

IN PURSUIT OF "THE AMERICAN DREAM"

By W. Dennis Stires

INMIGRANTS FROM EASTERN EUROPE, especially Russia, came to America in the 1880s and '90s in what seemed a mass migration. Leaving their unrelenting hardships behind, they came in pursuit of a better life — "the American Dream." A hundred and more years later we can see the results of their energy and perseverance in the story of a particular family, a story that for us begins in Wayne. Myer Sharraffiski and his brother Joseph had come to Maine from Boston, their port of entry to America, to begin life as pack peddlers.

The life they had left behind is epitomized in the famous 1964 Broadway musical "Fiddler on the Roof," a memorable success with over 3,200 performances in New York alone, and any number of revivals. The "Fiddler" in the musical's title is described as "a metaphor for survival, through tradition and joyfulness, in a life of uncertainty and imbalance." Set in Tsarist Russia in 1905, it is the story of Tevye the milkman and his family, and is based on earlier short stories written by the noted author Sholem Aleichem. At the end, Tevye is seen as the Fiddler, and he and his wife are saving their money to emigrate to America.

Few, however, will know the story of Myer Sharraffiski, a Russian Jewish man who arrived in this country as an immigrant in 1882, so records state, and soon found himself in Maine. In a feature story that in 1957 appeared in the *Lewiston Journal Magazine Section*, Rena Leadbetter McIlroy wrote a two-part description of Wayne village in 1887. In it, Myer Sharraffiski is observed in the village in front of the Wayne Hotel — the hotel that was renamed Pocasset House a few years later:

Oh look! There's Myer Sharraffiski, the little pack-peddler. He won't call here. The Howards (proprietors of the hotel) would object — their guests are hardly the type to patronize him. He's Russian — very polite and speaks English well, considering the time he's been in this country. How the children are crowding around! Just a few pennies will buy trinkets. He often gives to those who haven't any. (A few years later Myer drove through town in a shiny new vehicle filled with merchandise — a boon to busy stay-at-home housewives. A few years later still, the Sharraff Bros. were doing a thriving business in a shiny store in Livermore Falls. Now, instead of Myer going to people, they came to him, remembering his courtesy and kindness of earlier years.)

Rena Leadbetter grew up in Wayne, and later when married lived in Winthrop. In 1887 she was eight years old, and in writing her account may have relied on her memory of Myer the pack peddler. Other pack peddlers were not unknown to the town. In a diary kept by Stillman Howard, proprietor of the Wayne Hotel which the author cites, he notes one day in 1878, "Russian peddler to dinner." Again, in 1883, "A Russian overnight, a pack peddler." Each time, the pack peddler pays for his keep, part in goods and part in cash – as noted on the second occasion, "pd 25 combs, 25 cts to me & suspenders to Ward 25 cts." Ward was Howard's son who managed the hotel's stable, and payment to him may have been for a horse the peddler was fortunate to have, and the horse, too, fed and housed overnight.

It is easy to wonder, records notwithstanding, if one or the other of these earlier pack peddlers might not have been Myer Sharraffiski.

Pack peddlers were a phenomenon of the period, usually associated with those who like Myer Sharraffiski were also newly arrived immigrants from eastern Europe. And usually penniless, speaking little or no English, they were an everyday sight – except on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath – in such places as New York's Lower East Side and Boston's North End. Up and down the streets they went, hawking their wares to similar immigrants who lived in the multi-story tenements which still exist today. In New York at least, the pack peddlers' successors became one of the city's advertised traditions. With their fully loaded push carts or from tiny ground-floor shops, they made for a bustling Sunday afternoon on Orchard and Hester Streets. Now becoming a chic area of boutiques and art galleries, Orchard Street as they knew it is but a memory of time past.

Some were able to move on, become famous in their trade, and such is the story of Levi Strauss. Arriving in this country in the late 1840s, Levi had come from Germany, began life in New York as a pack peddler but who quickly realized he could have greater success with less competition if he took his trade to the countryside – which he did, in what is today the city suburb of Pelham. In a book titled *Mr. Blue Jeans; A Story About Levi Strauss* by Maryann N. Weidt and published in 1990, is told the tale of Levi's humble beginnings, with "a fifty-pound pack on his back" and each night to sleep where chance took him. By the 1870s Levi Strauss had become a household name all across the country, the well known manufacturer of the highly regarded blue jeans with their hallmark copper rivets.

The Sharraffiski legacy is Livermore Falls' largest business block. The surname is subject to various spellings – Sharraffski, or whichever it was it later became, as given in Rena McIlroy's story, Sharraff. By then, as she

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relate, Myer had settled down in Livermore Falls where he and a brother, Joseph, established what became the "Sharaf Bro's"; a successful store which advertised a line of "Dry Goods and Millinery." It was located where the sailor apartments are today. Sharaf is the name by which all later family members are identified.

Brother Joseph we know from Archie P. Richmond who spoke about the 180s in letters written in 1953 and '54, which appeared in Reginald H. Sturtevant's *A History of Livermore* published in 1970:

I can remember Joe Sharaf before I was three years old. At that time we lived in Livermore (west side) on the Prince Hinds place. Mr. Sharaf came along with a pack on his back, and my mother bought a red checkered table cloth of him. I have got it now, and it is in very good condition.



Sharaf Bro's; Livermore Falls; prior to 1898
Courtesy of Livermore/Livermore Falls Historical Society

By 1898, in space rented from John Lamb of Lewiston, Sharaf Bro's second store was located on the corner of Depot and Main Streets, with three floors of merchandise to select from. .

A present-day Sharaf family historian is Joan Starkman, of Newton, Massachusetts, who has provided a wealth of useful information for this story. She has shared major insight into the life of Israel Guy Sharaf who in the mid 1890s arrived in Livermore Falls to become manager of the family's business. As Joan Starkman tells it, he was "born in Kovno, Russia about 1868. Arrived in Boston in 1882 and was naturalized in 1889." With him came his father, Gershon, and on their naturalization papers each is identified as "peddler."

In Livemore Falls Israel Guy Sharaf was among the town's most highly respected citizens. His name repeatedly appears in various early newspaper accounts as well as in Sturtevant's history of Livermore.



Israel Guy Sharaf

A Trustee of the Livermore Falls Banking & Trust Co., 1900

Source: Reginald Sturtevant, *Fiftieth Anniversary,
Livermore Falls Trust Co. 1895-1845, 1945*

Like Wayne at the time, the town fell victim to fires that were both destructive and frequent. In 1898, on September 10 appeared as headline in the *Lewiston Evening Journal* "TOWN SWEEP BY FIRE." Beneath is the subhead, "Livermore Falls Village in Danger of Being Wiped Off the Map." In spite of firefighter help from Lewiston, Auburn and Farmington, the fire raged on, and in days following every detail was covered in depth by the newspaper's reporters. On the first day was noted "The dry goods store owned by Sharaf Brothers is in flames," as was nearly every other building in the center of town. The fire is described as making a clean sweep down the south side as far as Depot Street, "on the corner of which stood the Livermore Falls branch store of Sharaff Bros. of Boston."

Boston, which Israel and Myer entered as immigrants in 1882, was evidently where the family first established themselves in business, a dry goods store which by 1898 was large and successful enough to have what was called a "branch" in Livermore Falls.

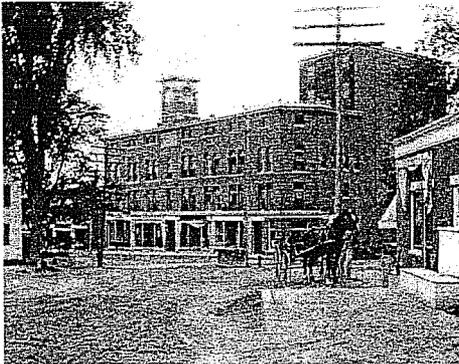
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Events around 1900 in Livermore Falls were devastating to businesses along Depot and Main Streets. Israel Sharaf estimated his loss in the 1898 fire at \$10,000 in merchandise. In the same year a large wooden store was built on Main Street, intended as a temporary structure until a large six-story building could be constructed. "Within less than a year," Sturtevant writes, "on June 21st, 1899, came a second bad fire, which completed the destruction of the Town's main business section which the first fire had begun nine months before. It was a discouraging outlook, and yet at the same time, a golden opportunity to replace all at once a village of flimsy wooden stores and factories, with new, larger and more substantial masonry structures." Photographs of the fire show no remains of Sharaf's third store.

Plans for the new brick building were completed and Sharaf store #4 soon became reality in 1900. At the time, the *Lewiston Evening Journal* commented, "As one passes through Livermore Falls, he is impressed by the fine, new blocks going up to replace the old ones that were destroyed by fire. Notable is the five-story building on Main Street, called the Sharaf Block, which will contain the Bank, Post Office, Opera House, Court Room, and large stores," and among the stores was Sharaf Bros. George Coombs, a prominent architect of Lewiston (now Harriman Associates of Auburn), designed the structure as well as other business blocks and private homes in town.



The Sharaf Block, 1901

Courtesy of Livermore/Livermore Falls Historical Society

As Sturtevant describes the Opera House, "The new 'Music Hall' in the Sharaf Building was indeed an ambitious design for a small community.

With its large balcony extending around three sides, it could easily seat twelve hundred people; and its vast stage reached up another story higher, to accommodate the raising and lowering of stage sets and scenery. The seats on the main floor were removable, to leave a clear floor for dancing or roller skating."

We are always ready to please you with our line of

Dry Goods and Millinery

Goods are always as represented and one price to all

SHARAF BROS.

LIVERMORE FALLS, MAINE.

Advertisement, Livermore Town Register, 1904

"Along with the physical changes," Sturtevant further notes, "a new generation of young, ambitious and able men were emerging as the new leaders." Israel Guy Sharaf was among them.

In 1906 the *Lewiston Evening Journal* announced a wedding in Brooklyn:

Livermore Falls, Me. June 18 (special) — Mr. I. G. Sharaf of this place and Miss Emily Morse of Brooklyn, N.Y. were united in marriage Wednesday evening at the home of the bride's sister, Mrs. Spitz of Brooklyn. . . . The bride comes from one of the best families of New Jersey, and is a most charming and cultured young lady, while the groom is one of Livermore Falls' best known citizens. . . .

John Guy Coolidge, who grew up in North Livermore, at first worked in Israel's dry goods store, then purchased the business around 1908, a business which continued throughout the 1900s in the same location.

The town's citizens awoke on Friday, May 13, 1910 to hear shocking news. Sharaf's store #4 was on fire! The *Lewiston Evening Journal* reported on that day, "the 'beautiful Sharaf Block,' towering above every business block at Livermore falls, and from which the business life of the entire community seemingly pulsatd, was almost completely gutted by fire, with a loss of \$150,000."

The building had occupied 126 feet along Main Street, was 92 feet deep on Water Street, and was 100 feet high. As seen in the above photograph, the six-story section at the right contained the Music Hall and two-story storage area for stage scenery. The total cost: \$70,000. As the *Lewiston Journal's* news report of May 13, 1910 notes, "The first story of Sharaf block contained the Post Office, J. Guy Coolidge's dry and fancy goods store,"

along with three other stores as well as “the banking rooms of the Livermore Falls Banking and Trust Company.”

“Mr. I.G. Sharaf, the owner, is in Boston, and what his plans are for the future the *Journal* can only guess. That he or someone else will rebuild is quite probable; but that Sharaf Block will ever again be reproduced in all its grandeur and architectural beauty, no one dares hope nor expect....”

Sharaf sold the remains to the Bank, which rebuilt the structure, omitting the Music Hall.



The Sharaf Block after the fire in 1910
Courtesy of Livermore/Livermore Falls Historical Society

Israel Sharaf immediately embarked on a new and different venture; he took over a failing local business that manufactured suit cases and trunks. As Sturtevant relates, “the business was taken over by I.G. Sharaf, under the name of Standard Suit Case Company, making light weight dress-suit cases. Sharaf employed ten persons and produced two hundred cases per day, using matting imported from Japan. He occupied, in this business, the entire second floor of the factory building and, according to *The Lewiston Journal* of May 11, 1912, the business was showing constant increase.” Israel, however, soon returned to Boston, where he lived until his death in 1933.

Today, as Livermore Falls’ largest building, the restored structure continues an integral part of the community. Donations of over \$12,000 were gathered to restore the building’s town clock made by Seth Thomas. Initially, in 1903 at a cost of \$1,200, the funds to purchase the timepiece had been donated by the Oliver P. Thompson family of Jay. It was installed by Davilla S. Thompson, clock salesman, jeweler, and optician, who had developed a unique machine to make and grind eye glasses. The new Board of Trade gathered donations to restore the clock once again after the 1910

fire. This campaign was led by Oliver's brother, Aaron Smith Thompson. The present-day "clock doctor," James Bryant of Wayne, restarted the historic timepiece at a special celebration on Friday, January 11, 2008, an event which had extensive news coverage in the *Lewiston Sun Journal* and the town's weekly *Livermore Falls Advertiser*.



James Bryant restarting the historic clock
Author's photograph

The building and clock are an integral part of the community. At the same time, they are visible reminders of what once stood on the same site brought about by the Sharaf family whose ingenuity and enterprise made it happen. Myer Sharraffiski and his brother Joe, like Tevye the milkman undoubtedly knew their share of "uncertainty and imbalance," but they too, survived. To Israel Guy Sharaf, who it appears was their nephew or cousin, they were able to hand over a local business which after the humblest of beginnings was reaching a pinnacle of success, ending up in the "beautiful Sharaf Block."

Of Myer Sharraffiski, whose appearance in Wayne begins this story there is little further trace. In 1900, however, the U.S. Census identifies Meyer Sharafsky, still another variant spelling of the family surname, who with his wife Rose and two sons were living in Brooklyn.

Israel Guy's father, Gershon, is believed to have been a brother or uncle to Myer and Joseph, and of Gershon and his family a great deal more is known. In 1888 after the family's arrival in Boston, the entire family posed for the studio photograph below. Seated in the center are Gershon and his wife Bertha, surrounded by their seven children.



From left to right: standing are Israel, Anna, Bessie, Morris, Ada
 Seated are David, Bertha, Gershon, Ralph
 Courtesy of Joan Starkman

They were a large family, and of the children, David, the eldest, became the grandfather of Joan Starkman. Morris was the grandfather of Justin Sharaf, a successful Certified Public Accountant and Tax Advisor now living in Raymond, Maine. Israel's grandson James graduated from Harvard, and later he became an attorney for Harvard College. Ralph's daughter Irene is no doubt the family member best known to an American public.

Irene Sharaf became famous for her award-winning costume designs for both Broadway stage and Hollywood film productions. Her five Oscar awards included "An American in Paris" 1952, "The King and I" 1957, "West Side Story" 1961, "Cleopatra" 1963, and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" 1966. Other awards came to her, and in 1993, the TDF/Irene Sharaf Lifetime Achievement Award was named in her honor, and she was its first recipient.

From Sharraffiski to Sharaf, beginning as pack peddlers and moving on, as a family they achieved in full what they came for -- the promise of "the American Dream."