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Bloom found refuge, respect in gold rush Alaska

By: Judy Ferguson

In the 1850s and 1860s, San Francisco Jewish merchants were heavily involved in the lucrative seal trade and the Russian-American Company. When Louis Goldstone, a California fur house agent, who knew Alaska's wealth firsthand, reported in 1865 that the Russians wanted to sell Alaska, Goldstone's employers contacted Cornelius Cole, a California senator who contacted his former classmate, U.S. Secretary of State, William H. Seward.

In 1867, after the United States purchased Alaska from Russia, another fur syndicate, chiefly controlled by Lewis Gerstle and Louis Sloss, bought out the Russian America Company, becoming the Alaska Commercial Company. By 1897 the gold rush was on. Among those stampeding, a young Jewish Lithuanian, Robert Bloom, began heading over the Chilkoot Trail packing merchandise on his back to trade with the prospectors.

Meta Bloom Buttnick, the daughter of the Fairbanks merchant-outfitter who once helped pick the site for the University of Alaska, remembered her father, Robert "Bob" Bloom recently by phone.

"For generations," she began, "the families of both my father and my mother, Jessie Spiro, lived in Shavel, (Siauliai) Lithuania." Famines, epidemics, discrimination, an epic fire, no jobs and little educational opportunity left the people impoverished. Born in 1878, Bloom had to quit school early to help support his family.

In the western United States, land was being homesteaded. Promoters for the railroad advertised free land, animals, tools to anyone in Europe who would come. Bloom's Uncle Shapiro went, but unsuccessful at farming, he migrated to Seattle. Both the Bloom and Spiro families then fled Lithuania and immigrated to Dublin, Ireland.

"But Daddy wasn't content in Ireland, where Jews used assumed names to do business. At 17, looking for the land of opportunity," she said, "he arrived at Ellis Island in 1895. He continued on to his Uncle Samuel Shapiro's home in Seattle where he got a job with the Buttnick family."

Two years later when a Portland steamship laden with Alaskan gold arrived in Seattle, the Klondike gold rush officially kicked off. "Daddy packed a load of trade goods up the Chilkoot Pass and then, shot the rapids at Lake Bennett. Once in Dawson, he rented a cabin with an extra bed for boarders and traded his stock to prospectors. Every weekend, he'd load his canvas bags, packed out to the creeks and sell gold pans and merchandise to the miners."

After Dawson played out, Bloom stampeded in 1903 to the new gold camp on the banks of the Chena River. In Fairbanks on Front Street (today's First Avenue), he opened a little hole-in-the-wall store, "R. Bloom Hardware." He bought raw fur and sold to a London firm. Bloom and his friends became Congregation Bikur Cholim, sometimes holding services in their homes. A portion of the Clay Street cemetery was set aside for the Jews.

In 1910, Bloom returned to Dublin where he met Jessie Spiro, 21, who'd been working in London as well as attending pro-suffrage rallies. When Bloom's father died the next year, Bloom brought his younger brother, Myer Bloom, back to Seattle to finish school. In 1912 in Dublin, Bloom and Spiro were married, and then moved to Alaska.

After Myer Bloom graduated, "he ran Daddy's Hardware, Guns, Ammunition store in Ruby," Buttnick said. "The next year, I was born, one of the first non Native children in Fairbanks." The same year Spiro-Bloom continued as a suffrage advocate, and helped lead Fairbanks women as in 1913, the nation woman's suffrage.

"Daddy's store was sometimes referred to as 'The Intellectual Delicatessen.' Frequently the independent types from Graehl stopped in; she smiled, 'to discuss philosophy and politics. His stationery logo read, 'R. Bloom. Hardware, Guns, Ammunitions, Trappers' and Hunters' Supplies. Raw Fur, Bought and Sold.' He sent his pelts to the Seattle Fur Exchange. Once after a man shot a wolf, skinned it and sold it to Daddy, he stretched, and nailed the pelt onto the telephone pole in front of the store where it dried for the next two weeks."

In 1915, Bloom was among those with Judge James Wickersham who picked the site for the Alaska Agriculture College and School of Mines; from 1921 to 1925, Bloom served as a charter member of the Board of Regents. Bloom also was active in local agriculture and aviation.

"All this business, however, stopped during Jewish Name Year, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. In Fairbanks, Daddy was satisfied with our education but he wanted us to be around our culture, to have Jewish associates, He couldn't leave the business, so Mama, who still had a father and brother in Dublin, took us four girls there in 1928 for school."

"I got a degree with honors in Modern Literature from Trinity College, Dublin University," she said. "But when I returned to Fairbanks in 1935, the country was deep in Depression. Luckily a job opened up, and for the next three years I taught English French and Latin.

"In 1939, Harry Buttnick of Seattle and I were married."

Three years before the war began the Army began developing Ladd Army Air Field and purchased Bloom's farm land for access into Ladd Field.

Ending an era that stretched from Fairbanks early gold camp days, Bloom closed his store in 1941.

During World War II, Bloom was the chairman of Alaska's Jewish Welfare Board. He and his wife served as unofficial chaplain for Jewish servicemen stationed in Alaska. They and others hosted the first public seder, Passover meal. By 1943, Jewish army chaplains were officiating as the first rabbis in Alaska.

Robert Bloom, a merchant, and the first of the Fairbanks Jewish community, helped shape education, defense, aviation, and outfit Alaskan miners, trappers and hunters. He inherited a land that had been secured largely because a Jewish merchant, Goldstone, pressured Secretary of State Seward to buy Alaska. Although Goldstone's motives were for commercial profit, he protected Alaska for Bloom and for all those needing the Great Land, a refuge at the top of the world.