

Petaluma's Chicken Farmers Part of New Show at SF's Contemporary Jewish Museum

"California Dreaming" is a new exhibit that explores how California influenced Jewish thought

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Petaluma's Jewish chicken farmers will be part of a new exhibit that opens this month at the [Contemporary Jewish Museum](#) in San Francisco.

The show, which kicks off Nov. 17 and runs through next October, is titled "[California Dreaming](#)" and explores Jewish life in the Bay Area.

Among the many artifacts, photos and multimedia offerings will be displays about Petaluma chicken farmers and the Jewish Socialist community that sprung up here among immigrants fleeing Russia, Poland and other European countries.

"We are thrilled to be examining the community in this way for the first time," says Museum Director Connie Wolf in a statement. "Our search has revealed fascinating stories of pioneering spirit, invention, reinvention, assimilation, generosity, and activism... We look forward to the many stories that the community will add to this evolving exhibition over its yearlong life."

The exhibit focuses on uncovering Jewish life in the Bay Area, from Levi Strauss and other Jews who made a name for themselves during the Gold Rush to artists and writers like Allen Ginsberg who penned "Howl," his ground-breaking lament about the conformity of the '50s in a Berkeley coffee shop.

And ultimately it's a look at how California helped shape Jewish identity and helped integrate Jewish immigrants into the fabric of the greater American society after years of exclusion.

Although Petaluma was a small agricultural town in the early 20th century, it had a vibrant Jewish community centered around the [B'Nai Israel](#) congregation on Western Avenue, which still exists today. Many of the Jewish chicken farmers had come to Petaluma to learn farming techniques they hoped to use on kibbutzes, or collective farms, in Palestine (before it was Israel), where they had hoped to emigrate.

Some eventually settled in Israel, but many more stayed in Petaluma, raising families, owning businesses and becoming educators and community leaders.

The Petaluma portion of the exhibit will feature clips from the 2003 documentary film "[Home on the Range: The Jewish Chicken Ranchers of Petaluma](#)," produced by and directed by Bay Area moviemakers Bonnie Burt and Judith Montell.

Another aspect will be a "site reading" by Bay Area artist and historian Rachel Schreiber who will use eight archival photos to tell stories of Jewish communities. One of these is a Sonoma County chicken ranch, which Schreiber uses as an entry point into the history of Socialism among Petaluma's Jews and its commitment to social justice, including helping organize Sebastopol apple pickers, for which several labor leaders were tarred and feathered.

As part of the exhibit, people are invited to submit their own photos that illustrate what it means to be Jewish in the Bay Area. All photos submitted will be on display in the gallery as well as on the museum's website and dedicated flickr page. Visitors are invited to participate by uploading their images to flickr.com/groups/californiadreaming.