

Finding Rebecca: The Memoir of Rebecca Cohen Mayer: 1837-1930

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Newest Project: *Dressing Modern Maternity: The Frankfurt Sisters of Dallas and the Page Boy Label*

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While doing dissertation research at the Jacob Rader Marcus Archive in Cincinnati, Ohio, I requested all the documents that were related to Texas Jewish History. I returned home with mountains of paper including what I thought was the memoir of entrepreneur Henry Mayer.

Although I used a few pages from that document in my dissertation, I did not read the entire manuscript. Later, however, I remembered the memoir and read the Mayer manuscript. At that time, I realized the manuscript actually was the memoir of Henry's wife, Rebecca Cohen Mayer. As I read her memoir, I concluded that Rebecca truly was an amazing woman.

She embarked on a honeymoon trip across the Santa Fe Trail as a fifteen-year old girl and experienced excitement, hardship and tragedy. I wondered if her gripping story had already been published. I hunted through archival holdings and printed materials searching for more information, but, to my surprise, I could not find anything substantial that had been published about her. I did find one online article about her in a genealogical society newsletter, so I contacted the author, Joan Teller. I discovered that Joan was Rebecca's granddaughter. Although born after Rebecca's death and thus had never met her grandmother, Joan was thrilled to have someone interested in her grandmother, and she shared many stories about Rebecca. She also confirmed my hunch that nothing had been published about this remarkable woman.

I began searching for other information about Rebecca. I found a few newspaper articles that mentioned her husband and archived letters that she wrote to her family. Even with these documents and the help of her granddaughter, I needed to verify Rebecca's version of her life. As I verified her accounts by locating other sources that proved the reliability of her story, I realized that Rebecca's life-story was unusual. Not only had Rebecca's family moved around the United States during the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s, but Rebecca herself had lived an extraordinary life. Prior to the Civil War, few women had traveled along the Santa Fe Trail and even fewer traveled alone without female companionship. Rebecca, a young Jewish woman, did exactly that at the age of fifteen.

On her way into Mexico after leaving El Paso, Rebecca suffered a miscarriage and was told she would never have children. After the couple had lived in Mexico a few years, and she and Henry adopted a young girl who according to family lore was Henry's love child. The couple left Mexico late in the 1850s and settled in San Antonio, Texas where Henry had established a business office. During this time, Rebecca gave birth to several children and the family took part in the Jewish life of San Antonio. Henry favored the Union during the Civil War, and his support forced the family to flee San Antonio.

After escaping both Southern forces along the Rio Grande and Union occupiers in New Orleans, Rebecca and Henry settled in New York. While there, Henry decided to return to Europe to visit his mother. The couple spent about a decade in Europe. However after Henry lost his fortune, the family returns to the United States and settled in Chicago. Rebecca, now the mother of a dozen children and middle-aged promptly went to work. During her life, Rebecca reared not only her own large family but several of her grandchildren. She died at ninety-three still going to sleep each night with a pistol under her pillow.

Many individuals assume that most nineteenth-century Jewish women lived in the East and Midwest (NY, Chicago, Baltimore), maintained Jewish homes, contributed to Jewish society or worked alongside their husbands in small shops; telling Rebecca's story, however, augments that image and broadens the image of Jewish women to include western pioneers.

Researching written accounts often uncovers untold stories and even facts that contradict family beliefs. Similarly, I also uncovered some facts that her family never knew—such as the fact that her father owned a slave when he lived in Mississippi. Rebecca's story is remarkable and discovering her memoir and then documenting the memoir became a multi-year project. During the process of verifying her story, I realized that although Rebecca romanticized her husband, her memoir was factual.