

Kittner, Harry: A Candle Is Lit ^[1]

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Harry Kittner: A Candle Is Lit

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 3/14/1999. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Harry Kittner is one of the last congregants at Temple Emanu-El, in the small town of Weldon. This synagogue was the heart of a Jewish community that once thrived in Eastern North Carolina but has almost disappeared.

Formerly a bustling market town, Weldon has faded in recent decades. Kittner's Store, a downtown institution for 83 years, closed recently, when Kittner and his brother Bill retired. And Temple Emanu-El is down to only a few members.

A kind, soft-spoken man, Kittner served in the Marines during World War II and has been a dedicated civic leader in Weldon ever since. His is the story of a Jewish community's devotion to a small town, its struggle to overcome religious isolation and its hopes to be remembered.



Harry Kittner. Photo by Chris Seward, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the *News & Observer*.

In Harry Kittner's words:

My father, Louis Kittner, was born in Poland. He decided to come to America about 1912. I think he really came to escape the Polish army, because at that time you were conscripted and stayed in 25 or 30 years. We would consider him very Jewish. My brother tells the story that our father went to the train station and reached into his pocket and pulled out the change he had, and said, "I want a ticket. How far will this take me?" And the ticket agent said, "It will take you to Weldon." He carried Weldon was a thriving community into the early 1930s. It was a rail center. They had three lines coming into Weldon. There were trains that came down from Richmond, from Norfolk. There was a branch line that ran to Kinston.

On Saturdays, the country people would catch the train and come into town early in the morning, then catch the late afternoon train back. There were five or six clothing stores in Weldon, a hardware store, farm supplies, livery stables. There were many other stores. My father was glad to be here. He was glad to earn a living that allowed him to send some money back home to his family in Poland, and he made friends with a lot of the younger people. They used to come in to watch him repair shoes and they would talk to him. My older brother tells a story about the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. First of all, the Klan invited my father to join them! It was sort of a joke, you know: They don't know they're not supposed to like Jews! But they had to know he was Jewish. The brother said, "How do you know?" My father said, "I recognize the shoes I sold them!"

Temple Emanu-El was organized in 1912. First, they met in someone's home, then they rented the upstairs of a downtown store building. We had a Sunday school that was started back in the 1920s, and the lay leaders would teach. We had I.D. Blumenthal, the Charlotte philanthropist, had a vision of serving the small Jewish communities and supported the North Carolina Circuit Riding Rabbi Project. We were served by a circuit riding rabbi. He would come twice a month. He had a car. When a Jewish boy becomes 13, he's bar mitzvahed. When my turn came, I went to Kingston, New York, to live with my mother's two sisters. I went to school a whole year in Kingston. My parents wanted me to study and be bar mitzvahed at home. We kept a kosher home. The shochet, the one who goes around and slaughters cows and chickens, came from Raleigh. He wasn't a rabbi, but he was a righteous man and a religious man. My parents kept chickens in the yard, and so did the neighbors. The Jewish people were a scattered nation in Eastern North Carolina. We weren't all in one hub like in Richmond or Norfolk. So we became friends with the Jewish people in Rocky Mount and Wilson and Tarboro. We belonged to a Jewish organization, The North Carolina Association of Jewish Men and Women also threw us into contact with the Jewish people throughout the state. It was a service organization, but the primary purpose was to bring Jewish people who were scattered in small towns. We had services every Friday night. To have a service you're supposed to have 10 men, a minyan - now some of us count the women, too. We used to have enough for a minyan. But in a small town like Weldon we never did go by that too so we had to make do. I don't know how much longer the temple will be here. In the 1970s, our children started going off to college, and when they finished college they went elsewhere to work. There was nothing to draw new Jewish people to the smaller community. Our good friend, Ellis Farber, used to say, "There will be a Jewish community in Weldon 10 or 15 years from now forever." But you've got to look at the handwriting on the wall. It's happening all over. Wilson just sold their synagogue building. What's to happen to our temple? What's going to happen to the scrolls, the Torahs, the stained glass windows? But the big thing is, what will happen to the memorial plaques, the yahrzeit tablets? In the Jewish religion, in the synagogues you have these things. On the anniversary of that person's death, a candle is lit, usually for 24 hours. You say a memorial prayer, the kaddish, a prayer praising God. I would like to give all our artifacts and funds to a new small congregation that needs them. Maybe

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for A Change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Additional Resources:

[Audio Recording](#) ^[5]: Interview with Harry Kittner and Sarah Kittner by David S. Cecelski, 25 January 1999, K-0257, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/12928> ^[5]

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Authors:

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Origin - location:

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