

In the South, they say 'oy'

Film depicts Southern Jewish lifestyle in 'Shalom Y'All'

By Daniel M. Kimmel

Comic actor Steve Landesberg used to do a bit where he wondered how there could be Southern Jews. He knew they existed, he said. He'd eaten in their homes. Somehow, though, he just couldn't get his mind around the notion of one person asking another, "Where y'all going for the Hah Holidays?"

Movie Maven

Of course there were and are many Jews in the South, even if to Northerners like Landesberg – or your humble Movie Maven – the idea seems preposterous. In Brian Bain's 2002 documentary "Shalom Y'All," he takes us on a tour of Southern Jewry that is informative, personal and at times poignant. Bain is a third generation American Jew who grew up in New Orleans. He starts the journey with his own grandfather, then 99 years old and a transplanted New Yorker who became a traveling salesman in the South.

At first you may think Bain is going to sugarcoat the story, as we meet a generation of Jews who assimilated their way into Southern culture. They attended the Friday night high school football games, but they also established synagogues, Hebrew schools, cemeteries and other Jewish institutions.

Bain expresses his love for the South even as he acknowledges confrontations with anti-Semitism, and Jewish involvement in the struggle for civil rights. Former ambassador Andrew Young notes that there were rabbis joining Martin Luther King and other activists before he even became involved. An interview with a local police chief by the name of Reuben Greenberg brings the revelation that not only is he African-American, but a Jew by choice. He recalled a lot of the civil rights meetings he attended were held at synagogues, and decided to stick around.

Bain then moves on to the demographic cycle of the Jewish communities of the South.



Filmmaker Brian Bain and interviews Andrew Young.

In the small towns – as in other parts of the country – the Jewish children grew up, went away to college and never came back. Towns with once thriving Jewish communities now barely remember a Jewish presence at all.

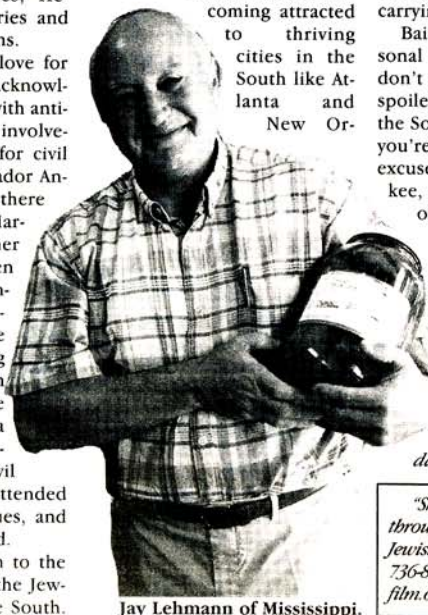
On the other hand, Northern Jews started becoming attracted to thriving cities in the South like Atlanta and New Or-

leans (pre-Katrina) and not only set down new roots, but reinvigorated Jewish life. We discover a landmark Atlanta fast food emporium that has gone kosher, and a community that got the cooperation of their non-Jewish neighbors to set up an eruv (a hung cord enclosing an area to permit carrying on Shabbat).

Bain undergoes some personal changes, too, but you don't want to have everything spoiled. Whether you're from the South and are nostalgic, or you're a proud – you should excuse the expression – Yankee, curious about how the other half has lived, check out "Shalom Y'All."

Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, reviews Jewish films for the Advocate. He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at daniel.kimmel@rcn.com.

"Shalom Y'All" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$25. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.



Jay Lehmann of Mississippi.