

March 2012

The Frisco Kid Movie Introduction

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It is 1850 and a very small Jewish community in San Francisco needs a Rabbi.

The leader of the Jewish community needs a husband for his daughter.

Enter the Frisco Kid, a cute, semi-wacky story of a rabbi from Poland who makes his way across the frontier to a new life in San Francisco.

Avram, played by Gene Wilder, is determined to reach his destination, despite a series of comical mishaps, and great obstacles. With only his faith in God, and his Torah, he faces this great adventure with optimism and determination. Robbers, thieves, blizzards, Indians all are miraculously overcome, as he makes his way west.

It is an truly an unbelievable story, but then again, I do recall a story about a rabbi from America, specifically, Altoona, who traveled half way around the world to a lead a congregation in Warsaw, Poland. So anything is possible.

While previewing The Frisco Kid, I began to wonder what it must have been like to travel across our great country in 1850 by foot, horse, wagon and train. I also began to wonder about the Jewish experience in the westward movement. As a child of parents, grandparents and great grandparents from Des Moines, Iowa, I have always known that the Jewish experience in America was more than just urban tenements and city life.

So I did a little research and I discovered the following:

Before 1849 there were only a handful of Jews in San Francisco.

But after the gold rush of 1849-50, San Francisco would become the second largest center of American Jewry by the 1870's.

Jewish Immigrants became successful community leaders. In 1847, Levi Strauss immigrated to the United States from Bavaria, and settled in San Francisco in 1853. He became a very successful businessman as the proprietor of Levi Strauss & Co Dry Goods. In 1873, he partnered with an immigrant tailor, Jacob Davis, and patented work trousers with rivets, that we now know as blue jeans.

Adolph Sutro became a leading mining magnate in the west, and became mayor of San Francisco in 1894.

The gold rush was a major event in American history. It helped provide the impetus for western expansion, the growth of trade and commerce, and the

development of infrastructure to reach the mining towns, pioneer communities and growing cities.

Of course, people outside the big eastern cities needed goods and services, and there was great opportunity. Peddlers, shopkeepers, merchants and wholesalers fanned out across the interior to support western expansion and a growing industrial revolution. Jewish laborers, merchants, and businessmen, were based in large and growing communities in New Orleans, Houston, and especially Cincinnati. By 1860 there was a Jewish population of 8000 in Cincinnati, one of the largest outside the east coast due to access by steamship on the great rivers.

Following the Ohio River to the Missouri River, Jewish businesses provided goods for the overland trip to California. Typical starting points included Kansas City, St. Louis, Omaha and Council Bluffs, Iowa.

We will see the Frisco Kid cross the frontier in a matter of hours tonight, but an average wagon ride from the Missouri River to California was 2000 miles and took five months. It cost about \$150 for food, and another \$150 for supplies. It took most people one year to save for this trip, as the average worker wage was \$1 per day. Wagon training per year peaked in the 1850's with 55,000 travelers a year.

If wagon training is not your cup of tea, another more expensive route was sailing around South America, which took about 120 days.

By 1869 the transcontinental railroad would be completed to shorten the trip from east to west to one week.

Tonight's movie is very light hearted and cute, but I think it is important to remember that life in the 19th century was anything but easy. Most Jews who made it to America were willing to take great risks to make the journey with no money, or no idea about what their future would hold. They wanted a better life, and to be free from economic and religious persecution. And they came by the thousands.

From 1820 to 1870, the United States doubled in size and quadrupled in population. Over 200,000 Jews immigrated with the hope of the American Dream, a place where the streets were paved with gold. From the early 1800's to 1880, the Jewish population would increase from 2,500 to a quarter million. Another 2.5 million would immigrate between 1880 and 1924. By 1945, there would be 5 million American Jews.

The history of the Jewish people in America is quite remarkable. Most of the information I gathered has come from the book, *Dreams of Freedom*, the official catalog of the National Museum of American Jewish History.

I was fortunate to visit this museum about one year ago. It is magnificent. It began as a small museum on July 4, 1976, and after years of growth, it reopened in an amazing state of the art building on Independence Mall in Philadelphia 18 months ago.

It tells the story of Jews and Jewish life in America, such as the stories of Levi Strauss and Adolph Sutro.

A few museum facts:

25,000 artifacts and a Smithsonian Museum affiliate

100,000 square feet and 5 stories

interactive exhibits and multimedia experiences

the collection is divided into three distinct periods:

1. 1654 to 1880 Foundations of Freedom
2. 1880 to 1945 Dreams of Freedom
3. 1946 Choices and Challenges of Freedom.

It tells the story of how Jews have benefitted from life in our great country, as well as how America has benefitted by opening it's doors to the Jewish people.

For those who have more interest in the Jewish experience in America, I am pleased to tell you about a day trip that our Greater Altoona Jewish Federation is planning to the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia on Sunday, April 29th. Soon we will be posting information about the trip on our website as well as through email and the US postal service.

Lastly, before we roll the film, three quick notes:

I previously mentioned my family roots in Des Moines, Iowa. Ironically, Iowa places a big role in The Frisco Kid.

According to Gene Wilder's autobiography, the part played by Harrison Ford was originally cast for John Wayne, born in Winterset, Iowa.

Secondly, Gene Wilder grew up in Milwaukee and graduated from the University of Iowa.

And lastly, he was a fraternity brother of my uncle and father at the same school that has beaten Penn State in football in 8 of their last 10 games, yes, the University of Iowa.

I thank you for supporting our film festival and I hope you enjoy the film.