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Ella Robinson,  
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Life and Experiences of an  
Indian Territory Business Man,  
Joseph Sondheimer.

By Samuel Sondheimer, 1312 Boston, Muskogee, Okla.

Joseph Sondheimer was born in Germany of Jewish parents in 1840. In 1848 at the age of eight years, he came alone to the United States. He went immediately to Baltimore, Maryland, where he found friends. At that early age he started out to make a living and maintain himself, by doing any tasks that a small boy was able to perform. A little later he moved to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, where he grew to young manhood. Being possessed of a real pioneer spirit, he started westward, stopping at St. Louis where he engaged in the mercantile business.

During the Civil War he followed the Army through the south, dealing in merchandise. At the close of the war, being allured to a new and undeveloped country, again, he pushed farther westward and came to Fort Gibson in 1867. Seeing a marvelous opportunity to launch what he saw as a marvelous enterprise, he began dealing in hides, furs, pelts, and pecans.

The Creek Agency located about four miles northwest of the present site of Muskogee was the only trading post in that section of the country on the west side of the Arkansas River.

There he established headquarters. As there were no railroads through the Territory at that time, all shipping was done by boat through St. Louis by the way of Fort Smith. The freight boats came up the Arkansas River and landed at what was known as the "Creek Agency Landing" and were loaded with hides and furs that went to all parts of the world. A little later an overland freight line was established from Fort Gibson and the Creek Agency to Baxter Springs, Kansas.

Mr. Sondheimer traveled over the country on horseback, riding his favorite gray saddle horse. He went from house to house among the full blood Indians buying their skins and pelts. He also traded with the small merchants throughout the country, who in turn had bought from the Indians. His business dealt exclusively with the wild life of the country.

When the MK&T Railroad was builded through the Territory and the town site of Muskogee was located, all those engaged in business at the Creek Agency moved to the railroad.

Mr. J. S. Atkinson was the first hardware merchant. Mr. J. A. Patterson had the first general merchandise store. Mr. Patterson erected a frame store building which he occupied. The back end of the store was partitioned off and occupied

by Mr. Sondheimer as a hide house. The stock was composed of cow and deer hide; beaver; otter; mink; coon; opossum, and skunk. He also bought and shipped pecans, prairie chickens, and quail. As his business reached to the western part of the Territory, in the early '70s he opened a branch house at Okmulgee. Then the first freight line from Muskogee was started, operated by Mr. Hugh Bay, that ran from Muskogee through Okmulgee to the Sac and Fox Agency. Mr. Sondheimer realizing that he would be compelled to secure larger quarters, in 1883 he purchased a site from Mr. T. F. Meagher at the corner of Okmulgee and Second street where the Harris Building now stands and erected his own building. As this was the only building of its kind in the Territory and it had become known among the Indians that they could get cash for their products, business rapidly increased. To Mr. Sondheimer was left the entire care of his two young sons, their mother having died in early life. He was not only a father to the boys, but a fine companion as well.

Fully realizing the importance of an education (Mr. Sondheimer having never attended a regular school himself, but was wholly self-educated), he was intensely interested in the school life of his boys. They attended Harrell Institute when classes were held in the old Rock Church,

located at the corner of Cherokee and Okmulgee street. Later, the boys were sent to St. Louis to school where they finished their education. They spent much time, when not in school, with their father at the store and in that way were trained in the business which later became theirs.

As the town grew, again they had to seek a new location, moving to the north part of town on the MK&T Railroad tracks and Fon Du Lac street.

Possessing the fine business acumen, characteristic of his people, Mr. Sondheimer was not long in acquiring a small fortune. Being conservative and not given to speculations, he was always ready to meet any emergency that might arrive.

By fair dealing in business and always a sense of justice to other persons, he established friendships that lasted throughout his entire life. By no means was his business his only interest, as a true citizen Mr. Sondheimer readily responded to any call of financial assistance. A church school, in need of funds to tide over a hard place, was often given the required help.

When Mr. C. N. Haskell came to the Territory in the interest of a railroad, he stopped at Wagoner. Going

before a meeting of business men, he proposed to bring his line through the town on the assurance of a cash bonus of sixty-five thousand dollars and sixty thousand dollars in real estate. The proposition was rejected and Mr. Haskell came to Muskogee and made the same proposition to the Commercial Club and business men. Mr. Sondheimer said, "I will give the first fifteen hundred dollars." With that, the others quickly responded and as a result of the first contribution, the Ozark and Cherokee Central which later became the Frisco Railroad, was builded through Muskogee.

In 1915, the Jewish people of the town, decided it was time to begin constructive plans for a Jewish church and to erect a building. Mr. Sondheimer was one of the first and most liberal contributors to the cause and Beth Abba Synagogue was completed and dedicated in 1916.

Private charities was also one of his specialities and no one ever knew how many people were given aid by him.

Quiet and reserved in nature, he possessed a keen sense of humor that made him an enjoyable companion.

Among his many friends throughout the Territory were several Indian Chiefs, Sam Checotah, General Pleasant Porter and Legus Perryman were among them. Mr. William

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P. Ross, a prominent Cherokee, whom he became acquainted with on his coming to Fort Gibson in 1867, remained his staunch friend throughout the life of Mr. Ross.

Mr. Sondheimer's younger son, Alec, and his wife, Dora Cobb Sondheimer, met tragic deaths in an automobile accident in France, August 2, 1923, while they were touring the country. Their bodies were returned to Muskogee and interred in Green Hill Cemetery.

At the death of Mr. Sondheimer in 1913, his sons assumed control of the business. Then, when the death of Alec occurred, Samuel was left to carry on.

To young Joseph, of the third generation, and only heir to the estate and business, will be left the responsibility of maintaining the business that has been so successfully prosecuted for seventy years.

The business is in a class of its own and unique in the fact that it is the only business that has been continuously operated from old Territory days down to the present in Oklahoma.

Today as all through the years, exports are sent to all parts of the world and despite the fact of the depression and financial stringencies, it is being successfully operated.

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Note: Mr. Alec Sondheimer's will left his estate of \$100,000.00 divided; one-fourth each to the I. M. C. A., the Y. W. C. A., Beth Ababa Temple and the Presbyterian Church. These bequests, however, were not to be available for the organizations until a lapse of twenty-five years and then only if the beneficiary organization should be a working body.

This note is added to Mr. Samuel Sondheimer's interview about his father, Mr. Joseph Sondheimer, to show that the fine civic spirit that lived in the father also lived in the son, <sup>Alec</sup> as doubtless it also does in the living son, Samuel.

(Editor).