



The whole London family on the big day.

'Super sleuther' and Jewish geography help solve case of mysterious bar mitzvah album

By ROCHELLE NEWMAN RUBINOFF

HOW DOES HANDING OUT free liquor samples in the Andersonville Jewel lead to finding a treasured family heirloom? For freelance writer Jenni Spinner, it goes something like this:

"It was a Thursday night, and there wasn't a lot of foot traffic in the liquor department," Spinner said. She supplements her freelance career with a couple of side gigs, and this is one of them. "It was really slow and I was straightening bottles.

"And not too terribly far away is a stack of Lagunitas beer. It was enough that I could see there was something brown; I thought maybe it was mouse pads—or maybe a stack of seasonal football calendars. But I got closer and I noticed that it was a photo album—and not just any old photo album—it was huge," she said.

"It was old and well cared for. All of these nice black and white prints mounted on heavy cardboard, with pages in between. There was a nice plastic cover on it and it says 'My Bar Mitzvah.'"

Although Spinner is not Jewish, she said that she knows how important a bar or bat mitzvah is in the life of a young Jewish man or woman.

So Spinner went home and posted the story on Facebook. She really wanted to find the family and was asking her Facebook community for help.

While looking through the album, there were a few, but not many, clues. There was no name on the inside cover.

But Spinner said from the photos it was obvious that the event took place in the 50s or 60s.

One of the biggest clues was a black letter-board with white letters saying "Shoreland Hotel, November 20, 1955."

Another clue: the bar mitzvah cake read 'Happy Bar Mitzvah William.'

Once Spinner posted those facts on Facebook, it was reposted "all over the place." And reporters from "The Block Club" were the first to pick up the story.

But what brought in the first answers were responders to Spinner's wife, Rachel Kell.

"She's big on ancestry.com and genealogy sites—and she tapped into a couple of Jewish genealogy groups on Facebook," Spinner said. "And that is quite a global network of people who are always on top of

things," Spinner said.

Kell posted the mystery in a couple of places and, within 36 hours, she received a Facebook message, saying, yeah, that's my cousin.

The post seemed to have gone from Chicago to someone in Israel to a friend in New York—the New Yorker knew the Londons.

But Spinner said that even before they got the final connection to the family, they found a yearbook picture from 1958, and in the second to the last row there was a kid who was clearly the bar mitzvah boy, William (Bill) London, from the album.

And just a couple of hours after that Facebook message, she got a message from Gail London, Bill's sister who lives in Lincoln Square.

Gail was thrilled to learn that this treasured family heirloom had been found.

"It's such a wild story," she said, referring to how the news literally traveled all over the world and the London family was identified in only 36 hours.

The solving of this mystery takes the notion of Jewish geography to a whole new level.

While it's still a little unclear as to exactly how the album ended up at Jewel, it almost seems beside the point right now.

"It's such a serendipitous event that someone in my neighborhood Jewel found it," Gail said.

And how fortunate it was that the person who found it was Spinner—a woman with curiosity, caring, and initiative. She has been recognized as a type of local hero for her "super sleuthing" skills and has been featured in several news stories, online, in print, and on the radio. In fact, Steve Cochran picked up on the story and interviewed Spinner on his WGN radio news program, presenting her with the MVPP "(Most Valuable Person on the Planet)" award.

Gail helps care for her brother, who now suffers with some memory issues. "However, all of the details of childhood are very clear, so this is going to be very meaningful to him," she said.

"There's really some divine order to this," she said. ■

Rochelle Newman Rubinoff is a freelance writer living in the northern suburbs of Chicago.