



Left: Joe Koen standing near the Austin Dam. Credit: PICB 10782, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.

Below: Henry Hirshfeld with Miriam Hirshfeld. Credit: PICB 04014, Austin History Center, Austin Public Library.



History from Page 6 | tell the story of African-Americans, Asians, Latinx and other groups. Austin Jews are an important group in the history of the city and we have not developed the materials that capture their impact.“

For Sheriff, the desire to create a central archive for Austin’s Jewish community is both professional and personal. As a folklorist and faculty member of UT’s Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies, Sheriff is committed to developing courses, symposia, exhibits and public programs that feature the unique stories of Austin’s—and Texas’—Jewish community—including their seminal role as merchants, politicians, industry leaders, artists and philanthropists throughout Austin’s history. As a third generation Jewish Texan, Sheriff grew up listening to the stories of her Austin relatives, and ended up building her home, family, and career around the Jewish community in Austin almost half a century ago.

“This is my home, and I love the idea of having one central location where I and my family can go to learn about the history of Jews in Austin for generations to come,” she said.

With a central collection strategy, the materials that are currently distributed among institutions and families could be collected, catalogued and conserved consistently. With the creation of a Web-enabled library guide, scholars and researchers anywhere in the world could know exactly what materials are available in the collection. Materials would be archived safely for preservation, and easily accessible for

research, programs and family genealogy studies at all times.

Cohen is passionate about the importance of such an archive at a time when there is rapid structural change in the Jewish and general society that generationally pulls the community farther apart.

“It’s vitally important for the middle-aged and older generations to preserve the analog history in the emergent digital age. It’s important in a more transient society to preserve community history. Our community’s shared history should be a unifying tool in a time when differences in political leanings polarize us. What we want to have is the precious opportunity and responsibility to make sure the Jewish story is included in the larger story of the history of Austin,” he said.

Mike Miller emphasized that the Austin

History Center is not starting from an empty slate. The Center already has a small record of Austin’s earliest Jewish community activities, including the family papers of Henry Hirschfeld, the first president of Congregation Beth Israel, and some isolated documents from Austin’s Jewish merchant community and those involved in the Civil Rights movement in Austin. Over the past several months, the Center has begun to go through all its existing collections to create a “Jewish American Resource Guide” as a first step to identifying strengths and weaknesses in the existing historical record. The next step is to solicit holdings from Austin’s Jewish institutions and individual families. Examples might include autobiographical materials about immigration to America, photographs of the commercial enterprises that were part of Austin’s Jewish experience, and audio- or video-recorded interviews with Austin residents about their memories of the city and the experience of being Jewish in central Texas.

Miller is also quick to acknowledge that the development of such an archive is always a two way street between the Austin History Center and the community donors. Those who choose to donate materials to the archive have a multitude of options about how, when and under what terms to do so. Individuals or institutions might choose to hold on to some or all of their original documents and provide copies for the archive; on the other hand, they may prefer to safeguard the valuable originals for posterity in the archive, while they hold on to copies for their own personal or institutional use. In either case, donors have many options to decide how and when their materials might be used and made available to the general public.

In addition to papers, books, photographs, sound recordings, films, and other related material, the Austin Jewish Community Archive also hopes to work with volunteers to create oral histories of prominent members of our community who have stories to tell of their role in key moments in Austin’s history.

“I know that, like me, there are a lot of people out there who have or will have precious materials from their bubbe or zayde. Having a place to archive and preserve these materials, while creating a mosaic of Jewish life in Austin, would be a great thing,” Keeper said. ■