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Growing Up on 9th Avenue East

By Minnie Zuckier

Minnie Zuckier wrote this article about her father's east Calgary grocery for a Calgary newspaper in 1994. They have allowed us to reprint it here, in abbreviated form.

When I was a toddler, in the early 30s, there were two small businesses, Lyon's Grocery Confectionery Store, and Baker's Shoe Repair, on the ground floor of the Fraser block at 1221 - 9th Avenue East in the Inglewood district.

My dad, Isaac Lyon, operated the grocery, and we lived in several rooms behind the store. In fact, the landlord had given my dad free rent for several months, to get us started in the business. Several wholesalers had given us goods on credit as well, and in this way, we were able to open our doors.

Everyone called my dad Sammy, and so Sammy he became to all our customers. This was our first grocery store and we had a little bit of everything. It was a meeting place for the neighborhood. We had some groceries, some confectionery, ice cream cones, pop, etc. There was a milk shake machine and even a couple of benches and tables where people could hang out.

Both my mom and dad were always there and worked very hard. In the early 40s, we built a new building nearby and moved to the larger premises. Gone were the milk shake machine and benches, but we had a lot more groceries and hopefully more customers.

We eventually had credit customers, especially farmers who promised to pay when the crops came in, and they usually did pay. On Saturdays, some of the farmers would drop off their wives and families while they

visited the local hotel beer parlor.

Once one of the husbands became so drunk that he couldn't find his truck, so he decided to sleep it off in a room somewhere. However, his wife and family were left waiting at our store, and my mother finally put them all up for the night. Of course, he sheepishly returned the following morning to pick up his family and their groceries.

This was all part of the business of running a grocery store where we knew the customers by name and watched all their children grow up. Our customers watched me grow up as well.

In our first store we had a showcase with many trays of bulk candy which we weighed out on a little scale. As a child, I disliked candy, and couldn't understand why my friends liked these goodies so much. I was fascinated by wax crayons, but I didn't have many of my own.

So, after being approached by some of my friends, I decided to trade candy for crayons. I managed to acquire quite a number of wonderful colors. But my trading career came to an abrupt end when my mother caught me sneaking candy out of the showcase, and I had to confess everything. Eventually I learned to like candy, and my once-perfect teeth went downhill from there.

I often wonder what happened to



Isaac (Sammy) Lyon in front of his store, early 1940s.

all the interesting and wonderful people who passed through our doors. My dad, "Sammy," has been gone for almost 30 years, and my dear mother is still with us at the age of 89.

(Isaac Lyon died in 1964; his wife, Ruth Heftler Lyon, is 94, and still lives in Calgary.)

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Lyon Grocery Part of Busy Jewish Business Block

by Jack Switzer

By 1940, Isaac (Sammy) Lyon's grocery store was only one of several Jewish businesses in the 1200 block of 9th Avenue East. One one block, between 10th and 11th Streets East (well-known as the "zoo turnoff"), were as many as ten Jewish merchants.

The Inglewood district was a busy one; it housed many workers in the nearby brewery, packing plants, and railway yards, and 9th Avenue East was the road into Calgary from towns and farms east of the city. Streetcar route #1, East Calgary, ran up and down the bustling commercial strip and its storefronts topped by walk-up apartments. Downtown was only a mile to the west, but the business area held its own for several decades.

Saturdays were especially busy. Maclean's Auction Mart, selling livestock inside the building and virtually everything else on the outside, was situated just a block south of 9th Avenue. Jewish businesses, Hutterites and other growers vended farm products from trucks and rickety stalls along the nearby railway tracks.

In 1930, the Great Depression was underway, and the block had many vacant stores. One major Jewish business, Sheftel Brothers Grocery, run by Morris Sheftel and his sons Leo and Harry, was located at number 1227. It was later renamed Empress Stores. Sheftel son-in-law Dave Baber and wife Molly lived upstairs. Louis Zuidema lived next door, in the Fraser Block.

By 1940 the economy had improved and Jewish businesses nearly filled the south side of the block. At number 1215, Jack Aceman and Harry Libin ran the Four Star Bakery. Next door at 1217, William Levitt had the Alberta Saddlery. At 1223, Dave Smolensky operated David's Dry Goods and Grocery.

The Sheftel's Empress Grocery Store was still at 1227, next to the Garry Theatre. Oddly, there were no

Jewish business in the buildings across the the street.

The Lyon, Sheftel and Smolensky stores had considerable competition from bigger, non-Jewish food stores on 9th Avenue East. The Sterling Market, part of a small chain, was at 1233. A Jenkins Groceteria outlet stood at 1329, in the next block, while a Safeway store operated at 1401 - 9th Avenue East, at the corner of 13th Street.

The Jewish merchants offered personal service by the owners and their families, as well as a selection tailored to the needs of their customers. They also delivered, but their biggest advantage over the cash-and-carry chains was their willingness to extend credit, between payments, until relief payments came, or until crop payments arrived.

There was also some bartering—for example, resalable farm eggs or vegetables for packaged goods. And the really destitute could always get a food donation of some kind from the Jewish grocers.

By 1950, the retail mix of 9th Avenue East had changed, but Jewish merchants still dominated the south side of the 1200 block. Here is a list of these businesses:

- 1209 - Economy Cleaners, Jack Fishman
- 1217 - Alberta General Store, William Levitt
- 1221 - Avenue Clothing, Abe Fisherman
- 1221A - Lyon's Grocery, Sam Lyon
- 1223 - David's Dry Goods & Grocery, Dave Smolensky
- 1227 - Art Cleaners & Tailors, Harry Diamond
- 1227 - Empress Stores, Leo Sheftel

Several single Jewish men and young families lived in apartments above the stores. In 1950 the Burns Block, at 1217, housed Leon Krieger, Mort Levitt and Ralph Przytcki. The Hymie Levitt family lived in the Fraser Block, at 1225 Ninth Avenue East.

As they began to prosper, Jewish

entrepreneurs bought commercial buildings in the area. Abraham Singer owned the Burns Block and Lou Belzberg owned the Fraser Block. The Sheftels owned the building that housed their store.

Sam Lyon was also able to buy his building. His family had moved a block away, to a house at 1218 - 10th Avenue East. Sam and Ruth's only child, Minnie, married Elliott Zuckier in 1949; the couple later took over the Lyon Grocery business.

The post-war period brought many changes to east Calgary's retail map. Inglewood families moved to the suburbs or travelled out of the district to shop. The 9th Avenue East Jewish merchants gradually closed or relocated. The farm supply business moved to the city hall area, where long-established Jewish-owned outlets like Nagler's Department Store, Farmer's Trading (Hymie Steinberg), and Ribtor Hardware (Saul Lipkind) were dominant retailers.

Ninth Avenue East became revitalized in the 1980s and 90s. Many original buildings in the area have been restored, and the avenue has attracted many specialized retailers, such as antique dealers.

The 1200 block is busy again. The Garry Theatre, the corner drug store, and the CIBC Bank are in their original locations and most of the apartment blocks still stand. It is Calgary's best preserved "heritage" district. When you next visit 9th Avenue East, remember its rich Jewish background.

Sources: Minnie Zuckier, JHSSA Archives, Glenbow Alberta Library, *The Voice of Jacob*, *The Calgary Herald* (Neighbors.)

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Corned Beef on Rye – Al's Delicatessen

by Shirley Rabinovitch

In the last issue of Discovery we requested information about Calgary Jewish businesses. Our first response was from Shirley Rabinovitch, who sent us a wonderful article about the business she and her late husband, Alex Rabinovitch, operated in downtown Calgary at First Street East. Many of our readers will share Shirley's fond memories of Al's Delicatessen.

In the last few years there has been an influx of people coming to Calgary, and I often hear the lament that there is no kosher delicatessen and no place to get a good corned beef sandwich. On these occasions, I think back to the sixteen years my husband Alex and I spent working our deli—Al's Delicatessen.

Our story begins in June, 1945, when Alex received his discharge from the Air Force. He was originally from Winnipeg, but Alex decided that we should stay here and make our home in Calgary, my home town. After living here for a while, Alex began to complain that there was no place in Calgary to get good deli food. It was then we decided to open our own deli.

We rented a small store on First Street East between 7th and 8th Avenues in the Cameron Block. We bought the basics we needed to get started, and on Halloween night, 1945, we opened Al's Delicatessen for business.

How could we know it was the beginning of sixteen very wonderful and colorful years?

During our first week two very large gentlemen came into the store just after six o'clock. They ordered coffee and stayed until we closed. I had seen them in the neighborhood and knew they were police detectives, but I was puzzled why they kept us company night after night. Al told me the police thought we were running a bookie joint. I didn't know what a bookie joint was, but after about a week the detectives realized we were operating only a delicatessen and they left. We never saw them again.



Al & Shirley Rabinovitch, Calgary, 1945.
Source: Shirley Rabinovitch

I always believed that the bread was the best part of a sandwich. We were very fortunate to have Martin's Kosher Bakery as our supplier. Owned by Shmuel Martin, a darling man, and his three sons—Eddy, Norman and Benny—the rye and pumpernickel breads delivered daily made the sandwich.

Our meat came from Winnipeg, from the Averbach family's Chicago Kosher Meats. It pleases me to think of the wonderful relationship we had with our suppliers for those sixteen years.

Our football team, the Calgary Stampeders, won its very first Grey Cup in 1948. Calgary went completely mad with football fever. The Jewish community joined the celebrations and football became the only topic of conversation in the deli. Everyone became a season ticket holder and all we heard was football, football, football. Al remained a Stampeders fan until his death.

Tom Brooks, the Stampeders general manager, had his office across the street from us. Tom, the coaches and their players would often come in for lunch. They would draw all their new plays on our serviettes. I once told Al I was going to collect the discarded napkins and sell them to the Edmonton Eskimos. He didn't think it was funny.

When we began in the deli business we were open until midnight. Every night at five to twelve we would get a phone call from the

ambulance drivers working the night shift at the General Hospital. They ordered their "lunch" for pickup, telling us they would be here in three minutes. At first I thought they would never make it in that time, and then they would arrive, with lights flashing and sirens blaring.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Jewish community went through a building boom, with new synagogues and new schools going up, and a Jewish community centre in the works. Al and I heard all the opinions, pros and cons, of these projects. In a way, Al's was a very small Jewish community centre.

All went well until the fateful night of November 28, 1961. A fire in an upstairs apartment engulfed the whole building. It was a bitterly cold night and by the time the fire fighters came from the central station, just a block away, the building was an inferno.

Sadly, seven people lost their lives that night; we only lost our business. I have been asked many times why we did not go back into the deli business. After much soul searching, Al decided that after the fifteen hour days seven days a week, it was time to try something else.

I remember so many wonderful customers: businessmen, lawyers, doctors, salesmen, bankers, firemen, football players and pro wrestlers.

It was truly a family affair. My son remembers standing on a Coca-Cola crate while he worked the cash register and my daughter remembers the time she worked as a waitress during spring break. My mother used to say that a good reputation is worth more than money in the bank. I often question that logic, but I'm happy to say that Al's Delicatessen had a good reputation.

To all of the customers who still remember us, on behalf of my late husband Al and me, thanks.

The JHSSA welcomes your memories. Please share your history with others. Call or write us.

New Photos from Our Archives



Calgary AZA, 1941. Most of these young men later served in the Canadian Armed Forces. Paul Belkin became an RCAF Pilot Officer, and died in action over Japanese territory in southeast Asia. (AZA now serves high school-age teens, but it was previously for males up to age 20.)
 Source - Bruce Libin and his mother Beryl Libin, widow of Leon Libin.

Pat Bercuson Hector – a Candid Life Story

Pat Hector was interviewed in Calgary in 1989 by Trudy Cowan.

I was born in Calgary in 1909 in a little tiny house on 5th Avenue East. My father (Jacob Bercuson) was not well off. But he was not as "green" as some, because he was quick with language. My mother (Sarah Hart Bercuson) was very intelligent, but was not as quick with language.

My father and mother came from the same shtetl in Romania. My father came over first; he came to avoid the army. There was a lot of anti-Semitism in Romania and he was bound and determined that he was not going to be a soldier for Romania.

My father left Romania sometime between the time when he was sixteen and eighteen for the army. He eventually got to England. From there he took a boat to Canada.

He lived first in Montreal and worked as a custom peddler, traveling farther as he got more language skills. Then when he felt he had enough language, he migrated to Calgary, about 1904.

He had family here—there were his brothers, Herman, Sam, and another, whose name I forget. They did not work on the farm settlements, as so many did. My father sent for my mother. They were married in Calgary. There were not enough Jewish men in town for a minyan, so they had to import one man.

They went to Olds and they lasted there for about six months.. My mother said, 'this isn't for me,' so they left there and came back to Calgary.

I was the first Jewish girl to be born in Calgary. There were four children. We lived near where they built the first shul, in 1911. My father was not a handyman at all, but he helped with the work building the shul, helping to get it ready before the high holidays.

I have never seen the inside of the mikvah they built. I don't think my mother ever went to the mikvah there. I think that's true of a lot of the people that began to discard the customs that were traditional.

My father had a men's wear store, mostly work clothes, at 227 Eighth

Avenue East. He had one clerk. He later moved to Eighth Avenue between Centre Street and First Street West. That was more expensive clothing, for a different clientele.

Everyone gathered in my father's store to meet and talk. My father was very outgoing, very friendly. It wasn't the same at 107 Eighth Avenue West. My father was very comfortable at the old store, but things started to go bad at the new location. I think we reached rock bottom in 1930, when Eaton's came in.

My father's business did not survive. We moved to Montreal because my uncle said "come to Montreal and I'll see that you get a job." That must have been about 1936.

About growing up in Calgary:

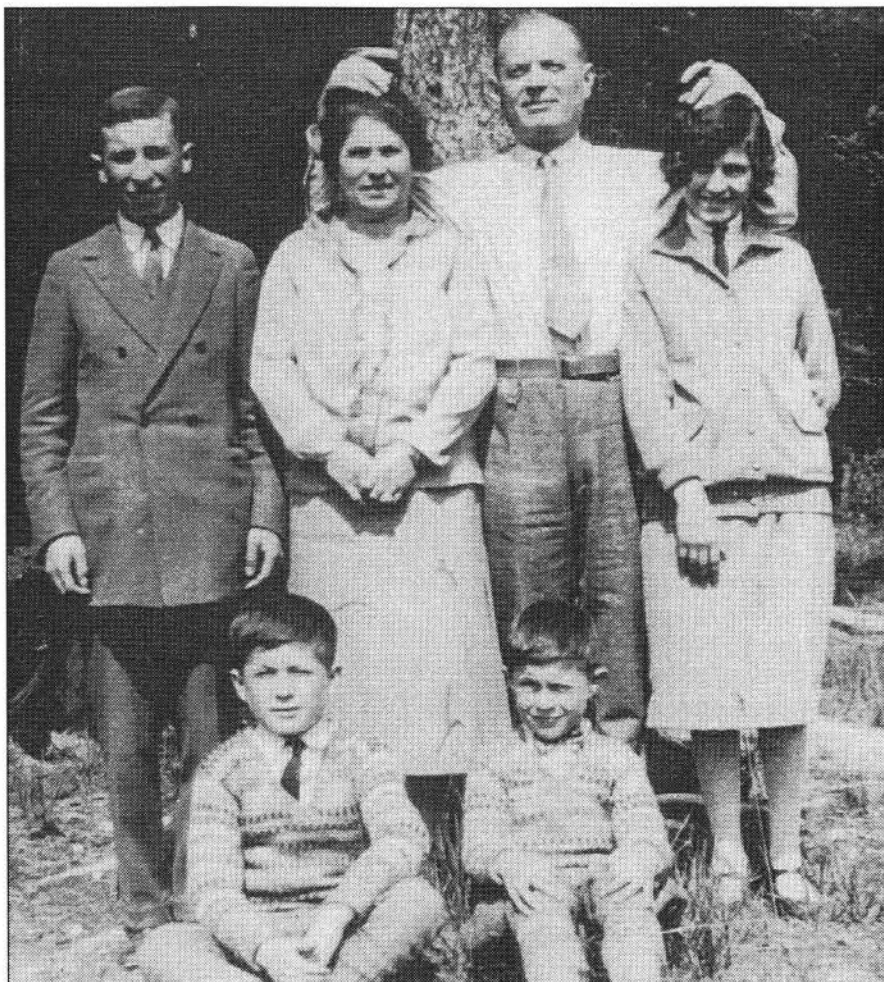
All four of us went to Victoria school. There was the oldest brother Joe, then me, then Leonard, and then

Bernard. Three of us were average students, but Leonard was outstanding. He was also sickly, and missed a year of school when he was about eight, with rheumatic fever.

The community was growing and we began to have organizations. There was a Ladies' Aid, and then we had a Hadassah, in which my mother was very, very involved. To me, the strange thing was that the organizations seemed more important than the family, but that's the way it was. And we weren't the only ones. Nearly everyone that was caught up in the need to build this community up was in the same situation.

We had some music teaching. My older brother had a Mr. Zelig Blumenthal, who used to come to the house. When I was about eight, I started music lessons, from Mr. John

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The Bercuson family, mid 1920s. (L to R) Parents Sarah and Jack Bercuson, flanked by son Joe and daughter Pat, and (seated) Leonard and Bernie. Photo – Harold Segall

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Source: Shirley Rabinovitch

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Pat Hector ...

Continued from Page 6

There were no chinooks. Every day I had to start a fire, and tried to bank a fire that would last all night, but it never happened.

Sam and I started going out together about March of that year. We kept seeing each other, breaking up, seeing each other again, and then breaking up again. This went on for about eight years. I had known Sam in Calgary almost all my life. He went with an older crowd, because he was three years older than me.

About the Hector family:

Sam's father, John Hector, was a hard-working man, he was really a very talented person with his hands. But with no education it wasn't easy. He worked for RCA in Montreal, and he was the one that changed recording from the cylinders to the discs.

When I got friendly with the Hectors and I looked in their basement, they had a gramophone with a great big speaker head. He was a "greener" and he no idea that there were things like patent rights.

He came west from Montreal because they were offering free farm land. He had left his wife in the old country, along with the oldest daughter, Blanche.

The mother died before he could send for her. Her sister brought the little girl over, and, as was customary, Dad Hector married her.

She soon had four children, and several miscarriages, and she died at an early age. They were living on the farm (near Cochrane), it was winter, and he took her into town on a sleigh. She never came back, and it must have been very traumatic for all the children.

Morris was just a few months old. An aunt, Mrs. Lipkind, took in Morris for a while, until Dad could find another wife. And then there was a fourth wife before he died.

By the time Sam was born, Blanche was three or four years old. Then there was Max, then Beth, and Morris.

Sam was an aggressive boy. I think it was because they were dirt poor. I don't think they always had enough to eat. Sam told me he never hung around the house. He always went down to his father's shop (the family had moved to Calgary), and even as a

kid he was an expert at welding and fixing things. He took after his father in his ability to create, and to work with his hands.

At the age of fourteen or fifteen (about 1922), Sam got together bits and pieces and built a car, and drove it. Then he sold it, and with the money he got more bits and pieces and built a bigger car. He was very creative.

Sam was very ambitious and serious about the family business. They started out with next to nothing, from a bicycle shop. He learned all the ramifications of the business, and then he went out to Turner Valley and wanted to expand. There was no stopping him. It was Hector Machine in Turner Valley. Hector Steel came much later.

Calgary to Montreal and back:

After three years, I didn't want to teach in the country any more, so I quit teaching. I took my grade 12 at Western Canada, and worked Saturdays for Sam Gurevitch at Christie Grant.

I was active in the Friendship Club, that was started by Sarah Florence. I was involved because I could play the piano. I went every week for a long time, but I couldn't get my mother to go. She just wouldn't have any part of 'those old people.'

I spent a lot of time at the public library, and Mr. Calhoun, the head librarian, took an interest in me. He couldn't offer me a job, but he said he liked the way I read and he wanted me to have library training. I worked and I learned. I went from department to department, learned about the binding of books, choosing the books.

They didn't pay me anything. There was a job available, but they gave it to a girl who came from a very prestigious family, the Rileys. I learned things twenty times faster than her, but that's the way it was.

We had to write book reviews and things like that. Mr. Calhoun read the things I wrote and he thought I had literary ability. Eventually I was put on the payroll, and I worked until my father was sufficiently broke that we had to move to Montreal.

My father had a small men's wear business in Montreal, but he wasn't

happy, and finally he was taken in as a traveller with my uncle's business. But by then his health wasn't very good. He went to Montreal in 1936, and died in 1942.

I was working in Calgary at the time my parents left. When I did go, I took a train trip, and saw Chicago and a bit of the world, on my way to Montreal.

I got part time jobs, and I managed, but how, I will never know. I borrowed a typewriter, and bought a typing book and a Gregg shorthand book. I studied and studied, and I got a job and I held it. I worked until Sam Hector and I got married.

Sam came to Montreal to see me, and we corresponded. We were married there in 1937, and we drove back to Turner Valley. It was wonderful. We went to New York for two weeks, and we took in Niagara Falls. We went to Washington for a week, and after that Sam was doing business. We went straight down to the border of Mexico and went across for a weekend. The trip was seven weeks altogether.

We had a child after a year, that was Judy, then Ellen three years later, and then three years later Jackie. When Ellen was a baby we came into town (Calgary) and no longer stayed in the Valley. Sam still had a business in the oilfields, but he didn't live out there.

My main organization, my big love, was Hadassah. I was never the president; I didn't want to be president. My job was fund raising, and I was good at it. When we finally had big synagogues, and sisterhoods, I found being active in the sisterhood tiresome.

We belonged to Beth Israel. Sam supplied all the steel for both Beth Israel and Shaarey Tzedek, as a gift. Judy and Phil's wedding was the first to be held in the Shaarey Tzedek (before Beth Israel was completed.)

Sam Hector died in Calgary in 1981, at 74. Pat Hector now lives in Vancouver. Their daughters are Judy Parker, Calgary, Ellen Dietz of Vancouver, and Jacqueline Braverman, of Rochester, N.Y.

Membership Update – 2000

We want to thank all of our members, many of whom have supported us for most of our ten years of Jewish community service. (All are from Calgary unless otherwise noted.)

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