

Community News & Features

Austin Jewish Community Archive: New Initiative of Austin History Center

By Robert Cullick

The history of Jews in Austin resides in many places, but in no central location.

Some of that history abides in the files, shelves, boxes and administrative cabinets of synagogues, university centers and Jewish service organizations throughout the city. Other tidbits are embedded in the tattered scrapbooks, diaries, newspaper clippings and photo albums sequestered in attics, basements, living room credenzas and garage shelves of individuals' homes and places of business. Still other stories are just waiting to be recorded from those who were part of that history, and live today to tell the tales.

Is it a good idea to pull all of this information together under the stewardship of the city of Austin? Could access, organization and protection help to preserve this history for future generations? What would it mean for individual pieces of history to be gathered under one roof to more easily contribute to a comprehensive story about the Jews who have helped shape the 11th largest city in the United States?

A group of dedicated Austin Jewish community members has been exploring these possibilities with the Austin History Center and invites public input at a community-wide forum on Nov. 6 at 7:30 p.m., at Shalom Austin.

"We're at a point of transformation from the talking stage of an idea to the development stage within the Austin Jewish community," said Paul Keeper, one of the

organizers of the effort. "We want to put a proposal in front of the community-wide meeting to explain what we hope to do and enlist additional folks to volunteer to get the job done."

The idea surfaced when Keeper inherited the job of dealing with personal information maintained by his grandmother, Rose Keeper of Houston, of blessed memory. After the silver, furniture and personal mementos were distributed, boxes of paper materials were left.

"It was a wonderful trove. She had diaries and date books going back 40 or 50 years. She had her father's steamship ticket, the invitation to her wedding and notes of meetings with other members of the Jewish community," Keeper said.

In searching for a home for his grandmother's ephemera, he discovered that his hometown of Houston had recently inaugurated a public archive for just such treasures. Following the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, which severely affected the southwest Houston Jewish community, Rice University created the Houston Jewish History Archive under the directorship of Joshua Furman. In just two years, the archive has amassed thousands of family, synagogue and institutional files which are now catalogued online and available for public research. The mission is the study and preservation of Jewish life in South Texas through collecting artifacts from all facets of Jewish life.



Jim Novy and President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Credit: Congregation Agudas Achim

So, Keeper, a mediator and retired administrative law judge, began to test the waters in Austin. He found eager partners with Dr. Suzanne Sheriff at The Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Texas at Austin; Mike Miller, managing archivist with the Austin History Center, the local history collection of the Austin Public Library and the city's historical archive; and

Jeff Cohen, executive director of the Austin History Center Association, a non-profit group that supports the Austin History Center.

"I see this as part of the History Center's mission to tell the story of all of Austin," said Miller. "The Center is committed to gathering, indexing and creating access to materials that | Continued on **Page 8**