The Star of David shines
south of the Mason Dixon Line

Filmmaker finds some surprises while researching Jewish history in the South

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Generations ago, they came to America, seeking a better life. Jewish immigrants settled mostly in urban areas, often forming close-knit communities, bound by religion and ethnicity.

But a few found their way to small towns around the country. Some who entered through New Orleans made their way northward and westward throughout the parishes of Louisiana.

New York filmmaker Brian Cohen tells their story and the story of their descendants in a PBS documentary called “Pushcarts and Plantations: Jewish Life in Louisiana.”

Cohen said the majority of Jews who came to South Louisiana in the early 1800s were from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. The exodus continued into this century.

Faye Bowen’s grandfather, Leopold Weill Sr., was among them. “He came here from Alsace-Lorraine as a young man of about 17 or 18 to avoid serving in the Kaiser’s Army. He had 24 siblings, some of whom were already in the country around Abbeville. When they got settled, they would bring their siblings over here,” Cohen said.

Once settled, Weill opened a mule stable in the location where the War Memorial now stands on Pinhook and would be instrumental in developing and selling parcels of land in what is now known as Bendel Gardens.

The manner in which this area was settled by European Jews fit a familiar pattern for Cohen, but he uncovered something about everyday life in the area he said he hadn’t expected.

“I have found that South Louisiana is, in my way of thinking,” said Dr. Gerald Foster, a retired Ochsner gynecologist who grew up in Plaquemines, “one of the most religiously tolerant areas of the country.”

That doesn’t mean that it has been easy to maintain their religious traditions as such a small minority.

“In a small community you don’t have the resources to do the things we do as Jews,” Mayers said. “For the children to be Bar Mitzvahed, we didn’t have an available teacher to teach them every day after school. That meant I had to teach them a lot of what they would have to know. I also took my children to New Orleans where my uncle was able to train them.”

Each participant in the film told his or her own story, creating an oral history of their town. This is Cohen’s second such venture. A native of Abilene, Texas, Cohen also made "At Home on the Range: Jewish Life in Texas." He plans a seven-part series that will encompass several southern states.

But he’s not done in Lafayette. Cohen will be here March 18 for a special showing of the film, which is open to the public at Temple Shalom. The show will air on PBS at a later date.

“I was really glad he made the film,” Bowen said, “because people outside the South may not think there’s much of a Jewish culture below the Mason-Dixon Line. Hopefully this movie will give them an insight into what it’s like to be Jewish in a mostly Christian place.”