

Alabama's Sand Mountain an Early Kibbutz

Originally published in the *Atlanta Jewish Times*

--by *Trudy Trivers*, written about 1987

They came with an idea, an ideal, to work the land, to produce a product, to share the toil, to share the hardships, to build, to develop--a community, a home. The soil was hard--a barren wilderness; life was simple, primitive, harsh; yet, they persevered; they tried to prove something. These pioneers settled the hinterland; they worked together for the common good. They were the first kibbutzniks. They settled the first kibbutz in--the Southern U.S., in northern Alabama.

Our history books tell us that the first kibbutz in Israel was Degania, built in 1909. History books should tell us that the first kibbutz in the Southern United States was a collective farm and a shirt factory built in 1903, six years before Degania, and in, of all places, the top of Sand Mountain in northern Alabama. My great uncle, Morris Brandman, was one of these early kibbutzniks, though I'm sure none of them had ever heard of that word. They called their settlement a colony.

The first kibbutz in the South was the dream of Jacob Daneman, an idealist and pioneer. He and the other members of the colony, around forty families, envisioned a community where the wealth would be shared and everyone would work for the common good. The endeavor, organized in New York, was sponsored by the Mechanics Industrial Company, a labor organization. The colonists' ideals and pioneering spirit brought them from the shtetls of Russia to the sidewalks of New York, and finally to a mountain top in northern Alabama. Here they wished to find a better life and to have an opportunity to realize their dreams.

Their dreams did not last long, just three short years. The soil on this mountain property was too poor. The crops were scanty. Dave Kopkin, nephew of Sam Kopkin, one of the colony's members, said of his uncle and the other kibbutzniks, "They tried to farm, they just weren't farmers." There were other problems as well. The shirt factory owned by the Kaplan family was not doing well, not enough orders, and the wages earned were meager.

Uncle Brandman met and married his bride, Ida Daneman, sister of Jacob Daneman, the founder of the mountain kibbutz. The young couple were duly married by a Rev. Ephriam Mennen, an itinerant rabbi, who performed various services for the community, though Chattanooga was his home. His daughter, Rose Lefkoff, recalls that she was told how many times her father left home to go to the settlement to minister to their needs. She remembers his description of the primitive living conditions and the hardships faced by the members. "Once when he came to perform a brit millah, he looked for the new mother and was amazed to find her working over a hot wash tub. In those days, this was just not done. He was shocked that she was out of bed and doing this kind of heavy work, so soon after the birth of her child."

Life in the colony meant working literally from "dawn till dusk." The members worked in the shirt factory, a sweatshop by our standards; then, they worked at the farm chores. They shared the responsibilities and profits, which according to Harry Daneman, the now 87-year-old son of the founder, were few. "They also raised chickens, geese and hogs. The hogs were not for them to eat; they were for sale to the local people." The group was dedicated and determined to make a go of their enterprise, but after only three years, the colony disbanded. Said, Daneman, "They just went broke."

Yet, there is an underlying feeling by many of the descendants that certain internal problems plagued the community which, may in the end, have been most responsible for its demise. For three years they endured the harshness of the cherty, Alabama soil, their inexperience as new kibbutzniks, and the financial failure of the Kaplan's shirt industry. The central conflict, which could not be endured, was the difference in philosophy among the colony's members. The philosophical differences revolved around the issues associated with religious observance. Though the Rev. Mennen came to the colony when needed for life cycle events, there was no rabbi there on a regular basis. Circumstances prevented complete observance. Shabbat could not be celebrated properly. A complete Jewish life was impossible. The short distances from even the small Jewish communities of Birmingham and Chattanooga were too far by horse and buggy, and the train was very expensive. They were, thusly, denied

access to a synagogue, a mikva, and a cemetery. (One member of the colony, Mrs. Kolanchek, died of consumption, and her body was sent back to Chattanooga. I was unable to find her buried in one of our local Jewish cemeteries, so I assume her body was sent on to New York). For some members of the group, these inconveniences did not matter, but for others it was the deciding factor which led them to leave the colony.

There is also some evidence that not all of the colony's members had the same dedication to the Labor Union's socialistic ideals. My mother, Ida Brandman Gault, swears that Uncle Morris Brandman was not a socialist. "Uncle was different," she said. "He and my father, Louis Brandman, who came to America several years later, never belonged to the Far Bond or the Arbiter Ring, the Workman's Circle. Uncle told me, when I was a child, that when he got off of the boat in New York, he was approached by two men who told him of a job opportunity in Alabama at a shirt factory. They even paid his way down." (It is my guess that his two benefactors were representatives of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society or founders of the colony who were looking for additional members).

Well, be that as it may, the kibbutz did not make a go of it. Great-uncle Morris and Great-aunt Ida left the cabin that he had built with his own hands, came down the mountain at Paint Rock, and took the train back to Chattanooga, which would become their home. Uncle Brandman purchased a house and store at 25th and Williams Street, and encouraged his brother, my Poppy, to move to Chattanooga. My grandfather, Louis, and his bride, Gussie, came to Chattanooga from New York on their honeymoon. I was told that Uncle bought a load of Alabama watermelon as the first produce for his grocery store. Poppy purchased a house and store just five blocks down the street at 20th and Williams Street. Both brothers prospered as Mom and Pop grocers.

The other members of the colony scattered to the surrounding larger towns as well. Kaplan's shirt factory moved to Chattanooga, and his descendants still live here, but they are no longer in the shirt business. Mr. Daneman came to Chattanooga and started a carpentry business. Mr. Kopkin came also, and went to work for Mr. Daneman. Among other buildings, they built *Elesays*, a jewelry store and once a Chattanooga landmark. The Rev. Mennen opened a furniture store, and his family, too, still live here.

So, the first kibbutz in the southern U. S. came to an end, January 30th, 1906, "not with a bang but with a whimper." Yet, in retrospect, there were many positive aspects of their adventure. Though their dream was not fulfilled, the colonists could always feel that they had that opportunity to try to reach their goals. They were part of a Jewish ideal, and though it didn't work in northern Alabama, the kibbutz movement did catch on in Palestine, and enabled its pioneers to establish the Land of Israel. We may ask, "What about comradeship and friendship?" Well, despite their differences, the colony's members always trusted and respected each other. Those who came to Chattanooga worked together, socialized, and their children even married one another. Rose Lefkoff said of them, "According to Papa, it was never necessary for a piece of paper, a contract, to pass between them." They were in the fullest sense of the word, *chaverim*, landmen, you know, what we call in the South, just like kin.