

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)**

### **Jewish Agricultural Colonies in America III**

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*Note: All quotations are from The Palestine Colony in Michigan, An Adventure in Colonization, Gabriel Davidson, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961); 1925; 29, AJHS Journal pg. 61 ff.*

#### **Introduction**

The last two Glimpses columns discussed attempts by Jews to set up agricultural colonies in America. There was strong sentiment in some circles that Jews should return to farming the land as they had in ancient times. Almost twenty-five collective Jewish agricultural colonies were established in various parts of America beginning in 1881. Jewish agricultural colonies populated by Russian Jewish immigrants were established (in chronological order) in Louisiana, South Dakota, Colorado, Oregon, North Dakota, Kansas, Michigan, Virginia, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Here we trace the history of the Michigan colony.

#### **The Palestine Colony in Michigan**

“In the center of the so-called Thumb District of Michigan, about a hundred and twenty-five miles north of Detroit and fifty miles east of Bay City, there is a small village bearing the odd-sounding name of Bad Axe. The story goes that a great many years ago lumbermen camping at this point found an old axe believed to have been left by the Indians. While one of their number was engaged in chopping down a tree the handle of the axe broke. In his anger he cast it aside execrating it as a bad axe. The scene of this incident became known as the place of the Bad Axe, and the village which in time grew up around it inherited that non-euphonious appellation. Up till about 1884 this district contained vast stretches of heavily timbered country, but in the fall of that year destructive forest fires denuded the land of much of its timber. In 1891, when our story opens, this land was covered with a second growth of scrawny brush and poplar, useless for almost any purpose save fuel, and not too good for that. About four miles from the present village of Bad Axe and right in the heart of the region just described, a dramatic venture in Jewish colonization was enacted.”

In the summer of 1891 sixteen former Russian Jewish peddlers and their families settled in Huron County, Michigan, in a location that was not far, as mentioned above, from Bad Axe. The virgin land they settled appeared to have good farming potential. The colonists

signed five-year contracts, agreeing to pay \$12 an acre for their holdings, each family contracting for 40 to 60 acres.

“Attuned to the ideal of establishing a new Zion in free America, they named their new colony Palestine. The settlers set to work with zest and zeal to establish themselves in their new home and in their new calling. Imbued with the spirit of the true pioneer, they little realized the stupendous struggle ahead.

“Their first tasks were to build small shacks and to clear small patches for fall plowing in preparation for spring planting. Five or six crude shacks built out of saplings and partially burned logs, each containing one unplastered room with flimsy partitions to separate the sexes, were hastily put together. While the clearing and building were going on, the settlers and their families camped out in the open. When cold weather set in some of the colonists were forced to take their families to Bay City and to resume peddling during the winter months. Those that remained in the colony were well-nigh destitute and depended for maintenance upon the little pittance which their brothers in Bay City could spare from their meager earnings. Their condition was at times so desperate that it is a mystery that they were able to subsist till spring. It is told that a neighboring German farmer, himself in not too affluent circumstances, doled out to them a small supply of milk and a few loaves of home-baked bread daily for a short time until he himself could no longer afford it. Still they struggled on, undaunted and full of hope, to prepare more land and to put up more buildings for the reception of their fellow colonists the following spring.

“An important phase in the history of the colony began at this time. A Jewish peddler who had witnessed the colonists’ sufferings brought the story of their heroic struggle to Martin Butzel, a prominent Detroit merchant, with whose firm this peddler had had business dealings. Butzel was known for his broad philanthropies and was at that time the president of Temple Beth El Hebrew Relief Society. A close friend of Butzel and also a member of Congregation Beth El was Emanuel Woodic, an experienced farmer who had had twenty-five years of successful farming back [sic] of him. Woodic was then living in the village of Utica, near Detroit, on a small farm whither he had retired when his advancing years and his wife’s illness compelled him to give up more active farming operations.”

Butzel turned to Woodic and asked him to investigate the conditions at the Palestine Colony. When Woodic arrived there in March of 1892, he found 57 colonists – 16 men, 7 women, 26 boys, and 8 girls. “They occupied ten shacks. Some of the wives and children were still in Europe. Not more than an acre or two on each farm had been cleared. The sum total of all the livestock was seven horses and two cows. One of the settlers had brought with him a team with which he had made his peddling rounds, another a single horse. Four horses were bought on time and had not yet been paid for. Enough money was scraped together with which to buy the two cows that furnished the entire milk supply for the population.”

“Upon Woodic’s return to Detroit Butzel called a special meeting of the Beth El Relief Society. Immediately a supply of clothing, groceries and matzoh, was sent to Bad Axe,

and arrangements made to procure fodder for the livestock. A fund of \$1200 was raised which was entrusted to Woodic to use according to his own best judgment. Because of the intervening Passover holidays and a spell of stormy weather, Woodic could not return to Bad Axe until early in May. His first step was to provide each farmer with a cow. He also bought three plows, three drags, a yoke of oxen, other equipment, and oats, peas and potatoes for planting. He supplied each family with a small quantity of groceries. What is more, he remained in Bad Axe throughout that spring and summer, teaching these raw recruits how to sow and cultivate, and later how to harvest their little crop.

“Realizing the necessity for more cleared land, he kept the men constantly at work underbrushing and clearing. During these operations he installed a temporary sawmill of the crudest type in order to cut the burned logs - a considerable supply of which had accumulated - into rough boards to be used as siding for the almost open shacks, so as to make them more habitable for the winter. Not only was Woodic the agricultural advisor but he acted as the communal leader and arbiter of the many petty disputes which naturally arose among the colonists. Living accommodations were barely sufficient for the colonists’ own families and Woodic had to lodge in Bad Axe village. Despite his age [56 at this time] he tramped the distance of four miles each morning and, after a strenuous day's work under a broiling summer sun, trudged back again to his modest room in the village. The noteworthy thing is that he received no compensation for his self-imposed task. To him it was truly a labor of love.”

Despite much hardship the colonists struggled on for the next few years. “During this era of comparative farm activity a laudable communal spirit developed. Almost from the start religious services were conducted every Sabbath morning, and Saturday was a day of cessation from labor. At first worship was held in one of the little shacks, later a small synagogue was built. A *schohet* came from Saginaw, and for a few months during the summer and autumn of 1892 Rev. Charles Goodwin of Bay City was spiritual leader, cantor and religious teacher, acting in these various capacities without pay. Praiseworthy was the ardent desire to give the children a thorough Jewish bringing up. Hard as it must have been to get together the little money required, a modest Talmud Torah building was erected.”

Beginning in 1895 the colonists faced increasing difficulty in meeting the financial demands of the debts they had incurred. Unfortunately, things deteriorated with each succeeding year. “The disintegration of the colony began in the fall of 1899 when three colonists abandoned their farms. In 1900 only eight families remained in the colony and these rapidly disappeared.”

This ended a bold experiment by a group of idealistic Jews who wanted to be farmers in America.