith, this was a story of assimilation and loss of their religious identity. For the post-Civil War arrivals who, more often than not, came with wives and children, this was a story of the constant struggle to remain Jewish. The lives of the earliest immigrants: Maurice Fortlouis, Adolph and Charles Frank, Abe Felsenthal, Sam and Alex Haas, Simon, Leopold and David Siess, Isaac Lehmann and Leopold and Lazard Goudchaux, who intermarried with the Porché, Bordelon, Gaspard, Aymond, Guillot, Marshall, Cole, Blount, Chatelain, and Cochrane pioneer families of Avoyelles Parish, are analyzed in the context of the external forces of history which shaped their lives, the major event being the Civil War. The conflicts between Union sympathizers and Confederate loyalists in Avoyelles Parish, the catastrophic consequences of the Red River campaign, the fall of Fort DeRussy, and the Union army's final march through Marksville and Mansura, may now be seen through the eyes of the immigrants who lived through them. These first Jewish men were followed by numerous postbellum arrivals including the Levy, Karpe, Wolf, Weill, Weil, Moch, Hiller, Kahn, Bauer, Weiss, Gross, Anker, Rich, Warshauer, Elster, Goldring, Rosenberg, Schreiber, Schlessinger, and Abramson families who, along with the sons and daughters of the first Jewish immigrants, continued to shape the destiny of the parish during the difficult years of Reconstruction, which brought with it the brief specter of anti-Semitism. These Jewish families continued to prosper well into the twentieth century. Their leadership in the development of Louisiana's lumber and petroleum resources, their contributions as physicians, dentists, and politicians, as well as their innovations in the retail ready-to-wear clothing industry, have given them a place of importance in the development of Central Louisiana, which can no longer be forgotten. Hardbound, 2012, Biblio., Illus., Index, 610pp.

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