

## Special Feature: BETH JACOB TURNS 80!—Part 4

by Alan Kaufman

### Life and Times of Harris Yett: 1868-1922

One of the more unusual of Montpelier's early Jewish settlers was Harris (Tzvi Hirsch) Yett. Born in Slobodka, Poland on Feb. 15, 1868. Harris left his *shtetl* at 17 and set his sights on the *Goldina Medina* (the Golden Land)—America. His obituary in the Aug. 6, 1922 Montpelier *Evening Argus* reads that when Harris arrived at Castle Garden, the federal immigration processing center at the southern tip of New York City,

...his earthly possessions consisted of a jack knife and a very small parcel of personal effect. The latter of which he left when he walked out the door with the crowd. His first business transaction in this country was when he sold the knife for ten cents which he used in buying a street car ticket and which in part started him on his way to Burlington...

Yett settled in Burlington and earned his living as a peddler. In 1890 he married Ida Levinthal, a *landsman*, in Burlington, and they began to raise a family. The 1901 Burlington directory lists Harris Yett as residing at 322 N. Winóoski Ave. The following year's shows him as "removed to Montpelier." The 1915 Montpelier Census lists Harris with wife Ida and their 6 children as residing at 18 North St.

Harris's brother Isaac (Itzik) lived at 12 1/2 Fuller St. in Montpelier, near Heaton Hospital. Our synagogue is named after Itzik's son Jacob (Yankel). Harris's sister, Anna, was married to Simon (Shaykhe) Berman. The Bermans operated a dry goods store out of the house at 11 Cross St. where they lived with their 9 children. Harris's mother Sarah and his brother Joseph (Zussman) also lived for awhile in Montpelier.

Harris had been self supporting since he was nine, and seemed to have been practically born with an astute business sense. After relocating to Montpelier, he managed and operated the American Clothing Store at 106 Main St. at the present site of Miller's Sports. In 1919 he became Vermont's first Jewish alderman, representing Ward (District) 3, serving for two years. He was

also very active on the Montpelier Board of Trade. One of his daughters recalled that he was asked to run for mayor, but declined.

His daughter, Lena Yett Colodny, recalls that her father was the first Jew in town to own a car—a "Cole" with seven seats! The family used to go to Burlington fairly often on Sundays to buy meat and baked goods. The Yetts had a horse and a cow and plenty of chickens running around. They used to get all of their milk from their cow. When they wanted to eat chicken, they used to bring it to the *shochet* in town and have him slaughter it. They had a huge garden in back of the house where they grew corn, tomatoes and cucumbers. Her mother used to can the produce for the winter and store it in the cellar. They had a big crock in the cellar for pickling cucumbers and tomatoes. They bought flour and sugar by the barrel. Lena remembers her mother baking her own bread and *challas*.

Lena also remembers that in the kitchen there used to be a big black stove on which her mother would cook *cholent* to eat on the Sabbath and holidays. She remembers helping her mother prepare the potatoes. They had a big coal stove in the living room where people used to gather to keep warm.

Harris was very active in the Montpelier Jewish community. He was one of the businessmen who acquired the building at 10 Harrison in 1914 for use as our synagogue. When Jacob Aaron's car collided with Arthur Barber's milk team in 1916, and Jacob was jailed, it was Harris who paid his bail. When Philip Kornreich, a Jewish visitor to our area died at Heaton Hospital in 1906, it was Harris Yett that the hospital notified, and it was he that attended to the burial. There is no doubt that Harris was a key player in Montpelier's early Jewish community.

The Yetts, as most, if not all of their Jewish neighbors, were Orthodox. In Harris's household, Ida, his wife, was the most observant. Ida knew Hebrew and Yiddish very well. When she used to *daven* in the synagogue the other women would crowd around her.

Harris's first wife Ida died in 1918. Two and a half years later, he married Jennie Levin of

Bennington and moved to 25 Tremont St. in Barre. At about this time, his business interests had shifted to Barre. He had a partnership with Meyer Levin at the Union Clothing Store in Barre. He eventually bought out Levin's share of the business and began to assemble a vast array of local real estate holdings in Barre.

Harris Yett died of cancer on Aug. 6, 1922, at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. His *Barre Times* obituary described him as "one of the heaviest holders of real estate in the city [of Barre]."

Ric Bercuvitz interviewed Lena Yett Colodny several years ago and asked if her father behaved like a rich man, i.e., was he very self conscious about having made money? She answered that he was a very generous man and used to give a lot of charity. The Yett children don't recall feeling particularly advantaged as kids. But they do remember that when Harris

would come back from buying trips in New York, he would always bring back gifts for the children—generally articles of clothing. They were very well dressed. Edwin Colodny of Washington DC, Harris's grandson, is the recently retired chief executive officer of USAir.

Information for this article was culled from obituaries in the *Montpelier Evening Argus*, *Barre Times*, and *Burlington Free Press*, and Montpelier and Burlington directories at the Vermont Historical Society, oral history tape of Lena Yett Colodny, made available by Ric Bercuvitz, and of the late Eva Yett Cohen produced by Morris Leventhal made available by the Vermont Historical Society with the generous assistance of Barney Bloom and Paul Carnahan.

Comments on the above can be sent to: Alan Kaufman, 76 East State St., Montpelier Vt 05602.



The 106 Main St. block of Montpelier decorated for a turn of the century "Dewey Day" celebration, showing Harris Yett's clothing store. (Photo courtesy of Lizzari Photographic.)