

## Claremont Boy Expounds on Cemetery's Founding, Jewish Merchants

Joe Steinfield grew up in Claremont and, more than half a century later, wrote a book about it: *Claremont Boy: My New Hampshire Roots and the Gift of Memory* (Bauhan Publishing, 2014).

Joe grew up in an era that some consider Claremont's glory years. Claremont had factories and jobs aplenty. It was a pre-interstate shopping mecca for the region. It was a safe and happy place to be.

### Judaic memories

Some of the book deals with Joe's memories of Claremont's Jewish community. For instance, in the late 1940s, writes Joe, Stevens High had its first and only all-Jewish battery on the varsity baseball team: pitcher Phil Kaminsky and catcher (and Joe's cousin) Carl Steinfield.

Joe's Bar Mitzvah took place at Temple Meyer-David in Claremont on March 1, 1952. Among the book's photographs is one taken in the temple that day.

Joe went off to Brown University in 1957 and hasn't lived in Claremont since. But right before journeying to Brown, Joe bought new clothes at Sam Heller's clothing store on Pleasant Street. I asked Joe about the disappearance of the Jewish merchants from downtown, and the near-disappearance of Jews entirely from Claremont.

In the 1950s, Joe says, there were about 50 or so Jewish families in Claremont, but today there are about ten. He notes, "All of us Jews were children or grandchildren of immigrants. Most of us went off to college. Some came back to Claremont and lived out their years. But on the other hand, I don't think there were the opportunities" anymore. When the immigrants from Europe had arrived, he theorizes, they were small villagers seeking communities similar to the ones they had left. "They were drawn to Claremont's safety, its non-urban environment, its good air." But the immigrant experience has changed. Once the immigrants stopped coming to Claremont, the town gradually lost most of its Jewish strand.

One of those immigrants was Joe's cousin Chaim, who was living in Poland in 1943. When the Nazis approached, he took his family into the woods to hide. Chaim and his family settled down on Claremont's Myrtle Street in 1947. "My cousins entered Bluff School without a word of English," Joe writes.

Joe's mom remained in Claremont until 1970, and Joe often visited. Since then, the visits have become fewer, but they never stopped. Nowadays, Joe makes an annual visit to meet up with childhood friends. And even today he still considers himself a Claremont boy.

"Whenever I go to Claremont, Meyer-David Cemetery is my first stop," says Joe. His parents are buried there. Joe writes that when the Jews of Claremont decided in the 1950s to have their own cemetery, "My grandfather organized the project so that, in his words, 'we won't have to schlep them to Boston.'"

### A prosperous town

"In those days, the 1940s and '50s," writes Joe, "Claremont was prosperous and people seemed to get along. Drugs existed in those days, but in faraway places like New York City, not our town. There was no shortage of alcohol, of course."

He notes, "Crime was something else we didn't have. Supposedly, there had once been a murder in Claremont, but no one ever talked about the details, like who was the victim or what became of the murderer."

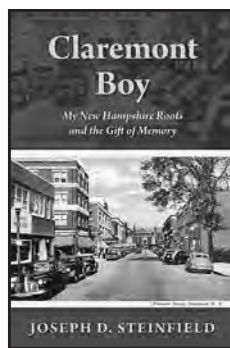
According to Joe, pollution was a factor even then: "Pollution? Of course we had it. The factories, including my father's mill on the Sugar River, contributed to it, but no one ever talked about it."

Joe's father and uncle owned the Claremont Waste Manufacturing Company, on Lower Main Street. It made flock, a sort of imitation velvet that gives a fuzzy feel to products ranging from wallpaper to car dashboards.

In Joe's time, one didn't just know the neighborhood shops; one knew the shopkeepers. Joe remembers the downtown of his era, when Jewish merchants were lined up and down Pleasant Street: "Jack Weiner's hardware store, and Harold Weiner had a downtown store. Jack Bayer's store was next to Zig Heller's restaurant, and next was a book shop. And a fabric shop. And there were three hotels."

Joe grew up on a street called Edgewood (it didn't have a surname), which today is Foster Place. "John McLane Clark owned the *Claremont Daily Eagle* [now the *Eagle Times*]. His widow, Rhoda Shaw Clark, moved next door to us. She ran the paper for many years." The Steinfield family read the paper too. "When I was a kid, we got two newspapers," writes Joe. "*The Daily Eagle* and the *Boston Record*."

*Claremont Boy* is not entirely about Claremont. It is a partial memoir of Joseph Steinfield, today an attorney working in Boston. His memories are sharp, and a section of the book is devoted to Claremont. The book comprises 90 vignettes, originally published in a monthly newspaper column for the *Monadnock*



*Ledger-Transcript* in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

The writing is straightforward, touching, accessible, witty, and at times poignant, such as when describing his mother's battle with Alzheimer's disease: "She had the good sense to outwit the disease. Before it took away all her faculties, she died of something else." Also poignant is this observation:

"My mother-in-law accomplished in death something she was unable to do in life. She brought members of the family together."

Joe drops a few pearls of wisdom into the book, such as, "Oftentimes facts are really just opinions expressed with total certainty." Yiddish expressions are used freely, but always explained with parenthetical translations.

### The Julia Child connection

Throughout the book are memories of Joe's meeting, often with famous people, such as Duke Ellington, Daniel Ellsberg, Dom DiMaggio, Bob Cousy, Dorothy Loudon, Janet Napolitano, Michael Dukakis, Ozzy Osbourne, and Julia Child. The Child vignette is humorous. It seems that Child never endorsed products, and if her likeness appeared on one she would sue through Joe's law firm. Then she'd give the recovered money to her favorite charity, the American Institute of Food and Wine. "Then," writes Joe, "she would say to me, 'I do hope they do it again soon. The Institute needs the money, you know.'"

Perhaps Joe's greatest skill as an author is that he draws connections between people and events that lesser observers would never have noticed. He might not have experienced more coincidences and connections than others, but he is more aware of them. For instance, Joe's uncle, Eddie Firestorm (Stevens, class of '38), entered Harvard at age 16, and after


graduating became a World War II Marine fighter pilot. Uncle Eddie just happened to be the one who taught baseball's Ted Williams how to fly.

### A store behind every storefront window

Joe has seen many changes to Claremont over the decades. "Like so many mill towns, Claremont has gone through difficult times," says Joe. "The town then was reasonably prosperous. It was a fairly bustling downtown. Back then, every storefront window had a store behind it." What has happened to the downtown area since then, says Joe, "is a change not for the better."

*Claremont Boy* is a handsome book. Its acid-free paper and high-quality binding ensure that the book will never fall apart. The gorgeous cover, which depicts Claremont's Pleasant Street in the 1940s, comes from a vintage postcard and will tickle the memories of the town's old-timers.

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