

Martha Newman: Pioneer on the Suburban Frontier

BY MERLE A. BRANNER AND ROBERT A. SIDEMAN

“Leave it to Martha and Marc to find the end of the world and live there.” That’s what the Newmans’ friends said after visiting them in far-off Winnetka. When Martha and Marc were married in 1902, they settled in a comfortable apartment on the South Side. But they felt confined, cooped-up; Marc complained that the only open space nearby was the landing on the stairs outside the kitchen door.

SO One summer the Newmans rented a house in Wilmette—and loved it: the quiet, the proximity to Lake Michigan, and especially the abundance of flowers. Several years later, in 1908, Marc, Martha, and their two young daughters made the North Shore their permanent home by settling in a house in Winnetka.

At that time a Jewish presence on the North Shore barely existed. In 1900, four members of the Foreman banking family—a brother, three sisters, and their spouses—built a residential compound on Hazel that they called “Wildwood.” But Wildwood was for summer use only; each year when school began, the families returned to the South Side.

There were also several Jewish families who settled in downtown Highland Park, where they operated retail enterprises and lived on or near the premises.

Occasional renters included David Mayer of the Schlesinger & Mayer department store, who spent the summer of 1902 on an estate in Glencoe. But Marc and Martha Newman were in the very forefront of Jewish families in Chicago who opted for life on the North Shore year-round.

When the Newmans moved north, they found Winnetka a little different from how it is today. The Indian Hill train station, today just up the street from their former home, had not yet opened. Nor were there mail deliveries, or even house numbers: in the early years, the Newmans’ street address was simply “Winnetka Avenue near Abbotsford Road.”

But Martha and Marc took to their new life without hesitation. Marc, who like Martha’s father, was a manufacturer of men’s clothing, commuted to his office downtown from the Kenilworth station, where he also picked up the mail, while Martha, with young children, became active close to home. Winnetka was then known as a progressive community, which suited Martha just fine. When the ladies in town marched for women’s suffrage, for example, Martha Newman was right there with them.

At the invitation of Christian friends, Martha’s older daughter K [sic] occasionally attended Sunday school with them. As K’s daughter, Babette Powell, recalled it:

“One day [in 1914] my mother came in and asked her mother why she couldn’t have her own Sunday school. And that was it—the very next Sunday, Granny had ten children in the house, and her religious school was underway.”



It was in this house that Martha Newman opened her religious school one hundred years ago.

Courtesy Winnetka Historical Society.

Martha Newman was uniquely qualified, not merely to teach, but to establish a school as well. She was born Martha Washington Simon in Chicago in 1876, a Centennial baby named for the first First Lady. Martha grew up one of five children in a comfortable neighborhood on the South Side, the daughter of Henrietta Mayer Simon, a homemaker, and Leopold Simon, a manufacturer of men’s clothing. Both of Martha’s parents emigrated from Germany at an early age. Martha attended Armour Institute, predecessor of the Illinois Institute of Technology, and after completing coursework there, went back to Armour for a two-year kindergarten teacher training course.

Martha’s first job after completing the program was to open a kindergarten at the Maxwell Street Settlement, located at Maxwell and Jefferson in the heart of the burgeoning immigrant Jewish neighborhood. The inspiration for the kindergarten came from a suggestion made one evening by Jane Addams, at a meeting attended by Martha Simon. Martha enjoyed the teaching and the children, yet found herself

unprepared for the poverty she encountered. She soon found herself taking up a collection among her friends to provide the basic necessities for some of her students. Later, she taught in the public schools.

An important influence on Martha throughout her life was Rabbi Emil G. Hirsch of Chicago Sinai Congregation. Martha grew up at Sinai, went through religious school and was confirmed there. She recalled the day Rabbi Hirsch came to her home to ask her to join the faculty of the Sinai religious school. She objected, he insisted, she took the job and loved it. Fortunately, Martha kept texts and materials from those days and brought them with her to Winnetka.

Martha strongly admired Rabbi Hirsch's progressive approach to Judaism, which placed far less emphasis on ritual than on social justice. His thinking, she felt, was actually closer to that of younger congregants such as herself than to that of their parents. As Martha put it, "What religion I got, I got from him." Many of her friends who settled on the North Shore in the early years felt a similar devotion to Sinai and to Rabbi Hirsch.

Aided by Rabbi Hirsch's informal guidance, Martha's religious school in Winnetka—an "informal Sabbath school to prepare children for Confirmation in the city," as Martha described it. thrived from the start. She was soon joined by several other mothers who assisted her, and within a year she moved the school to the Winnetka Woman's Club on the Village Green.

By 1920 enrollment had reached 65, a measure both of her success and of a growing Jewish population. In April of that year, the Newmans joined forty-five other families (twenty-five from Winnetka, ten from Wilmette, six from Highland Park, three from Evanston, one from Glencoe, and one from Chicago) in forming the "North Shore Branch of Sinai Congregation." This was an expansion of Martha's religious school to include Confirmation that could now be conducted on the North Shore, as well as weekly services by visiting rabbis.

Rabbi Hirsch conducted the initial service of the new congregation at Hubbard Woods School in June 1920, marking the beginning of Jewish worship on the North Shore. Following the death of Rabbi Hirsch in 1923, the group took its first steps toward

independence by adopting a new name, "North Shore Congregation," hiring a rabbi, and joining the Reform congregational union. With the Jewish population making increasing demands for a more complete program including a home of its own, the congregation incorporated in 1926 as North Shore Congregation Israel and proceeded to build a temple at Lincoln and Vernon Avenues in Glencoe.

One of the first Jewish families to follow Marc and Martha Newman to the North Shore were the Stonehills. In 1908, Charles Stonehill joined ten other men in signing articles of incorporation for Lake Shore Country Club, and at the same time he began to develop lakefront property in Glencoe adjoining the club grounds for his own residence. Charles and Nettie Stonehill and their children moved to the seventeen-acre estate they called Pierremont around 1911 and remained there into the 1930s. In 1961 North Shore Congregation Israel purchased the former Stonehill estate; three years later it dedicated its new house of worship on the grounds.

And Martha Newman was there to enjoy that dedication, as she was to see the school she opened with

ten students grow to an enrollment of nearly two thousand, in a life that spanned 104 years of keen memories and sharp wit. When at 99 she was asked by a persistent interviewer to answer questions she didn't want to answer, she sparred with the ease of a Presidential candidate. Of a student sixty years earlier, a girl: "She always wanted to get out of Sunday school, but she certainly wanted the presents." Of a grandson who became president of his temple: "He tells everybody, 'I got asthma from one grandmother and religion from the other.'"

Rabbi Edgar Siskin of North Shore Congregation Israel called Martha Newman "a Rebecca Gratz of the American suburban frontier." And indeed, just as Rebecca Gratz established the first Jewish religious school in North America, Martha Newman followed her beyond the edge of one great city, as the school she founded now begins its second century of providing Jewish education to children of the North Shore. ❖

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Martha Newman. Courtesy North Shore Congregation Israel.