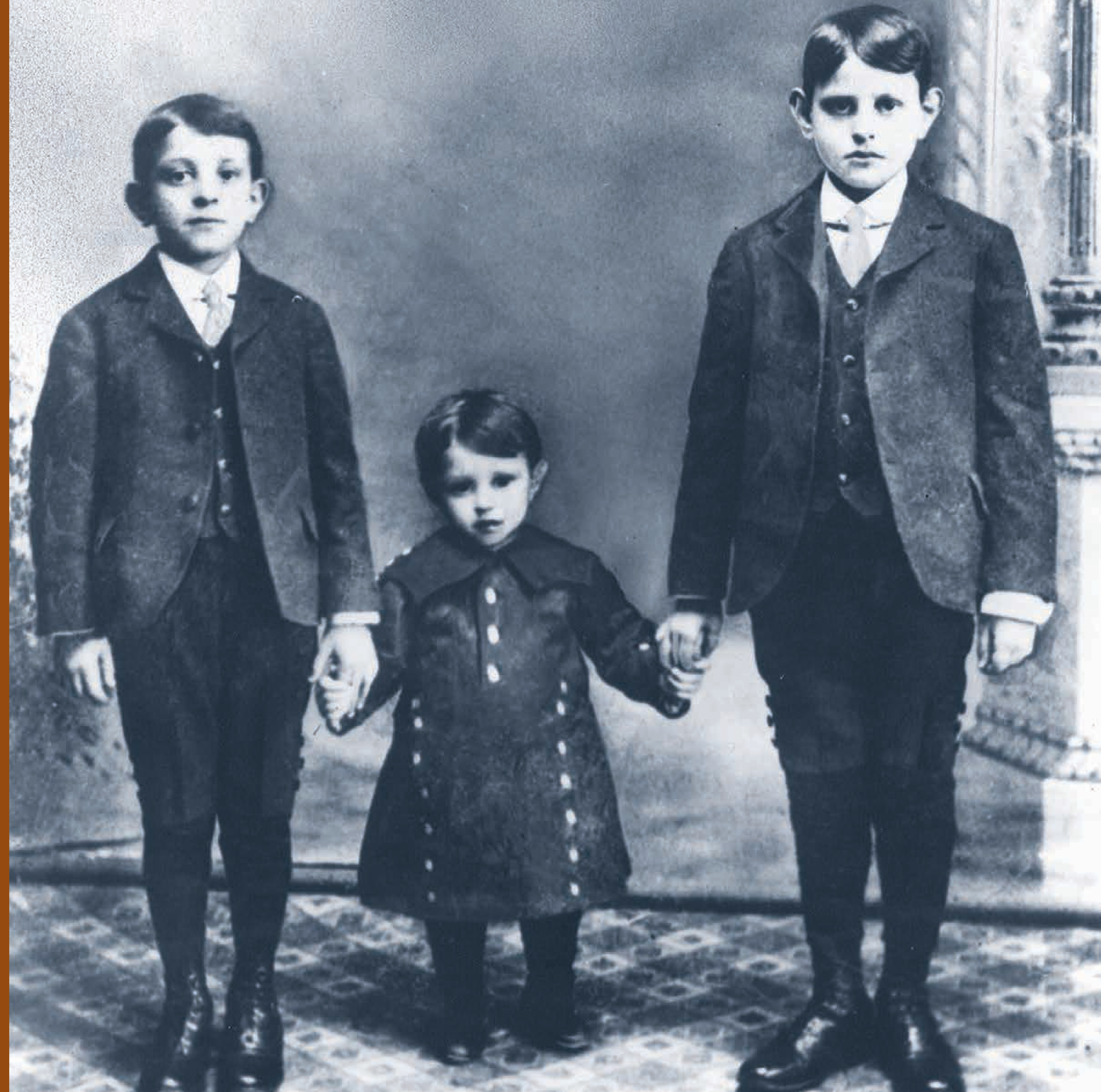
The Seventh Child

100 Years of Delaware North and the Jacobs Family

Kathi Ann Brown

CHAPTER TWO



BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

"It is said that nowhere in the world are so many people crowded together on a square mile as here," observed journalist Jacob Riis in *How the Other Half Lives*, his classic 1890 photo exposé of New York City's impoverished Lower East Side.

More than 300,000 people – most of them recent Eastern European immigrants – were packed into the most densely populated parcel of real estate on the planet. Even the worst areas of London could not compare with the Lower East Side's sheer squalor at the end of the 19th century. Whole families and lodgers subsisted in rickety tenements barely fit for human habitation. Dirt and disease, rats and raw sewage were the order of the day. Ventilation, privacy and inside plumbing were unheard of.

Amid the congestion and stench, a pair of young Jewish immigrants – Max and Hannah (Annie) Jacobs – struggled to make ends meet. Like thousands of Lower East Side residents, the two had recently fled the virulent anti-Semitism of Poland and Russia, hoping for a better and safer life in far-off America. What they found were soul-sapping living conditions and labor exploitation little short of slavery in New York City's notorious garment industry.

For blocks around, adults and children alike worked from early light till well past dusk for mere pennies, cutting, sewing and finishing clothing, while their bosses reaped huge profits. Tenement rooms doubled as tiny sweatshop factories, marked "by the whir of a thousand sewing-machines, worked at high pressure from earliest dawn till mind and muscle give out together," observed Richard Wheatley, a reporter for The Century, in January 1892.

EVILS OF THE SWEATSHOP

Subject Discussed Before the Tenement House Commission.

Much Sickness in Camps During Spanish War Due to Infected Garments —Conditions Experts Found.

"[They] toil from six in the morning until eleven at night," noted Wheatley. "Fifty cents is not an unusual compensation for these murderous hours. Trousers at 84 cents per dozen, 8 cents for a round coat, and 10 cents for a frock coat, are labor prices that explain the sudden affluence of heartless merchant manufacturers, and the biting poverty of miserable artisans."

Raising a family in such harsh conditions was not easy, but the Jacobses did their best. Three months after Wheatley's visit to the Lower East Side, 21-year-old Annie Jacobs gave birth to her first child – a son – Marvin Jacobs, on April 26, 1892. A year and a half later, she bore another son, Charles, on Dec. 15.

According to grandson Max Jacobs, Annie's husband strolled the streets of the Lower East Side daily, looking for tailoring work, with only sporadic success – possibly as much a reflection of his limited business skills as it was of local labor market conditions.

"When typhus raged through the building the same summer that Lillian was born, Annie sent the three boys to live in the nearby park to keep them safe from the disease and away from the baby. She met the boys every day in the park to give them their meals."

Max Jacobs

WATER MAINS CARRY SEWAGE TO THE CITY

OYSTERS AND TYPHOID.

During the first quarter of 1904 there were reported to the Health Department of New York 200 cases of typhoid fever occurring in the Borough of Manhattan.

On April 6, 1900, Annie Jacobs gave birth again, to another son, Louis. Four years later, she bore her only daughter – and last child – Lillian. Motherly joy competed with maternal anxiety. After more than a decade on the Lower East Side, the Jacobses seemed to be no better off financially and now had six mouths to feed.

"They had moved from a place on Stanton Street to 102 Broom Street before Lillian was born," said grandson Max Jacobs, recounting a family legend. "Still, they were living in tenements. My grandmother would string clothesline from one end of the space to the other and hang a blanket over it to create 'rooms.' When typhus raged through the building the same summer that Lillian was born, Annie sent the three boys to live in the nearby park to keep them safe from the disease and away from the baby. She met the boys every day in the park to give them their meals."

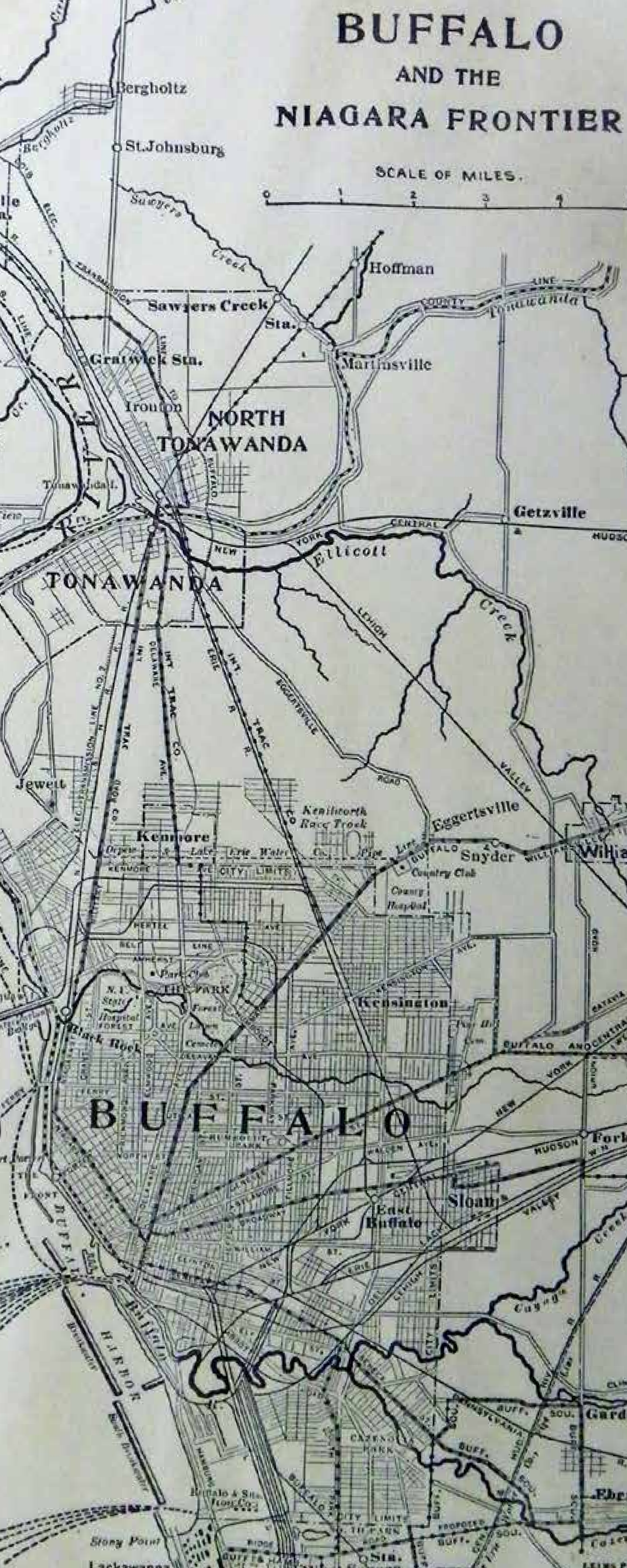
Lillian's birth was probably the last straw for the couple. Sometime in 1905 or 1906, Annie and Max packed up their four children and few belongings and headed for one of the city's train stations. They counted out their meager savings to buy five tickets for the family of six – probably on the Empire State Express – and climbed aboard. The parents spent most of the nearly 400-mile trip nervously signaling one of the boys to hurry to the washroom whenever the conductor came through to check tickets.

At last – more than eight hours after boarding the westbound train – Annie, Max and the four Jacobs children caught their first glimpse of their new hometown: Buffalo, New York.

The main attraction of the Queen City for the Jacobses was Max's older brother Joseph, who was doing well in the tailoring trade there. Max had survived, but not thrived, in New York City. Maybe with the help of his sibling, his job prospects would improve in Buffalo.

Family ties aside, Buffalo likely held other charms for the Jacobses. One-tenth the size of New York City, the metropolis offered the young family something it had rarely enjoyed in the old life: room to breathe. The city was also home to a small but vibrant Jewish neighborhood, established more than half a century earlier by Polish immigrants from Russia dubbed "Hoch-Polish." The city's oldest synagogue, Beth El, was founded in 1848 and joined by at least seven others by 1904. In 1890 – the year Jacob Riis's photo exposé of the fetid squalor of the Lower East Side was published – Buffalo had a Jewish population of 1,500, many of whom worked as peddlers, merchants, clothiers and tailors. The tight-knit community was concentrated on Franklin, Tupper and Pearl streets to the north and William and Clinton streets to the east.

Buffalo's business community was likewise up and coming. In 1901, the city was home to 60 millionaires, more per capita than any city in the nation.



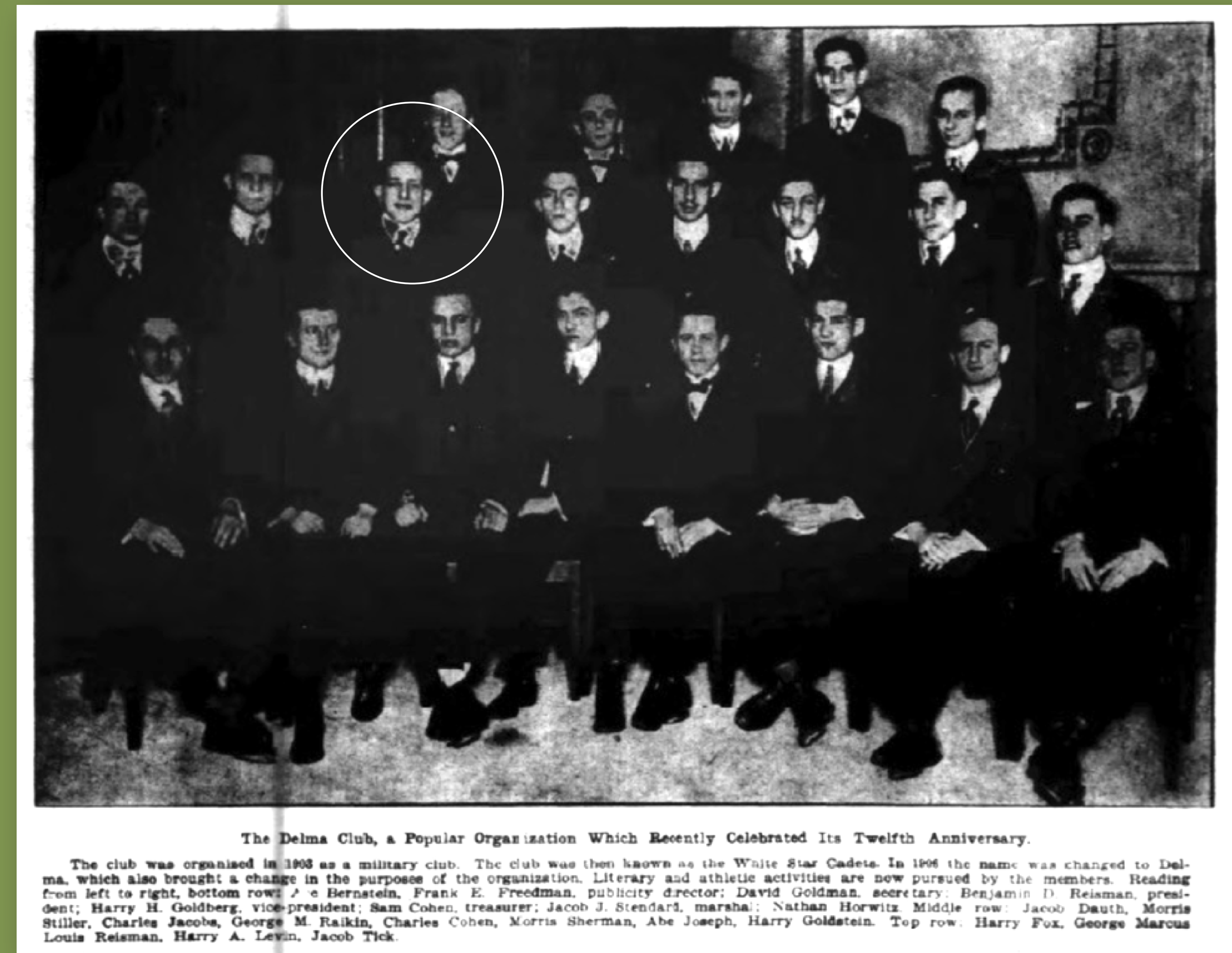
Prosperous and progressive, Buffalo had chalked up a number of interesting milestones in the two decades before the Jacobses arrived. The city was the first in the nation to have electric street lights (1881) and the first in the United States to have a day care center for children (1881). In 1895, the Niagara Falls Power Company harnessed the magnificent roar of the waterfalls to generate power to produce the first aluminum made by Alcoa (at the time, Pittsburgh Reduction Company). In 1896, Ellicott Square, the nation's largest office building, opened in Buffalo and the country's first big-city street-car system was electrified downtown. That same year, Mitchel Mark opened the first motion picture theater in the United States in the new Ellicott Square building. In 1898, the nation's first cancer clinic opened in the Queen City of the Great Lakes and was later named after its first director, Dr. Roswell Park.

Buffalo's business community was likewise up and coming. In 1901, the city was home to 60 millionaires, more per capita than any city in the nation. Many resided on Delaware Avenue, on a stretch known locally as "Millionaires' Row." Buffalo's Larkin Soap Co. was the world's largest manufacturer of soaps, perfumes, toilet preparations and pure food specialties. In 1904, Larkin unveiled a brand-new headquarters at 680 Seneca Street designed by architectural impresario Frank Lloyd Wright. (Sadly, razed in 1950.) Other huge local enterprises included the Ball Brothers Glass Company and Pratt & Lambert, a varnish manufacturer, each the largest in its respective industry.

The only significant blotch on the city's otherwise impressive track record was the assassination of President William McKinley by anarchist Leon Czolgosz in September 1901 at the Pan-American Exposition, four years before the Jacobses arrived in Buffalo.

The Jacobs family probably settled initially in the household of Max's brother Joseph, who might have resided on Cedar near William, according to family stories. A brief, but fierce economic recession in 1907 possibly kept the family anchored there for a couple of years. But by 1908, the Jacobses were living on their own in a rental house at 41 E. Bennett, possibly a sign that Max and Annie were beginning to prosper.

In 1910, the family was still at the same address, according to the U.S. Census. By then, Max and Annie had been married 18 years. Max was then 39 years old, still a tailor by trade and "working on own account," meaning he was self-employed. Annie was the mother of four living children out of the four to whom she had given birth, a gratifying survival rate in an era marked by frequent infant deaths.



The Delma Club, a Popular Organization Which Recently Celebrated Its Twelfth Anniversary.

The club was organized in 1903 as a military club. The club was then known as the White Star Cadets. In 1906 the name was changed to Delma, which also brought a change in the purpose of the organization. Literary and athletic activities are now pursued by the members. Reading from left to right, bottom row: A e Bernstein, Frank E. Freedman, publicity director; David Goldman, secretary; Benjamin D. Reisman, president; Harry H. Goldberg, vice-president; Sam Cohen, treasurer; Jacob J. Stendard, marshal; Nathan Horwitz. Middle row: Jacob Dauth, Morris Stiller, Charles Jacobs, George M. Raikin, Charles Cohen, Morris Sherman, Abe Joseph, Harry Goldstein. Top row: Harry Fox, George Marcus Louis Reisman, Harry A. Levin, Jacob Tick.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND LABOR—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
THIRTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1910—POPULATION

1910 U.S. Census

Either the census taker was sloppy or the Jacobses' limited English hampered communication, because the family's census entry for 1910 contains a few errors. The family surname is listed as Jacob, without an s. Marvin is listed as Isadore. (His real name was Irving.) Charles is listed as Charlotte, a "daughter." Louis and Lillian's information is accurate.

Schooling was a priority for two out of the three boys. Marvin, the oldest, was about 13 years old when the family moved to Buffalo. He attended the city's Technical High School, matriculating until about age 16. The youngest son, Louis, was enrolled in a local grammar school as soon as he was old enough to attend. He would later go to Hutchinson High School on Chippewa Street. Charles – the middle boy and a year younger than Marvin – dropped out of grammar school while the family was still living in New York City and didn't re-enroll in Buffalo.

"Our Uncle Charley never got past third or fourth grade," said his nephew Max Jacobs. "He was a big kid and probably a little slow compared to his brother Marvin. The teacher apparently told him that he was as dumb as an ox or something along those lines. For better or worse he replied, 'I'm stupid? I'm making more money than you are!' Not a response calculated to win over the teacher, but true. He really was. The boys were enterprising. They had to be."

The three Jacobs boys were indeed nothing if not "enterprising." Recollections and reminiscences about their early entrepreneurial exploits vary, but all put the accent on their willingness to try anything that might bring in cash to the family coffers.

In 1944, Charley Jacobs told a newspaper reporter that his first job was selling sand pails to kids at Coney Island when he was just 8 years old, probably a year or so before he was summarily kicked out of school by the disgruntled teacher.

"I couldn't count, so I took Marvin along," he said. "I sold and he made the change." Marvin reminisced that all three of the boys sold popcorn at nights at Coney Island.

After getting settled in Buffalo, the two older boys – Marvin and Charley – took up shoeshining to bring in a little spending money.

"I'm down at the corner candy store watching the other kids spend a penny for one of these and a penny for one of those," Charley reminisced decades later. "We don't have any pennies for anything. So I went home and said to Marvin, 'Come on, get out those shoeshining boxes. We're goin' into business!'"

Charlie Jacobs, the sport concessionaire who fed the fans at Buffalo's Offerman Stadium for years and who came to Jamestown in the early days of the PONY League to set up the local concessions, now serves nine Major League ball parks, 45 racing plants and 103 drivein theaters. On the dinner circuit this winter, Charlie tells his audiences: "But I still have the shoeshine box with which I made my first dollar. My wife has tried to put it in the basement several times, but it's varnished and occupies a prominent spot in our living room."

In 1944, Charley Jacobs told a newspaper reporter that his first job was selling sand pails to kids at Coney Island when he was just 8 years old.

APRIL 20 THE N

VAUDEVILLE ARTISTS

BREAK YOUR JUMP

AT

BUFFALO. THE ACADEMY. M. S. ROBINSON..................Manager.

DETROIT. THE AVENUE. H. H. LAMKIN..................Manager.

Both Houses Now Building.

OPENINGS:

BUFFALO, MAY 27. DETROIT, JUNE 17.

Marvin and Charley soon had a prosperous weekend shoeshine business in Shelton Square, where, Charley recalled, "sight-seeing rigs were going out and coming in there all day and trolleys and horse cars were unloading there."

The boys quickly recognized the benefit of distinguishing themselves from their many competitors. "The other kids watered down the liquid polish," said Charley. "Marvin and I didn't. We gave better shines; we got more business. Simple."

The pair soon moved the portable enterprise to Lafayette Square, where the city's financial heavy-hitters kept their offices. Marvin and Charley tried to talk a prominent banker into giving them an exclusive contract to shine shoes in the lobby of his building. The banker was impressed by the boys' moxie, but turned them down anyway. (Charley held on to his shoeshine box for the rest of his life to remind himself of the days before success.)

The Jacobs brothers' first serious business opportunity arrived in 1907 or thereabouts, when Marvin landed a job handling concessions on the balcony of the grand 1,400-seat Academy Theater, one of the city's major burlesque houses. Built by theater magnate M.S. Robinson in 1901, the magnificent fireproof building was all steel, a novelty at the time.

"It will be the strongest constructed building in the city of this nature," crowed a local newspaper when Robinson unveiled his concept in 1900, a year before the opening of the Pan-American Exposition. "[Plans] provide for a four-story structure, 90 feet in height, extending from Main to Washington streets. The lobby will be the most magnificent in the city. It will extend from the Main Street sidewalk back 100 feet and will be a mass of mural painting, sculpture and electrical decorations, for the plans call for a perfect blaze of lights. There will be 2,000 incandescent electric light bulbs on the Main Street front of the theater and as many as can be artistically placed in the lobby."

Robinson was determined to make the new theater at Main and Seneca a cultural beacon for Buffalo. "On one floor will be a magnificent statuary and painting gallery and another floor will be devoted to ladies' parlors and lounging rooms," he noted. "I shall spend a considerable sum of money in procuring works of art for the statuary hall, and that room will be absolutely free to the public. It will be open from 10 o'clock in the morning until 11 o'clock at night. Anybody will have the privilege of visiting it at any time between those hours."

Marvin Jacobs had chosen his employment well. The Academy booked the "very best vaudeville attractions that can be obtained" and offered 14 to 16 numbers on the daily bill. "The show will begin at 1 in the afternoon and continue to 11 at night," said Robinson, "the numbers following one another in an endless chain. ... The price will be 75 cents."

Many years later, Marvin recalled his daily work routine at the Academy. "I'd run to the theater from school, pick up all the balcony programs and wait for the show to open. Then, I gave out programs with every bag of popcorn or peanuts.

"I'd have Louis meet me at the theater an hour and a half before showtime in the afternoon," Marvin once recalled. "I'd sneak him into a corner of the gallery. He'd huddle there in the darkness until the show began. Then he'd help me sell popcorn."

"My father (Louis) was seven years younger than Charley, eight years younger than Marvin," said Max Jacobs. "So they were already in business by the time Lou came on board. There's a marvelous story that I was told by Ben Reisman, general counsel for the company for many years and a great friend of my father. When Lou started working at the Academy, Marvin and Charley sent him up into the bleachers in the burlesque house to sell candy. It was dark up there. He stumbled going down the stairs and his whole tray of candy and everything fell all over the steps. He was only about 8 or 9 years old, so he started to cry. The customers up there helped him up and they bought his entire tray out, just to make him feel better. He wiped his eyes and went back to the commissary and his two older brothers. Marvin asked, 'Why are you back so quick?' So Lou told him the story and Marvin said, 'Do it every night.'"

Marvin's management skills gained him a promotion from handling just the balcony concessions at the Academy to overseeing the orchestra floor, too.

"I had charge of hiring and firing the vendors, so, of course, I hired young Louis and Charley and our friend Ben Reisman," Marvin reminisced years later. "I had to make out nightly reports and file weekly reports to the company with detailed statements of purchases and daily deposit slips. If I was short $3, I had to make it up."

Based on his work at the Academy, Marvin was offered a transfer to Cleveland by the confectionary firm that had the contract for the Buffalo theater. "I rushed right out and bought a straw suitcase and spent $1.75 for a derby hat and I was off. I even bought a cigar to impress my new boss. When I arrived in Cleveland, the fellow I was to replace took one look at that big suitcase of mine and my new derby hat and said, 'Well, kid, I sure hope you know what this is all about,' and he took off, leaving me with a list of reports – Oh, what a list it was – to be made out before Saturday night."

Marvin does not appear in the Cleveland city directories during this period. At a mere 16 or 17 years of age, he might not have been old enough to be included in official directory listings.

Cleveland figured prominently in Marvin's future in at least one respect. For his bride, he chose Sarah "Peggy" Kornguth, the second-eldest of the five children of Samuel and Lena Kornguth of Cleveland. The couple was married by a justice of the peace in Detroit, on Aug 12, 1914.

"We became the greatest experts on furnished rooms in the country," Marvin said. "Peg had the places spotted for us in New York or Albany or Chicago ... and that's how we lived most of our early married life – in furnished rooms."

"When Lou started working at the Academy, Marvin and Charley sent him up into the bleachers in the burlesque house to sell candy. It was dark up there. He stumbled going down the stairs and his whole tray of candy and everything fell all over the steps."

Max Jacobs
Son of Louis Jacobs

By 1914, at age 22, Marvin (and probably Peg, too) was living in Chicago at the Jackson Hotel and working for George B. Levee Co., the theater promoter and confectioner that had the contract for the Academy in Buffalo, among others. Marvin (using his formal first name, Irving) was secretary of Levee's company in 1914, a position he held until at least 1917, according to his military draft record from World War I.

In the meantime, back home in Buffalo, Marvin's two younger brothers were also hustling to earn money. Newspaper delivery was a time-honored occupation for boys and the Jacobs brothers were no exception. All three boys at one time or another zipped through the streets of Buffalo, putting newspapers into the hands of customers. Before Lou was old enough to tackle a route on his own, his brother Charley would take him along on his delivery rounds. Many years later, Lou told his son Max that Charley's regular customers included more than one "house of ill repute." When Charley stopped by to pick up the monthly payment, the prostitutes would pinch little Lou's cheek and tip him a quarter. "My father would later kid his brother. 'Say, Charley, you were promoting me when I was just 5 years old!'"

A little later, Lou Jacobs landed his own newspaper delivery job. Smaller in stature than most of the other kids, Lou would sometimes get tossed into the river by his bigger rivals when the boys gathered to snatch up stacks of newspapers to hawk throughout the city. Instead of getting mad and giving up – which was what his tormentors clearly hoped he would do – Lou would come up laughing.

Soon Lou made friends among them and "a year later," said son Max, with a wink, "they were working for him."

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Wanted — Good boy to carry papers in the neighborhood of Huntington, Depew, Main, Woodbridge, Parker and Morris. Apply Buffalo Courier Subscription Dept., 250 Main St.