

Chapter 6

A Tale of Two Cemeteries

Life is a journey . . . and death a destination.
—Rabbi Alvin Fein, *Gates of Repentance*

*To everything there is a season, . . . a time to be born
and a time to die . . .*
—Ecclesiastes

The Beth-El section of Greenwood Memorial Park is a trapezoidal island of grass and granite set apart from the rest of the cemetery by quiet roads and sloping curbs. Magnolia trees, planted in 1947, shade the 1.4-acre graveyard where each corner is anchored by a prominent Temple clan.

In one corner rest the Gernsbachers, chief among them Henry Gernsbacher (1858–1936), the prime organizer of Beth-El, who is buried beside his wife Julia Falk (1859–1935) and five of their six sons.

In another corner lies Max K. Mayer (1877–1955), the first Jewish child born in Fort Worth. He served as Beth-El president when the building on Broadway Avenue opened and is buried next to his wife, Berenice Gans (1892–1950).

At the third corner of the cemetery stand the Potishman and Friedman headstones. The original Potishmans were Eastern European immigrants, traditional Jews who were charter members of Congregation Ahavath Sholom. Family patriarch Henry Potishman was an expressman who picked up luggage at the train station in a horse-drawn wagon. His five children rapidly acculturated into the community. One daughter sang in the Temple choir and later gave voice lessons in Hollywood and New York. A son, Leo Potishman (1896–1981), made a fortune in the feed-additive business. He is buried here. His sister, Mamie (1899–1996), Sisterhood president in 1937, married builder Harry B. Friedman (1887–1978). Their son, former Fort Worth Mayor Bayard H. Friedman (1926–1998), is buried beside them.

Anchoring the fourth corner of the cemetery is the headstone that marks the final resting place of the Wolf, Klar, and Miller families. Alex Wolf, Jake Klar, and Herman Miller married the Winterman sisters—Fannie, Lena, and Sophia. This close-knit extended family lived

the American dream of upward mobility. They began as pawnbrokers handling second-hand goods and graduated to the retail trade. Their stores trained a host of aspiring jewelers, including their sons-in-law Ben Ellman and David Gordon and their nephews, the Goldstein brothers, whose storefront became a downtown landmark.

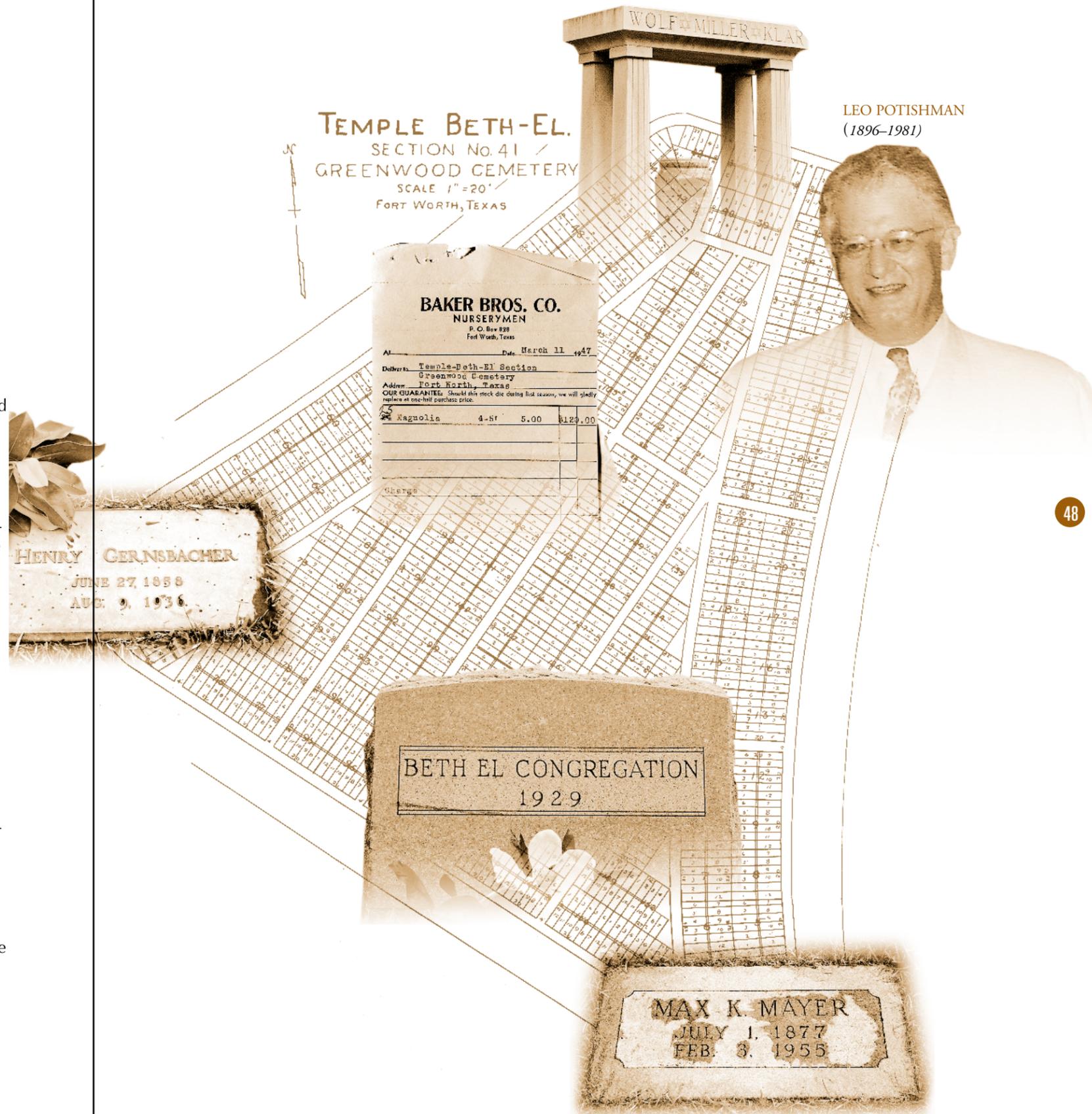
It was the Wolf, Klar, and Miller families who made it possible for Beth-El to purchase this serene cemetery section in 1929. The property cost \$8,000, payable over five years with \$2,500 down. Strapped for funds, the Temple raised the down payment from six people who could afford to pay upfront for family plots. The Wolf-Miller-Klar headstone, etched with Jewish stars between each name, represents nearly half the down payment.

Meredith Carb, a real estate broker, had first proposed purchasing land at Greenwood in 1923. Operating a cemetery made sense: It was both a service to members and a long-term source of revenue for the congregation.

Despite Carb's reasoning, trustees delayed purchasing a burial ground, assuming they could obtain at no cost Emanuel Hebrew Rest, the pioneer Jewish cemetery. That acre of land, on South Main Street between St. Joseph Hospital and the city morgue, had belonged to the "Israelites of the city" since 1879, when civic leader John Peter Smith designated it as a Jewish cemetery. A burial society called Emanuel Hebrew Association was formed in 1882 and received the deed. By the turn of the century, the widow Babette Carb was society president. Her executive board met monthly and collected dues from 59 members for maintenance. Congregation Ahavath Sholom purchased its own cemetery on land adjacent to Greenwood Memorial Park in 1909, leaving Hebrew Rest to the Reform Jews.

By 1918, the cemetery association was making

THE WOLF, MILLER, and Klar families purchased a corner plot, putting down money that enabled the congregation to buy this cemetery section in 1929.



overtures about deeding Hebrew Rest to Beth-El. That year, the Temple minutes state, board President Herman Lederman, whose mother-in-law Tillie Schloss was an active association member, appointed a committee to negotiate with the cemetery "ladies." Negotiations went nowhere.

In 1923, an impatient Meredith Carb, whose grandmother Babette was buried at Hebrew Rest two years before, implored the board to look elsewhere.

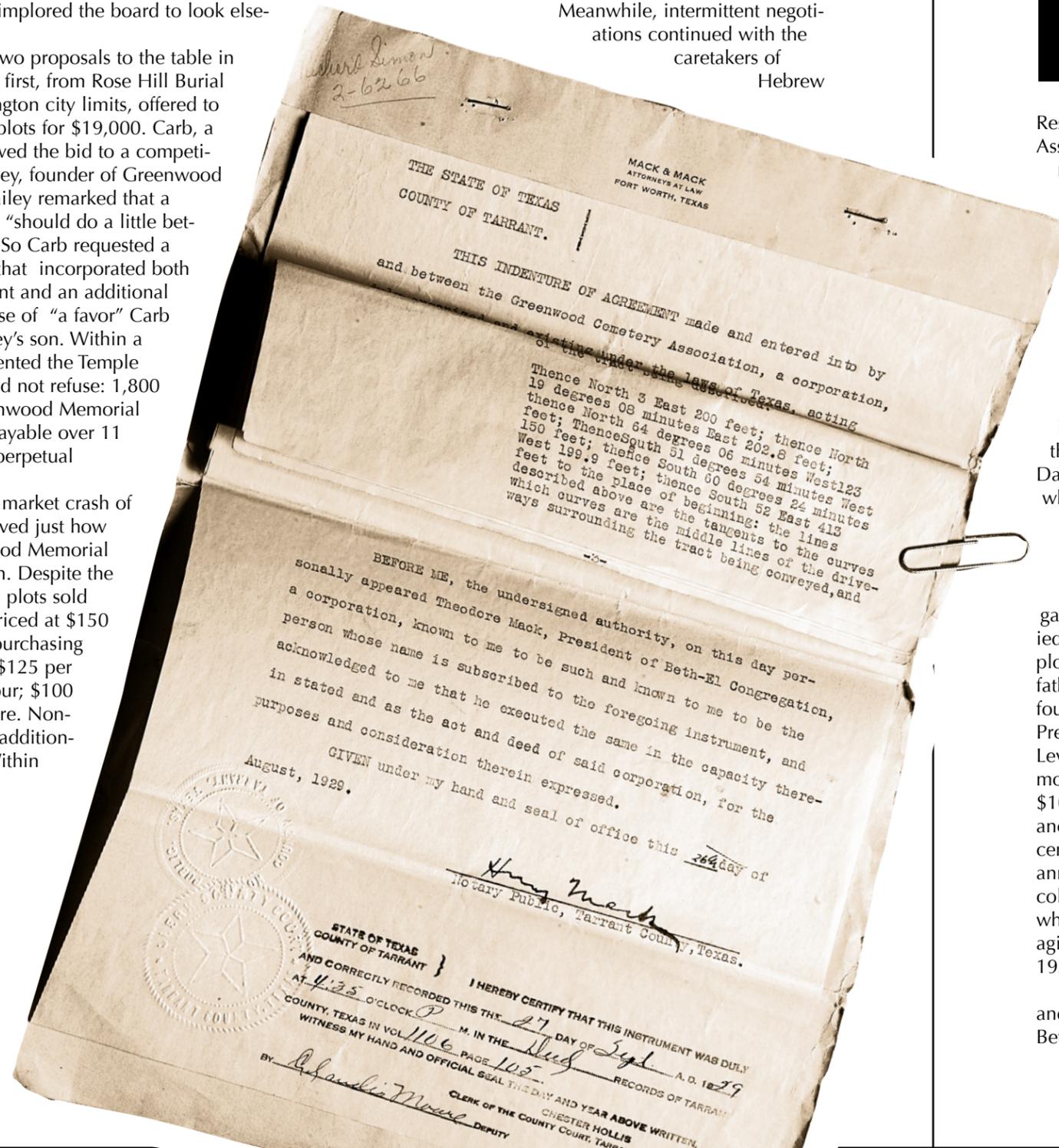
brought two proposals to the table in January 1929. The first, from Rose Hill Burial Park near the Arlington city limits, offered to sell 1,000 burial plots for \$19,000. Carb, a savvy broker, showed the bid to a competitor, William J. Bailey, founder of Greenwood Memorial Park. Bailey remarked that a cemetery operator "should do a little better for a church." So Carb requested a counteroffer, one that incorporated both a "church" discount and an additional price break because of "a favor" Carb had done for Bailey's son. Within a week, Bailey presented the Temple with a deal it could not refuse: 1,800 gravesites at Greenwood Memorial Park for \$8,000, payable over 11 years, including "perpetual upkeep."

The stock market crash of October 1929 proved just how wise the Greenwood Memorial purchase had been. Despite the Depression, burial plots sold well. They were priced at \$150 each for families purchasing one or two plots; \$125 per plot for three or four; \$100 each for six or more. Non-members paid an additional \$50 per plot. Within

one year, the cemetery had raised \$1,150 for the Temple. At the end of two years, the balance sheet showed \$9,100 income. After 20 years, the cemetery had sold 170 lots for a total of \$18,200.

"It is doubtful if anybody now can appreciate what the dead contributed," observed I. E. Horwitz. "The living couldn't provide what was needed, but the dead could and did help."

Meanwhile, intermittent negotiations continued with the caretakers of Hebrew



Dollars and Cents

Price per plot in 1929

- Members: \$150
- Non-members: \$200

Price in 2002

- Members: \$1,000
- Non-members: \$2,000

Very few plots available at Hebrew Rest

Rest Cemetery. In 1930, the Emanuel Hebrew Association "entered an agreement" for the Temple to manage the cemetery and discussed raising the price of gravesites. The agreement was never finalized. In 1933, another committee met with the "ladies in charge of the old Cemetery . . . [suggesting that Beth-El] take over." Again, an agreement failed to materialize.

New money was pumped into Hebrew Rest in 1954 upon the death of Dan Levy. Levy, who had previously underwritten the cemetery's wrought iron gates, was buried in a family plot near his father, Beth-El's founding President Sam Levy, and his

mother, Addie Kramer Levy. The son's will established a \$10,000 trust to maintain the family graves with the balance for general cemetery care. From the Levy trust, the cemetery association earned interest averaging \$370 annually. In addition, the cemetery association's treasury collected around \$1,000 in annual dues from members who paid an average of \$12 per year. Inflation and an aging, diminishing membership led to a \$35 deficit in 1958 and a \$300 deficit by 1960.

The "ladies," represented by Annette Schwarz and Frances Neumegen, were ready to negotiate with Beth-El again.

In April 1962, Beth-El Congregation finally signed an agreement to assume the upkeep of Emanuel Hebrew Rest. The pioneer cemetery had more than 300 graves as well as 95 spaces left for sale, according to a cemetery committee report signed by I. E. Horwitz, Manny Rosenthal, and Raymond Cohn. The cemetery association recognized that it could no longer guarantee perpetual care. The Temple felt morally obligated to tend the cemetery. The grounds had become unkempt. During one cleanup effort, congregant Wally Nass recalled hauling away "100 bags of bottles and junk." Under the direction of a succession of cemetery committee chairmen, including Sam Rosen and Bob Greenman, the pioneer cemetery received due care.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Hebrew Rest became a favorite project of the Religious School. Religious School Director Ellen Mack guided students as they researched the cemetery's history and studied Jewish burial customs. During *Simchat Torah* of 1979,

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HORSE-DRAWN CARRIAGES bring mourners to Emanuel Hebrew Rest, 1400 S. Main St., in 1898 for the burial of David Linsky, 48, a merchant and member of Woodmen of the World.

students and congregants gathered to bury two Torah scrolls and several prayer books that had been scorched and charred decades before in the Temple fire. A Texas historic marker was dedicated at the cemetery on April 18, 1982.

An oasis of greenery within the city's Hospital District, the Hebrew Rest Cemetery is the site of an annual *yiskor* memorial service the Sunday morning between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Local journalists periodically write up the landmark cemetery. During the congregation's annual Mitzvah Day, cemetery maintenance is among the volunteer projects. "It is evident that Emanuel Hebrew Rest holds much of the heritage of the Jewish community of Fort Worth, Texas, inside its gates," wrote a seventh-grader.

The story of Beth-El's cemeteries does not conform to the usual pattern of Jewish communal development. Generally, a pioneer cemetery gives rise to a burial society that becomes the nucleus of a congregation. In Fort Worth, the progression was different. The cemetery association endured eight decades as a stand-alone institution. Frontier Fort Worth was hospitable to "Israelites," yet local Jews were not ready to assert their collective identity as a congregation. The city's other pioneer cemeteries—Pioneer Rest and Oakmont—are also unaffiliated with any particular congregation. On the frontier, a cemetery was a necessity. Apparently, a congregation was not. 🕍



FRESH FLOWERS and memorial garlands cover the grave of Ben Levy (1881–1928) at Emanuel Hebrew Rest.

PLAQUE AT HEBREW REST

Buried at Hebrew Rest

- 22 of Beth-El's 43 founders
- At least five Confederate veterans and one Union soldier
- Many fraternal lodge members whose tombstones indicate that they were Masons, Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and Woodmen of the World

White Studio

Communal Kaddish

When people die before their time, we mourn the loss of their potential. Stunned, the congregation grieves collectively, intoning a communal *Kaddish*.



Some untimely deaths are mentioned in the minutes—because those departed congregants served on the board or in a key capacity. Other deaths are noted in front-page headlines because tragedy surrounds their end.

When Leo Lederman, 44, died after a bout of pneumonia in 1948, he was Beth-El's vice president, in line for the top position. A massive marble water fountain, inscribed with his name at the Broadway Street Temple, indicated the dimension of loss he left behind.

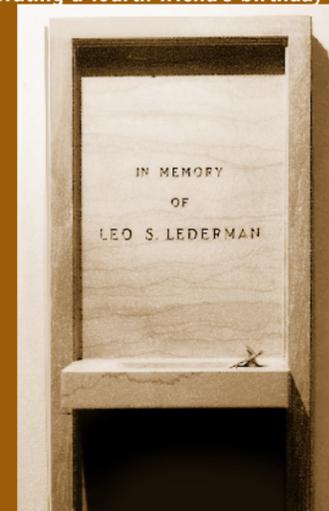
Louis Morris, 50, longtime Temple secretary and idealistic co-founder of the *Texas Jewish Monitor*, died suddenly in 1927. In the next issue of the weekly newspaper, a thick black border framed his picture. The editor's wife, Lilli Bogen Morris, who sang in the Temple choir, stepped forward to keep *The Jewish Monitor* in print and to request a monthly wage for her singing. The sympathetic board agreed.

Some deaths are too recent and too fresh to be recalled in print. The many stones and mementoes recently placed on these graves are testimony enough to lingering sorrow.

Some deaths occurred so long ago that only the older generations recall their impact.

Polly Boardman, a Paschal High School student, was 16 when lightning killed her during a Fourth of July outing in 1975. A recent confirmand, Polly was walking on a hillside at Lake Whitney with her two brothers and two other friends when a summer electrical storm hit. Each of the youngsters felt the lightning bolt. Only Polly was hurt. She is remembered through the Polly Boardman Fund, which awards partial scholarships to the Greene Family Camp for Living Judaism.

Violent weather also figured in the tragic deaths of three beloved widows celebrating a fourth friend's birthday with Sunday supper at the Grapevine Steak House. When the women did not return home November 22, 1981, authorities launched a search. A police helicopter discovered their Cadillac submerged in 12 feet of water on a flooded road usually blocked



with barricades.

Julia Shanblum Lesser, her sister Rae Shanblum Goldstein, their close friend Sarah Eckert Gernsbacher, and a non-Jewish companion, Lucile Dean, perished in a tragedy police called a "quadruple drowning."

Rabbi Robert Schur, grief-stricken, had difficulty delivering the eulogies.

Julia Shanblum Lesser, 73, a retired Paschal High School mathematics teacher, had been Beth-El's Religious School superintendent during the 1940s and 1950s. A strict, well-organized educator, she still taught Hebrew to fourth- and fifth-graders and tutored bar and bat mitzvah candidates. Her husband, optometrist Dr. Sol Lesser, had died two years before.

Rae Shanblum Goldstein, 70, a beautiful woman who kept her blond hair into old age, was the widow of Bennie Goldstein, a car dealer who had died 20 years before. She was active in Sisterhood and Council.

Sarah Eckert Gernsbacher, 87, a sprightly, active soul who walked a mile a day, was a retired employee of



Meacham's Department Store. She had been planning her annual New Year's Eve party.

Lesser and Goldstein were daughters of L. F. Shanblum, a founder of Ahavath Shalom. Gernsbacher was a student in Beth-El's confirmation class of

1909. Her late husband was Laurence Gernsbacher, whose father and brothers were Beth-El founders.

Nearly every Jewish person in Fort Worth knew these three women, if not through school, synagogue, family, or club activities, then by sight. The intertwining relationships that knit the Jewish community surfaced in multiple ways after the tragedy. These women's deaths reinforced the sense among Fort Worth Jewry that theirs is a small, extended family.