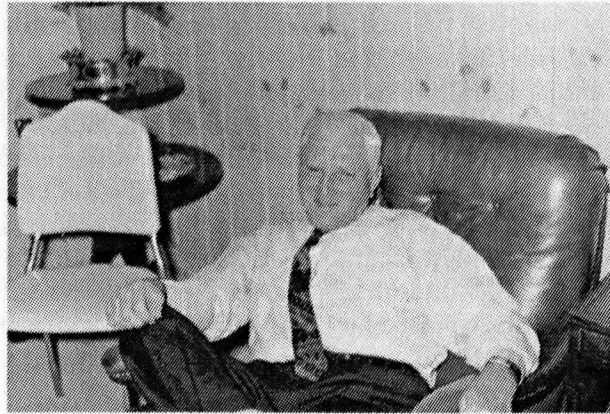




*Essie Isaacson*



*Sam Isaacson*

## **Sam Isaacson**

Sam was the son of Harry (Zvi Hirsh ben Yankov) and Eva Alpern (Chaya Chava), but he must have felt part of most of the Jewish families in Auburn. Not only did his parents board newcomers, but there was a great deal of intermarriage between cousins and former neighbors from Krasne, Lithuania, and Radoshkovitz. Harry came to Auburn when he was in his twenties, with the help

of his brother who was already settled there. Sam married Essie Taylor, not a cousin, whose parents owned Taylor Farms, a resort in Windham, Maine. They had two children, Natalie (Woolf) and Earl. When I interviewed Sam he was living in his daughter's home as was his son-in-law's mother. Each family owned an apartment in West Palm Beach, Florida. He had six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. They spent winters in Florida since 1937.

Sam's father escaped from the Russian Army, where he suffered anti-Semitism, by fleeing to Germany. When he arrived in Auburn, he was greeted by the Auburn Committee. Because he had no money, the committee bought him a horse and wagon to start life as a peddler. He bartered fruit in exchange for scrap, bags, bottles, etc. For instance, a bunch of bananas could bring one dollar; a hand of bananas was worth 25 cents but no money was involved. He bartered with vegetable growers ten to fifteen miles around Auburn. He was not observant, but he knew enough Hebrew to help found a synagogue and served as president of both the congregation and the Chevra Kadisha (a burial society).

The uncle who brought Sam's father to America was in the clothing business. When he died he left a fortune—\$10,000. His widow, Yashiel Abraham, bought a tenement house and installed a bathhouse. Since nobody had a bathtub, the ten-cent charge was paid until it was obvious that the hot water only lasted for the early bathers. She was one of two sisters who married two brothers. The couples never met until the day of the double wedding. "It is questionable if this was a love affair," said Sam.

Sam's older brother, Benjamin, was nine years old when his father sent him to Hebron, a private high school. After he graduated from Bates College, he rode a horse to Salt Lake City and played his banjo for a living. Sam's father hated peddling; he went to Boise, Idaho, to visit relatives who might help him start a business. This trip failed, but he came back satisfied to go into the junk business.

Sam spoke enthusiastically about Benjamin, who never had a music lesson but could play the piano and any wind instrument as well as the violin. He went to Bangor to attend law school, but he was restless. He spent two years here, two years there, and finally became a ballroom dancer. In Old Orchard Beach he married an Italian girl who later died in childbirth. Then he and

Sam became scrap metal merchants. Benjamin founded the Cedarbrook Foundry in Newfoundland, which Sam later bought from him. This company provided machinery for the paper mills. When they started in 1941, Newfoundland (an island whose main industry was fishing) had only ten to twelve Jewish families, primarily young people hoping to be admitted to the U.S. Most of the Jewish families left the area by 1960. "They prospered and moved out when they retired. The synagogue was sold and proceeds went to United Jewish Appeal." Sam's son-in-law goes up two or three times a year, but it is very discouraging; seven hundred people are unemployed, and the British are making newsprint. It looks like the steel mill will be phased out soon. "Somebody will pick it up," surmised Sam.

In Auburn the synagogue was attended by everyone, religious or not, because it housed the social life of the community. "In those days when there was a holiday, you knew there was a holiday. You got a new suit, new shoes, a Buster Brown collar—you knew the holiday was coming soon." At Sam's bar mitzvah, Rabbi Segal from Lewiston officiated. His five sons and five daughters graduated from Bates College; he had come from Canada as a Hebrew teacher.

Sam's younger brother, Harris, went to Georgetown Law School and became the second lawyer to practice law in Lewiston, following Ben Berman. "We had a lot of fun with the old-timers; they had wit—great characters—great sense of humor. They all made a good living; if they didn't, there was something radically wrong somewhere—physically unable, or they couldn't think straight. The opportunity was there just as it is today. Now the opportunities are as great as ever or greater. You have to have a good background—high school is not enough." His daughter graduated from Indiana University; his son from Miami University in Ohio.

Sam was born in the hospital, but most people used a midwife. He says he was not a good student, but he graduated from high school. He enjoyed peddling bananas with his father. He still attends synagogue on High Holy Days. He likes to tell a story about Rabbi Berent. This rabbi socialized with his Catholic neighbors and practiced brotherhood by teaching priests. Once he attended a banquet with Father Drinen where ham was served. "Why don't you eat the ham?" asked the priest.

"I'm surprised at you. You know Jewish people don't eat ham."

"You ought to try it. It tastes good," urged the priest.

"By the way, how's your wife?" asked the rabbi.

"You know I'm a priest. I'm not allowed to marry."

The rabbi replied, "You ought to try it. It tastes good."

"We made a good living during the Depression. There was a certain drive—a routine you fixed for yourself. I was never interested in money—my concern was for humanity. I could have accumulated more money. Then, a dollar was a dollar. I had a good many partners. I always gave them more than their share. They helped me; they were working; I would bring them in." He is famous in Lewiston for giving each business to the partner when he left. At one time he had ten stores. Sam traveled throughout Maine and eastern Canada, buying property and selling when he lost interest in the real estate. "During the Depression you made money. Everything was cheap. RCA had a receiving and sending unit that sent messages to Europe from Belfast on the Penobscot River. On the hill was a residence, a two-story brick building with six sleeping rooms and six bathrooms that had tile ceilings and sides. In addition, the whole place had auxiliary power. I made the ridiculous offer of \$3,500. The broker said 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' I went to my brother, Harris the lawyer, and borrowed \$1,000 for a deposit. Three days later it was mine." The taxes owed were \$2,800, but after Sam stripped the 300 telegraph sets, he sold the whole place to the mayor for \$10,000. The city could then build an armory and town hall. "It was worth a million.

"I was buying a foundry and machine shop in Bath for a song. Now it is worth \$400,000. It was a lot of fun. A family in Boston bought the Bangor-Aroostook Railroad with twenty feet on each side of the tracks with stations and equipment for \$5 million. It could be liquidated for \$10 million. You used to be able to do everything with a handshake—you can't do that today.

"I bought a Peavey business from the widow. He made long-handled picks the men used to dislodge logs in the pond. We had a group of men in a stock-buying club, and each fall we had a banquet with the wives at the Martha Washington Inn. My father owned a car, though he never drove—he had an employee drive when he took all the children to Laconia, New Hampshire."

Sam's life did not include "people like George Lewis, a character with a bad reputation. He took advantage, like what is going on with deregulation—it's dog eat dog. People are exchanging *paper*, not money. There will be a rude awakening—somebody

is going to get hurt somewhere along the line. Conglomerates are picking up small industries, sapping the assets and throwing hundreds of people out of work. They talk about imports hurting America. I know a shoe man complaining about his business hurt by imports, but what is he driving? A Mercedes! Look at my son-in-law selling General Motors products, and he drives a Volvo. My son does the same thing. That's not good thinking. My son has a gift shop, the Sharlane store in Auburn that has a little bit of everything. If you have something at the right price, people will find you."