

# History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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# Pieces of Silver

## ■ From his association with Abe Lincoln to the founding of Silver Lake, City pioneer Herman Silver was a man of distinction.

In 1978, I was a graduate student in history at the University of Utah. My focus had been on American Jewish history in the American West during the 19th century. My Master's thesis was about Jews of the Intermountain West from 1826-85. My source for this reference book was the Anglo-Jewish press of that time in America, and this is when I discovered Herman Silver (1830-13). He was a true Los Angeles pioneer.

I found Herman Silver far different than most pioneers who moved west in the United States. He was not your average pioneer searching for a new life, a means of finding self-identity for either himself or his family. He was not a pauper or a peddler looking for a permanent occupation in new undiscovered territory. And he definitely was not someone looking to strike it rich in mining for gold or silver in the mountains of the glorious virgin West.

When I discovered Herman in the Anglo-Jewish press, he had moved to Denver, Colo., in 1873 with his family.

According to different references, he arrived to become the assayer or superintendent of the Mint in Colorado. In the burgeoning Jewish community in Denver, Silver was revered for his education and the ability to be a lay-rabbi. He also was established socially and politically. As a matter of fact, upon his 25th wedding anniversary, there was a large celebration attended by the Governor of Colorado, James Grant, and his wife.

But by 1883, Herman Silver stopped appearing in the newspapers I was using in my study. I knew he had not died because there was no eulogy in any of the papers. What I soon discovered was that he and his family moved to Los Angeles, where he became a member of the Los Angeles City Council, ran for Mayor and became a commissioner on the first Board of the Los Angeles Water Commission.

So, let me give you an overview of Herman Silver's illustrious life.

Herman was born July 21, 1830, about 140 miles southwest of Hamburg, Germany, which was then referred to as Prussian Saxony, now East Germany. He was one of six children. Little is known about his parents or siblings. According to rabbi and historian William Kramer, Herman was a bright child in both secular and Hebraic studies; he aspired to become a rabbi. But for health reasons, when he was 18, he suffered from what was then referred to as the "attack of fever." His parents then allowed him to board a ship for America for health reasons.

When he arrived in the United States he moved to Montreal, Quebec, Canada. He had met a Roman Catholic priest from Montreal, and they made a decision to teach each other Hebrew and English. Herman moved to Canada for two years, where he began an affiliation with the Masonic Order that continued throughout the remainder of his life. Herman Silver left Canada at 20. He traveled to New York, the South and Midwest.

The 1860 census lists Mr. Silver in Peru, Illinois. During this period, he married Eliza Post. He was known to have been an Abraham Lincoln supporter, having met Lincoln that year. In 1863 and 1864, Herman served as assistant assessor of Internal

Revenue for the Second Division of the Sixth District of Illinois. Also, legal directories from Ottawa City, Ill., noted that he was an attorney in 1866 and 1867. It was noted that, during those years, he came to know future President Ulysses Grant and Colonel John C. Fremont, of the famous California expedition. Because of his health problems he never joined the military, but he did help recruit men for the Union Army during the Civil War.

Once again, "lung congestion" became an issue for Silver. His doctor recommended that he move to Colorado, where there were many health centers to help him. This meant he had to refuse an appointment as United States Marshall of the Dakota Territory. He arrived in Denver in 1874, where he was granted a Federal appointment to the United States Land Office. In Denver he became involved in politics and became the national deputy for the State of Colorado for the Republican Union League of America. On April 27, 1877, President Grant made him the manager of the Denver Mint, a position he held for eight years. Herman was also involved in private sector work as well. He held executive positions on the Denver Tribune and was auditor and treasurer for the receivership of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad.

Illness was once again the reason the Silvers moved, this time to California. He now needed a warmer, milder environment. His family did not move directly to Los Angeles but instead first to San Bernardino. In 1887, he was asked by the president of the Acheson, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad to become secretary treasurer of the consolidated lines in California. It becomes apparent that Herman and his family moved to Los Angeles while continuing that work. There is also mentioned in the bible of early Los Angeles history, Harris Newmark's book, *Sixty Years in Southern California: 1853-1913*, that

Herman, at the same time, "obtained a franchise for the construction of a double-track cable railway in Los Angeles," with a James F. Crank.

Little is known about Herman Silver in Los Angeles for almost a decade, with the exception of his involvement within the local Jewish community found in the Anglo-Jewish press. But on Dec. 18, 1896, there is a filing notice that Herman Silver would be running for Los Angeles City Council from the Fourth Ward. From 1870 to 1909, the City Council was divided into wards. At that time there were nine wards, each one having one Councilman. In 1896, the Los Angeles Times stated that Herman Silver ran under the banner of "A League for Better City Government," and he had 4,500 supporters. The Fourth Ward representatives were behind Herman Silver. It was noted that, "he would be a...Councilman, not a politician."

Upon Herman's election to Council at 67 years old, he was nominated and voted in as City Council President in 1897; at times he was the Mayor pro tem when the Mayor was away from the City. Silver ran a second time for City Council as a Republican.

He once again was voted in as Council President. In the January 2, 1899, City Council minutes, C.H. Toll, Councilman from the Fifth Ward, gave the following remarks about Hon. Herman Silver at the close of the prior session:

"Our heartfelt expression of praise and thankfulness for the just equitability and fearless manner in

which he has ever conducted the deliberations of our body ... he has made the rough places smooth and easy ... and for the inspiring influence defused throughout our tired team of officers. By his ... self-sacrificing devotion to the interests of the municipality he serves."

During Herman's second term, water issues continued to be an overriding problem in Los Angeles. A lease on the Los Angeles City Water Works Co., owned by Griffith-Beaudry-Lazard, ran out. The original contract between the private company and the City stated that upon expiration of the agreement the City would take over the company for an arbitrated price of \$2 million. In 1902, the City Council approved emergency ordinance 7554 (NS), establishing an administrative board of seven water commissioners. The Hon. Herman Silver was chosen as one of the seven members. But, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

The Hon. Herman Silver's term was completed in 1900. It should be noted that, during that era, terms of office lasted two years. He was asked to run again for the City Council, but he decided, after much deliberation and discussion, to run for Mayor as a Republican delegate instead. His opponent was Meredith "Pinky" Snyder, who eventually became Mayor three times. Herman received accolades in the press upon his declaration as a candidate. But politics being what they are, Herman lost the election. It has been rumored that he lost because he was too old, and there was anti-Semitic sentiment in the City.

Nevertheless, in 1902, Herman was elected President of the newly formed Water Commission. The following year it became an appointed commission by the Mayor. It was cut to five members, and Herman Silver was not reappointed. Upon his retirement from the Board of Water Commissioners, the Chamber of Commerce and the Merchants and Manufacturers Association gave resolutions in his honor. It was this type of recognition that brought the new Board to name a reservoir in Los Angeles the Herman Silver Lake. This action was the precursor to the area of Los Angeles known as Silver Lake.

In 1903, Governor George C. Pardee appointed Silver to the California State Bank Commission; he became its president for two terms. Hon. Herman Silver retired from public service in 1908. He passed away Aug. 19, 1913, from a heart attack at the age of 83, leaving his wife and two children. Neither of his children had children of their own.

