

A Short History of Clarion

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On a lonely windswept knoll in central Utah, rest two solitary graves (see Photo 1). The tombstones are inscribed in both Hebrew and English. They are reminders of a short-lived Jewish settlement known as Clarion located 3 miles west of Centerfield, some 135 miles south of Salt Lake City.



The headstone of Aaron Binder is one of the last remaining reminders of the Jewish Colony at Clarion, Utah.

Birth

Just after the turn of the century, Utah was actively advertizing for settlers. One result was the sale by the Utah Land Board of 6,000 acres in Gunnison Valley to the Jewish Agricultural and Colonial Association. The land was sold for just over \$10 an acre, with 10 percent down required and the balance to be paid over a 10-year period. The land was subdivided into 40-acre tracts.

Most of the investors were poor immigrants who had to borrow the money for the down payment. One hundred and fifty-two Jews from Philadelphia and New York filed for title to the Gunnison Valley land and got it. Each member hoped to escape urban poverty by settling in rural, central Utah.

Clarion was not an isolated event. Around the start of the twentieth century, approximately forty such farming settlements were begun in America. Clarion was, in addition, ideologically and temporally part of an international "Back to the Soil" movement that saw Jewish colonies established in Argentina, Canada, and Israel.

Documents belonging to the State of Utah provide a valuable source of information concerning the Jewish investors. Only one man listed his occupation as "farmer." All were from Russia, all between 20 and 30 years of age.

Advance Party Arrives

In the fall of 1911, an advanced party led by Benjamin Brown arrived in Utah. Its 12 members proceeded to clear land, plow, and plant. Within the year, 1,500 acres were under cultivation. By the fall of 1912, the Jewish settlement had grown to 23 families. After the first harvest, Utah Gov. Spry journeyed to Clarion and spoke at the colony's first harvest festival. It was reported that more than 1,000 people attended the celebration.

Many of the settlers made reports to their eastern investors. One report describes the living conditions in Clarion and the aspirations of the settlers: ". . . We are already living like human beings. The first 10 families have already fairly good houses that stand in two rows like a small village. Each person already sleeps in his own bed and eats meals regularly. Now when we look over our fields that are decked with grain, we are already sure that it was not in vain that we put down here so much of our strength, and we feel certain in due times to have here a solid home."

The optimism was premature. Irrigation farming was being practiced by those unfamiliar with it. The water supply provided to the colony from the Piute Canal was less than reliable. The first year's crop was not substantial enough to permit the colony to make its loan payment. As Clarion's situation deteriorated, its population continued to grow.

Utah Governor Encourages Settlers

Yet during the winter of 1914–15, Governor Spry—while in Philadelphia—was still encouraging people to move to Utah: "The families now in the colony are doing well, especially in growing grain, the irrigation plan being picked up easily by them."

"To the man in the East who is dissatisfied with his work or living conditions Utah offers a chance to lead an independent life under favorable conditions far from the congested tenement districts of large cities . . . I believe the Western states should all have publicity departments, who would let the world know how they are prospering."

Despite the governor's report, the colony was in trouble. Outside contributions were required to keep the settlement alive. The colony, after four years of operation, was still not profitable. In November 1915, the State Land Board foreclosed and most residents were forced to vacate. It was an extremely difficult and disheartening occasion.

With assistance from the Salt Lake City Jewish community, most of the colonists bought railroad tickets and returned to New York City and Philadelphia in 1915. Others left Utah and began farming in California, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. A few stayed and continued to farm in the Clarion area, leaving the land in the late 1920s not for economic reasons but from fear that their children would lose their religion identities through assimilation.

According to historian Robert A. Goldberg: "Clarion died an early death. The site chosen was characterized by marginal soil and an undependable water system. Moreover, the colonists' knowledge of farming as well as their funds were inadequate to sustain their effort. Yet, they had looked beyond personal self-interest and fought for a Jewish rebirth on the land and an end to bigotry. That they failed is their history; that they dreamed and struggled and were greater than themselves is their legacy."

Today, only about half of Clarion's original acres is being farmed. Much of it has since been deemed unsuitable for irrigation. The land not currently farmed has been reclaimed by sagebrush and is useful only for grazing.

Clarion's main street ran north-south on a bench above the Sevier River. Today along the road, little remains besides the weathered concrete foundations of the original Jewish homes. None of the houses remain at their original site, although a few were moved to nearby communities.

Large Cistern Built

In one of the reports to the eastern investors, the Jewish colonists made reference to a large cistern which was to filter and store culinary water. Unfortunately, on its first filling, one of the cistern's walls collapsed (see Photo 2).



Collapsed wall on the Clarion cistern.

Lamont Nielsen, a local farmer, located the remains of the cistern. An inspection of the structure revealed it had failed because of inadequate internal support, there is no re-bar in the concrete. The ruined cistern stands as a symbol of the attempt at colonizing the Sevier River Basin. Yet the Jewish colonists were not the only ones to attempt survival in the area.

After the demise of the Jewish colony, others, principally Mormons of Scandinavian descent, moved into the area. In 1932, the Clarion Mormon Ward had 166 members. The ward met in the social hall constructed by the Jewish settlers. On April 1, 1934, the ward was officially disorganized, "on account of the shortage of water."

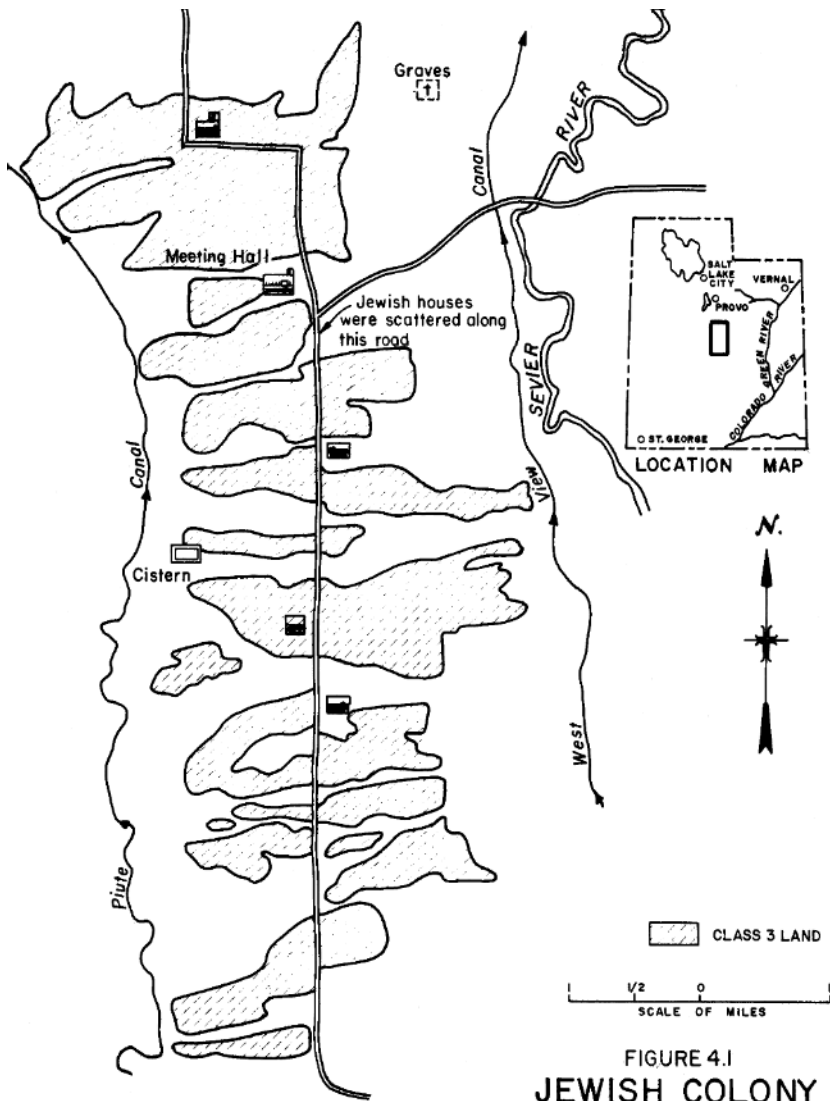


FIGURE 4.1
JEWISH COLONY
CLARION, UTAH

General layout of the Clarion colony

Source: Robert Alan Goldberg, *Back to the Soil: The Jewish Farmers of Clarion, Utah, and Their World* (1986).