



Leadville Purim, 1879-1898

During Leadville's late nineteenth century boom period, residents had occasion to enjoy all manner of amusements. While the usual ribald mining town entertainments—cribs, saloons, and the like—were readily available, Leadville's Jewish doyennes provided other more respectable means for social engagement. By 1879 the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Association (HLBA) established itself as a charitable institution and organizer of middle-class social life. As in other parts of the country, such charitable Jewish organizations helped to strengthen communities, provided much needed social services to the needy—often without regard to religion or race—and cultivated gentiles' good will towards Jews. The HLBA's annual Purim ball, held from 1879 to 1898, was a popular fundraising occasion that for years was regarded as "the event of the season in Leadville."¹ Indeed the ball's popularity extended well beyond Leadville and we have found no evidence of public Purim balls being held anywhere else in Colorado at the time. In 1886, Colorado Governor Eaton and his wife even traveled from Denver to attend the affair.²

In terms of its observance among American Jews and familiarity to non-Jews, Purim ranks well behind the High Holy Days and Passover. Yet for the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Purim was unquestionably the Jewish holiday most likely to be known among Leadville's gentile residents thanks to the annual ball.

Purim is a celebration of Jewish salvation from Haman's efforts in the 4th century BCE to kill all Jewish subjects of the Persian Empire. Queen Esther, whose Jewish heritage was unknown to the king, helped to foil the plot along with her cousin Mordecai. The Book of Esther instructs Jews to engage in feasting and provide gifts to the poor to

commemorate the event. Other customs associated with Purim include drunkenness and masquerade, pursuits the gentle HLBA understood would appeal to Leadville residents.

Lavish Purim balls such as those held in Leadville, Colorado were not without precedent. Perhaps the largest and most elaborate among those held in the US were those organized by the Purim Association of New York, which was active from 1862 to 1902. The New York Association was formed during the early days of the Civil War by a small group of young men from well-to-do backgrounds who endeavored to keep the affair exclusive.³ The philanthropic Purim Association raised approximately \$306,000⁴ over the duration of its existence helping build good will towards American Judaism among both Jews and non-Jews. Over time the event became more and more dissociated from its religious implications such that by 1902 the Association's final event was held at the Metropolitan Opera House as simply a ball with a ballet and tableaux.⁵ Despite the New York Purim ball's eventual dissipation of religious implications, the early days of Gotham's Purim Association were a source of inspiration for Jewish populations in other US cities. In 1869, one could attend a Purim ball in Boston, Albany, Baltimore, Chicago, New Orleans, and San Francisco.⁶ By the time Leadville held its first Purim ball in 1879, a trend had been established.

Like its New York counterpart, Leadville's Purim ball emphasized charity and patriotism. Yet the Leadville Purim ball differed from the New York affair in several significant ways. First of all, the Leadville ball was decidedly a masquerade party, or *bal masque*, and was described as such in the local newspapers.⁷ While the elegant young men of



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New York wanted their ball to follow Jewish tradition and be a masquerade, state law prohibited the use of disguise and their appeals for exception to Mayor George Opdyke were ineffective.⁸

Observing Purim through masquerade has been traced to Italian Jews in the late fifteenth century and it has been suggested was done in imitation of pre-Lenten Venetian carnival.⁹ Because the New York Purim Association could not invite its guests to attend in disguise, their occasion was called a “fancy dress ball.”¹⁰ In the late nineteenth century, fancy dress balls in general were a popular bourgeois entertainment in the US and Canada. Such balls emphasized dress to enhance one’s self rather than dress to disguise and so masks were prohibited.¹¹ A de-emphasis on disguise and costume at fancy dress balls likely reflects Protestant organizers’ preference for less conspicuous shows of consumption as might be associated with an elaborate costume worn only once. Nonetheless, attendees wore expensive gowns and wigs to suggest historical or literary figures. At the 1862 New York Purim fancy dress ball, for example, people wore costumes that did not require masks: there were soldiers, courtiers, and a Little Red Riding Hood as well as a Hamlet.¹² In the latter part of the nineteenth century, large masquerade events would have been chiefly the domain of Catholic Mardi Gras in New Orleans and perhaps that city’s Purim balls as well. Being able to hold a masquerade made the Leadville event exceptional.

Leadville, Colorado was without many of the legal and social constraints that prevailed in more established parts of the country such as New York. Indeed masquerade was a primary source of appeal for the annual event and provisions were made to facilitate the procurement of costumes, which in some years were awarded prizes. Being removed from the large cities and nestled in the

High Rockies did not diminish the excitement and preparations that went into planning what to wear. In 1884, a week before the festivities, the *Leadville Daily Herald* noted that Mrs. Leichtweise of East Sixth[sic] Street had ordered and received a consignment of “new and novel costumes.”¹³ The following year, the *Leadville Daily Herald* remarked that as early as January women had placed orders back east for Purim costumes and dresses.¹⁴

Another way in which the Leadville Purim ball was distinctive is that it was organized by the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Association, many of whom were members of the Reform congregation Temple Israel. Reform rabbis in the late nineteenth century did not make great provisions for Purim’s observance and indeed in New York, some took Reform Judaism to task for spoiling the fun by not highlighting its place on the Jewish calendar.¹⁵ The Temple Israel congregation, while Reform, was in the unique position of having no rabbi who could advise against celebrating Purim.

The third way Leadville Purim seems to have differed from balls held in other cities was in terms of its inclusivity. While ladies received admission by invitation and gentlemen were able to purchase tickets from committee members,¹⁶ there was a sense that people from most walks of life could attend. The annual ball received coverage in the local newspapers and advised community members in advance of the event that tickets could be purchased at the door.¹⁷

Ladies with invitations could enter for free and, given the event’s popularity, it should come as no surprise that there were rumors of women using forged invitations to gain entry in 1885.¹⁸ Given the volume of “working women” in Leadville, one wonders if these might not have been the ladies who forged invitations where none were issued. Evidently racist, anti-Semites seem also to have been tolerated. In 1883, N.F. Cleary, a lawyer and



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campaign editor for the *Democrat* was allowed admission despite his having lately replied to someone who mistook him for a Jew: “I’d rather be taken for a nigger than a damned Jew.”¹⁹ An unnamed local Jewish merchant confronted Cleary at the ball but the incident seems to have caused scarcely a ripple in an otherwise remarkably tolerant and integrated community.

The themes of charity and patriotism coalesced magnificently in 1887 when the HLBA organized what was likely the most extravagant ball held in the history of the city’s annual event. The occasion presented an opportunity to honor Jewish tradition while publicly demonstrating assimilation to the American way of life in an interfaith environment. Unlike in previous years when the masquerade was held at City Hall, that year it migrated to the Tabor Opera House. People dressed as “Mexican,” “Cowboy,” “Sailor,” and “Uncle Sam.”²⁰ Patriotic costumes remained popular over the years and included “Uncle Sam,”²¹ “George Washington,”²² “Martha Washington,”²³ and the abstract “America.”²⁴ Above the auditorium’s stage in 1887 was hung a massive Star of David constructed from evergreen branches. The space was festooned with blue streamers, bunting, and banners in patriotic red, white, and blue.²⁵

Leadville’s Purim was both a Jewish holiday that emphasized disguise and a demonstration of middle-class American life. The costumes reflected such hybridity. For example, *il domino* is a classic hooded cape costume associated with eighteenth century Venetian carnival that, without the mask, enjoyed popularity at elegant non-Jewish fancy dress balls. In 1895, no fewer than eight Purim guests—men and women—dressed as dominoes.²⁶ The costume had the advantage of allowing one to emphasize one’s rich attire beneath the cape while remaining in the spirit of the occasion.

Allegorical costumes were popular at fancy dress balls, a trend that extended to Leadville’s Purim ball as demonstrated by “America” making an appearance in 1887. That same year Emma Kahn was an “Evening Star”²⁷ and in 1895 Mrs. Ed Jackson attended the ball as “Night.”²⁸ Miss Emma Kahn seems to have been partial to abstract concept costumes. In 1885 she dressed as a “Snow Storm.”²⁹

People played with identity in other ways. For a number of Leadville residents, the bustling Western town probably offered first encounters with the “other,” which became sources of inspiration for costumes that newspapers described as “Chinaman,” “Negress,” and the aforementioned “Mexican.” Purim emphasizes disguise and so while such costumes might be abhorrent to many twenty-first century Americans, it is important to recall the historical context for these occasions requiring partygoers to conceal their identities. Leadville was a relatively diverse and tolerant place, which likely contributed to the occurrence of race-inspired costumes representing novelty in the town if not cultural sensitivity.

Purim emphasizes playfulness and parody, which certainly came through in other costume choices. Jewish attendees in particular seem to have delighted in the parodic aspects of the occasion. In 1885, M.J. “Max” Monheimer won the prize for most comical costume when he attended the ball as “Fat Boy on Skates.”³⁰ In 1895, the *Herald Democrat* reported that L. Hoffman, Dr. Sol Kahn, Alf. Hoffman, and R. Rosendorf all attended the ball dressed as monks.³¹ Such group costumes were popular in other years as well. In 1885, Ed. Levy, J.L. Stern, A. Heller and A. Shoenberg attended as a group of “four Chinamen” whose trade was “washes, washes.”³² Other group costume concepts that year included collaboration between members of the Shoenberg, Metz, Schiff, and Goldsmith clans to become an “Italian organ



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grinder and family,” which was reportedly well received. Another group costume was the abstract “Leadville.” “Leadville” included participants representing “Silver,” “Gold,” and “Iron.” The costume seems to have been a kind of float built on a cart, which included a series of tunnels. The “Leadville” concept was attributed to Herman Schultz.³³

Perhaps the most striking costume parodies seen at Leadville’s Purim balls were those involving cross-dressing. Popular area newspapers documented cross-dressing in 1882, 1885, 1887, and 1895. These included Robert Arons as an “old woman,”³⁴ “Gov. Loeb” as “negress,”³⁵ Mrs. I. Baer as “Santa Claus,”³⁶ Miss Murphy as “drummer boy,”³⁷ and J.O. Heimberger as a “washerwoman.”³⁸ On at least two other occasions, ball attendees cross-dressed though it is unclear whether they were Jewish, which suggests a trend of a sort.³⁹ While cross-dressing on Purim is not strictly sanctioned or prohibited according to Jewish law, among assimilated Leadville Jews the practice may have presented the ultimate in hilarity by creating chaos to temporarily disrupt the social order. In 1887, the Purim festivities included a tableau of thirteen pretty young women representing as many nations whose appeal was further enhanced by the “Kate Castleton guards” comprised of ten young men dressed as “Quakeresses and armed with muskets.”⁴⁰ (Kate Castleton was a popular entertainer of the day.) After the tableau, the guards executed a drill exhibition that was no doubt amusing. In terms of its ludic and universal appeal, Leadville Purim was likely more on par with free-willing Mardi Gras than elitist East Coast fancy dress balls where cross-dressing was not tolerated.⁴¹

At that same legendary 1887 Purim ball held at the Tabor Opera House, the lavishness of the occasion included a thirteen piece orchestra and the construction of a dance platform over the

auditorium’s seating that measured 35’ x 65’ and had two wings of 15’ x 30’ each. Japanese lanterns, gas jets, and three electric lights ensured that the space was well lit. That year the committee members also served as floor managers and included Jacob Bernheimer, Isidor Heller, Sigmund Simon, Fred Butler, Charles Sands, Abe Bergerman, and Simon Schloss. The men wore identifying white satin badges, which had been embroidered in gold by Mrs. Emma Kahn. That night the party lasted until dawn and was considered a great success. Planning for the momentous occasion had taken such effort that it was held nearly a month after Purim, which fell on March 10th that year.⁴²

While 1887 was perhaps the most lavish Purim ball, balls held in other years were rarely small affairs.⁴³ In 1885, for example, the event was held at City Hall, when proceeds were to go towards “liquidating the indebtedness on the New Temple Israel, lately erected in our city.”⁴⁴ The Great Western orchestra provided music and a sit-down dinner was held for 250 guests. Banners adorned either end of the hall and read: “Welcome to Our Annual Purim Festival” and “May Our New Temple be an Ornament to Our City.” That year Mrs. I. Hauser won the prize for handsomest costume, which consisted of “a scarlet silk velvet cushion with cologne bottles to match.”⁴⁵ While no prize was given to men for this category, the *Leadville Daily Herald* pronounced Mr. F.A. Morse, the telegraph operator at Tennessee Pass, the winner had there been such a prize. His “Spanish prince” creation was constructed entirely of buckskin and made resplendent with embroidery done by Mr. Morse’s own hands.⁴⁶ Flowers and evergreens were used to decorate the space. Perhaps even more remarkable than the flowers shipped into town while Leadville was still under snow, was the area behind the music stand referred to in the *Leadville Daily Herald* as the “ladies boudoir” furnished with “oriental magnificence,” which included sofas, ottomans, divans, paintings, and



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engravings.⁴⁷ Damask curtains separated the area from the main hall leaving one to speculate on the area's masked activities. In addition to the fun, there was a religious component. Before the evening's unmasking took place, a series of six tableaux were staged depicting the biblical events associated with Purim festival. Among those to perform were Miss Sophia Stone, Miss L. Blumberg, Miss May Murphy, Mr. S. Harris, Mr. A. Bergerman, Mr. Lee Kohn, Mr. Sam May, and Mr. S. Blumberg.⁴⁸

Leadville Purim and Children

Masquerade and other activities involving the upending of social norms tend to appeal greatly to children and undoubtedly Leadville's annual Purim event was something local youngsters looked forward to. Leadville's Purim Ball was oriented towards adults yet children were not entirely excluded.

In 1882, at least one child, "Master Lee Loeb," was present at the Purim ball. According to newspaper reports, Leadville merchant luminary J.H. Monheimer awarded Master Loeb the prize for most comical costume. Curiously, the newspaper does not describe his costume nor does it provide his age. We do know, however that he may have been in attendance with D(avid?) Loeb, who was attired as a domino and "Gov. Loeb," who was a negress.⁴⁹

In 1885, children under the age of thirteen were not allowed to attend the festivities. Instead a separate event at City Hall was held for the little ones several weeks later. They enjoyed themselves between 6:00 and 9:00 in the evening and were sent home at 9:30 so that the adults could dance for the remainder of the night. Proceeds from this event supported the Hebrew Sunday School.⁵⁰

Leadville Jews in Attendance at 1887 Purim Ball

Ella Kahn
Mr. and Mrs. S. Shoenberg
Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Bergerman
Mr. and Mrs. A. Shayer
Mr. and Mrs. M. Mankus
Mr. and Mrs. C.T. Greenfield
Mr. and Mrs. M. Kahn
Mr. and Mrs. Sam Berry
Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Cohn
Mrs. Sandusky
Mrs. Rosenstock
Jake Goldsmith
Jacob Bernheimer
Simon Schloss
F.H. Meyer
Louis Cohn
A. Baer
J. Shoenberg
Sam Mayer
Jacob Sands
Mike Mayer
I.Baer



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Want to help Temple Israel expand its documentation of Leadville Purim, the High Rockies' best party in the late nineteenth century? So far we have located only newspaper reports of the annual event and continue to search for ephemera, photographs, costumes, etc. Perhaps you have come across the following:

- Souvenir menu cards printed for the 1884 Purim ball.
- Invitations.
- Souvenir programs distributed at the 1887 ball.⁵¹
- Photographs. Fancy dress balls from the same era were well documented in studio portrait photographs. Despite the presence of several photographers in Leadville, we have found no photos of people dressed for Purim.
- 1887 white satin badges embroidered with gold and worn by the ball's floor managers.

Inquiries, anecdotes, and comments may be sent to longled@longled.cnc.net

¹ *Leadville Daily Herald* 1/6/1885, p. 4.

² *Leadville Daily/Evening Chronicle* 2/22/1886, p. 2.

³ Goodman, Philip. "The Purim Association of the City of New York (1862-1902)" in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, New York, no. 50 (1950), p. 142.

⁴ Goodman, p. 164.

⁵ Goodman, p. 161.

⁶ Goodman, p. 166.

⁷ *Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle* 2/22/1886, p.2.

⁸ Goodman, p. 145. Interestingly, New York penal code 240.35 is still quite restrictive when it comes to wearing a mask or other disguise in public.

⁹ Goodman citing Goodman (1949), footnote 3, p. 136.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ C. Cooper and L. Welters. "Brilliant and Instructive Spectacles: Canada's Fancy Dress Balls, 1876-1898" in *Dress*, vol.22 (1995), p.14.

¹² Goodman, p. 145.

¹³ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/9/1884, p.4.

¹⁴ *Leadville Daily Herald* 1/6/1885, p. 4.

¹⁵ Goodman citing 1896 *Jewish Messenger* essay, p. 160.

¹⁶ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/9/1884, p.4.

¹⁷ *Herald Democrat* 3/1/1893, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle* 2/22/1886, p .2.

¹⁹ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/24/1883, p. 4.

²⁰ *Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle* 3/30/1887, p. 3.

²¹ *Herald Democrat* 3/14/1895, p. 8.

²² *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1882, p. 1; *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.



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²³ *Herald Democrat* 3/14/1895, p. 8.

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle* 3/30/1887, p. 3.

²⁶ *Herald Democrat* 3/14/1895, p. 8.

²⁷ *Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle* 3/10/1887, p. 3.

²⁸ *Herald Democrat* 3/14/1895, p. 8.

²⁹ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.

³⁰ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.

³¹ *Herald Democrat* 3/14/1895, p. 8.

³² *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1882, p. 1.

³⁵ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1882, p. 1.

³⁶ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.

³⁷ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1882, p. 1.

³⁸ *Herald Democrat* 3/14/1895, p. 8.

³⁹ According to the *Carbonate Chronicle* (4/4/1887), Miss Cora Rogers dressed as a “jockey” and Alfred Seabrook dressed as a “negress” in 1887. While it seems clear that both Rogers and Seabrook were cross-dressed, it is uncertain whether they were in blackface as their respective races are unknown. Certainly blackface, through the application of burnt cork, was a popular form of vaudeville entertainment at the time particularly among Jewish and Irish performers. Indeed David Levy attended the 1885 Purim ball as a “Nigger Singer,” which suggests local familiarity with contemporary iconographic stereotypes, *Leadville Daily Herald* (3/5/1885, p. 4). At the time blackface was even taken up by African-Americans, sometimes to appear as white people in blackface or for lighter skinned blacks to appear more “authentic.” Since Kentucky Derby jockeys in 1887 were likely to be African-American, it is possible Miss Rogers was both cross-dressed and in blackface. For more on blackface in the late nineteenth century, see Brian Siebert’s *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

⁴⁰ *Carbonate Chronicle* 4/4/1887, p. 2.

⁴¹ Cooper and Welters, p.14.

⁴² *Carbonate Chronicle* 4/4/1887, p. 2.

⁴³ No ball was thrown in 1897. That year a small private tea was held instead. *Herald Democrat* 3/7/1897, p. 5.

⁴⁴ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.

⁴⁵ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1885, p. 4.

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/5/1885, p. 4.

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1882, p. p. 1.

⁵⁰ *Leadville Daily Herald* 3/7/1885, p. 4.

⁵¹ *Carbonate Chronicle* 3/28/1887, p. 1.