

# Blank's Lake Jewish Colony

By MICHAEL DAWE

When most people think of Pine Lake, they think of a pleasant resort in the middle of a long-settled farming and ranching district in Central Alberta. Some also know it as the location of Camp BB Riback, (formerly Camp B'nai Brith). Usually the only tragedy people connect with Pine Lake is the terrible tornado, which struck in July, 2000.

There is, however, another heart wrenching tragedy that occurred almost 120 years ago, northwest of Pine Lake. It involved a colony of Russian Jews that was established in 1893 at what is now known as Blank's or Blanche Lake. It was the first Jewish agricultural settlement in Alberta.

The origins of the colony are rather obscure. Moreover, it is not entirely clear why the colonists chose the Pine Lake area for their new homes. What is known is that the Calgary-Edmonton Railway was constructed through Central Alberta in 1890-1891 and an influx of new settlers followed. In the spring of 1893, Charles Magrath, later the first mayor of Lethbridge, completed the official surveys of the Pine Lake area, which opened up the district for official settlement.

However, the Pine Lake region was quite remote from the main settlement areas around Red Deer, Innisfail and Lacombe. In the spring of 1892, Frank Farley, the uncle and namesake of the famous Canadian author Farley Mowat, rode his horse through the Pine Lake region for three days and did not see



Pine Lake, c. 1975 Red Deer and District Archives.

another soul.

At first, only a few hardy ranchers settled in the district, attracted by the open grasslands and plentiful water, but also by the absence of small farms on the prairie.

There were, however, a couple of enticements for the Jewish settlers to go to the Pine Lake district. One was the fact that 180 sections of the land around Red Deer belonged to the Saskatchewan Land and Homestead Company, a commercial enterprise ostensibly established to encourage the settlement of Methodists in the region. The Company wanted \$10 per acre for its lands, far more than the Jewish settlers could have afforded, even if the Company had been willing to sell to them.

Probably the most important attraction for the Jewish settlers to the Pine Lake district was the fact that the area was so remote. Given the fact that these Jewish families had suffered during the Russian pogroms, being somewhat removed from non-Jewish settlers would be seen as an asset, not a disadvantage.

Moreover, the open area allowed for the

establishment of a community similar to the "shtetls" or rural villages in the Jewish areas of Russia and the Ukraine. The colonist families wanted to live as communally as possible, with their homes in close proximity to each other.

Thus, the fifteen families, comprising a total of some 70 men, women and children, settled in a rough ring around Blank's Lake, on or near Sections 28 and 33 of Township 36, Range 25, West of the 4<sup>th</sup> Meridian. Rabbi Blank, the new community's leader, had a modest log cabin built on the southwestern edge of the small lake that was later to bear his name. The rest of the Jewish settlers lived in tiny shacks or dugouts nearby.

The fledgling colony had very limited resources. The settlers had some seed potatoes, but very little in the way of seed grain. Shortly after the colony started, Rabbi Blank went to Red Deer with most of the community's money to buy a horse and a gun. Tragically, while hunting shortly thereafter, the Rabbi dropped the gun, which then went off and killed the horse. The poor man cried out "I am

ruined!”

The weather in Central Alberta in the early 1890s was very cold and dry. As it was, the Blank's Lake colonists had very little in the way of farming experience. Virtually their only food source was some potatoes they had been able to grow, as well as some fish they had caught in Pine Lake.

Some of the settlers in the area, particularly Henry Alford, son-in-law of Alberta's first school teacher, Andrew Sibbald, tried to help out by supplying the Jewish settlers with wild game. However, there was a great deal of hostility by many others in the area. Some provided the colonists with pork, which they claimed was deer meat. They then took great amusement from “the joke.”

Government officials were virtually no help. Because the Jewish settlers were reluctant to file the normal homestead applications, Jerry Jessup, the local Dominion Lands Agent, stated that he was unable to extend seed grain assistance. Jessup also wrote that while people knew that the colonists were needy, there was a suspicion that the Jews “might have some money hidden away”.

The bigotry of G.T. Thompson, a senior federal official, was much more explicit. He wrote in a report that since the colonists had some potatoes and a few fish “there is very little danger of a Jew starving”. A.M. Burgess, the Deputy Minister of the Interior wrote that the Blank's Lake Colony was “very undesirable from all points of view”.

Meanwhile, once the word circulated about the Colony, there were bigoted editorials against them in the Southern Alberta newspapers. The *Calgary Herald* wrote that there would be no good reason to spend money on these settlers, as their arrival in the territory was such an undesirable event.

Eventually, the Russo-Jewish Relief Committee in London, England, learned of the destitution at the Blank's Lake Colony. Hence, in May 1894, Joseph

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Holy Trinity Church Pine Lake c. 1973. The symbol above the door on the bell tower is a Star of David. Red Deer and District Archives.

I thought I should give some explanation regarding the Star of David which appears above the bell tower door at the Holy Trinity Church at Pine Lake. It is not clear why it is there, but at least part of the reason may relate to how the Church was started.

Just after the turn of the last century, the three young Alford brothers, Reg, Bert and Henry received a letter from two aunts, Elizabeth and Henrietta Alford in England. The letter stated that these relatives would be sending a rather sizeable sum of money. The young men were overjoyed and quickly began making plans as to how to spend their windfall. It was not until later that they read the rest of the letter which stated “We are deeply concerned to think that you boys have not the opportunity to attend divine worship, so we are sending this money to form the nucleus of a fund for the building of a church in your community.”

Hence the Alford donation was what got the Holy Trinity Church project started. As I mentioned in my article, the Alford brothers, who ran the store and post office at Pine Lake going back to the

time when the Blank's Lake colony was started, were among those who lent a helping hand and some emergency food supplies to the Jewish colonists. That may account for the Star of David being put on the Church.

Another explanation may lie in the background of the architect, James Llewellyn Wilson of Calgary. He was a talented architect - he later designed both the Alberta Hotel, Bow Valley Ranch house, Cross House in Calgary as well as the Old Strathcona Library in Edmonton. I am sorry I don't know more about him but there may be something about his life that would prompt him to use a Star of David as a prominent feature on the Church.

By the way, I have checked and there do not appear to be any Jewish settlers buried in the graveyard that surrounds the Church.

Just a side note to the main story but it is interesting that the main old public building, closest to the site of the Blank's Lake Jewish Colony, has a Star of David as one of the major symbols on its exterior, even though it was built seven years after the Colony finally collapsed.

Jacobs, chair of the Relief Committee, arranged to have \$400 sent to help the colonists.

The money was spent on several bushels of grain and sacks of flour. The colonists also bought a number of horses, which G.T. Thompson wrote "they did not need". Unfortunately, the colonists had already pledged their small 1894 crop for some desperately-needed farm equipment. Thus, the influx of cash was short-lived.

With the ongoing grim conditions, all but six of the families left the district, presumably for Manitoba or the United States. The Russo-Jewish Relief Committee sent more relief money in the spring of 1896, but by the time it arrived, the colony was down to six residents. The oat crop from the previous fall had frozen and the potato crop was poor. Moreover, Rabbi Blank had signed a contract for supplies with a merchant in Red Deer and then found himself unable to meet his financial obligations.

In the spring of 1896, the last of the Blank's Lake colonists left. In 1902, when the Boote family homesteaded on the west side of the colony, Captain Cottingham, the new local Dominion Lands Agent, sold the Rabbi's cabin to them for \$5.

For many years, all that was left of the failed colony were some remnants of the settlers' tiny homes and the Blank's Lake name (sometimes misremembered as Blanche Lake). However, in 2001, Ted Boote offered some documents relating to the colony to the Pine Lake community. These documents, including a map, are now on permanent display in the meeting room in the Pine Lake Hub Community Hall.

Thus, the current residents in the area are determined that although the story of the Blank's Lake Jewish Colony is a tragic one, it should not be forgotten.

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North End Store and Post Office at Pine Lake. Store was started by the Bert Alford in 1893 and was later operated by Henry Alford. Photo is taken around 1900. Red Deer and District Archives.



Alford house on shore of Pine Lake, below Holy Trinity Church Pine Lake, c. 1904 Red Deer and District Archives.



Robert Page Ranch which was started on the shores of Pine Lake in 1893. Red Deer and District Archives.