

THE CLARION COLONY

In 1911, twelve Jewish farmers representing 200 immigrant families arrived in Utah and created an agricultural colony three miles west of Gunnison, some 135 miles south of Salt Lake City. They formed this cooperative settlement to kindle a movement to the countryside among Jews crowded in the urban slums and sweatshops of the East. Farm ownership, the colonists believed, would build Jewish self-confidence, help destroy anti-Semitic stereotypes, and facilitate the acceptance of Jews by Christians. As the harbingers of the Jewish economic and social future in America, the colonists had issued a call, so it was appropriate that they named their experiment Clarion.



Clarion was not an isolated event. Between 1881 and 1915, 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.

Led by Benjamin Brown, the Jews cleared 1,500 acres of ground and planted wheat, alfalfa, and oats in their first months on the land in Clarion. By the spring of 1912, green shoots had broken through the soil. Joy, however, quickly turned to sorrow. The canal which the colony depended upon for water proved unreliable and irrigation needs could not be met. The first year's harvest was a disaster.

In the second year, the colony lands were divided into individual farms. With its sharing of machinery and cooperative buying and selling, Clarion resembled an Israeli moshav. By the spring of 1913 the population of Clarion reached 156 people and 2,400 acres had been plowed and planted. But the optimism born of struggle received a series of crushing blows. During the summer, heavy rains broke the irrigation canal's banks, flooding the fields. An early frost produced more destruction. The subsequent harvest was discouraging—the Jewish farmers brought in another poor crop.

Despite these setbacks, the Jews resolved to stay on the land. In the winter and spring of 1913-14 they rebuilt and replanted. A water shortage again plagued the colony in the spring and summer of 1914. This time the problem was unrelated to weather or canal deficiencies. The absence of locks on canal gates enabled Mormon farmers to expropriate more than their allotted share of water. The resulting harvest was not sufficient to enable Clarion farmers to continue the next year.

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 religious identities through assimilation. Benjamin Brown organized the Utah Poultry Association, which eventually evolved into the Intermountain Farmers Association. Maurice Warshaw built the Grand Central department store chain based in Salt Lake City.

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.

Robert Alan Goldberg

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

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http://www.uen.org/utah_history_encyclopedia/c/CLARION_COLONY.html