Judaeic scholar Norman Stillman had visited the University of Oklahoma twice in years past. While he was impressed with the beautiful campus and the people he met, pulling up roots and joining the OU faculty never crossed his mind—"never in my wildest dreams," he admits.

Not that Jewish studies are alien to America’s heartland. Centers of study exist in Texas, Colorado and Missouri. But traditionally, the hotbed for Jewish studies has been the Washington-to-Boston corridor, with most new activity found on the West Coast.

OU certainly has areas of nationally acknowledged prominence, most notably meteorology and petroleum engineering, and some of its library holdings, including the Western History and History of Science collections, are top drawer. However, the surprisingly stately university on the prairie did not seem the most likely location for an internationally respected expert on Judaeic and Arabic history to continue his academic career.

After all, Stillman is a native New Yorker, accustomed to the cultural offerings of the East Coast and a close involvement with a thriving Jewish community. He and his wife, Yedida, were well-established faculty members at the State University of New York at Binghamton, having built a reputable Jewish studies department over the past 23 years with more than 1,000 students enrolled each semester.

But the University of Oklahoma was offering Stillman an endowed chair in a well-regarded history department. If appointed to the newly established Schusterman/Josey Chair in Judaeic History, endowed by Charles and Lynn Schusterman of Tulsa in honor of their fathers, Sam Schusterman and Harold I. Josey.

Stillman finds, to his great relief,
Historians Norman and Yedida Stillman came to Norman from the State University of New York at Binghamton where they had built a well-respected Jewish studies department over the past 23 years. While both are members of OU's history department faculty, Yedida is currently teaching both biblical and modern Hebrew on a temporary basis.

that his repertoire of jokes and anecdotes works just as well in Oklahoma classrooms as they did in New York.

The Stillmans were warmly welcomed to the state by Charles and Lynn Josey Schusterman, the Tulsa couple who endowed the Schusterman/Josey chair in memory of their fathers. The Schustermans are longtime supporters of OU and active in U.S. and international Jewish life. Charles Schusterman is founder and chairman of Samson Investment Company, the largest independent oil and gas producer headquartered in Oklahoma.

The Stillman family has affiliated with the Norman Jewish community, composed mostly of University faculty and their families, with services and social events held at the local Hillel Foundation. Stillman has introduced a traditional Sabbath service once a month that is quite well attended.

Shortly after they arrived in Norman, the Stillmans were delighted to learn that violinist Itzhak Perlman was the next visiting artist scheduled to perform with the Oklahoma City Philharmonic; they decided the state was not a cultural void after all. The quality of OU theater and music offerings backed this conclusion.

The city of Norman is actually more accessible to travel than upstate New York, especially in winter, Stillman notes. The Oklahoma City airport is less than 30 minutes up the interstate and seldom closed by bad weather, a major selling point to the veteran traveler. In March Stillman flew to London to keynote an international conference on Muslim-Jewish relations, organized by the Maimonides Foundation, the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies and Tel Aviv University's Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies.

“It was a moving experience,” Stillman told the Jewish Chronicle following his address. “Jews and Muslims, people from Israel and Arab countries, are talking about Islamic-Jewish relations in a dispassionate, academic setting—which is as it should be. It shows how far things have come.”

He admits that some people saw “the world as caving in” in the wake of the terrorist attacks in Israel, but Stillman remains optimistic. “People should not lose heart. There’s good reason to hope for the future.”

The Stillmans are even more optimistic about their future in their new home. What they enjoy most about their new environs is the people.

“I'm very impressed by the friendliness of people,” Norman Stillman says. “There's a degree of civility here that is missing back East. And I've found little of the demoralization and financial and social problems so common in the East.”

Stillman is a board member for the National Association of Jewish Studies, which has held its annual convention in Boston for the past 27 years. He thinks it is time for a change—and has suggested the August group schedule its next convention at OU.

The OU Norman campus already is the new home for the association’s journal, considered the leading journal for Jewish studies in the English language. As its editor, Stillman was able to bring the publication with him.

The energetic Stillman has proposed that the brand new OU Judaic Studies Program be expanded into a regional center. To that end, he is seeking funding for a library endowment. The Schustermans have offered to establish a challenge grant to help raise an endowment for a visiting Israeli professorship.

The phone is ringing with invitations to speak. Students are dropping by. His new suite of offices will soon be completed. Things definitely are going well for the transplanted professor.

“My kids say they haven’t seen me looking this content in a long time,” he says. —Judith Wall