

## **History in Transit: “Wild Bill” Patram’s Job to Remember**

Interview by Sally Kline

There are many things Jews might consider a moving experience: the bar mitzvah of a precious child, the loving embrace of a friend in a time of mourning, even a simple taste of *Bubbe’s* perfect chicken soup on a frigid winter day.

It was during such a day—December 18, 1969—that William B. “Wild Bill” Patram organized the passage of an antique building just right, thereby realizing a rite of passage for a whole community. The wind-chill factor may have dipped below the 20s on that bitter morning, but the warmth of the occasion made it a moving experience in more ways than one.

Structural moving engineer Bill Patram of Fairfax, Virginia, now a retired silver-haired septuagenarian with a booming baritone voice and a vivid memory, recalls the job to move the old Adas Israel synagogue as a “good project.” Despite the challenges of the weather, a mini-conflagration, the usual hassles with city bureaucrats, and one collateral casualty—in the form of a dead pigeon—the transition of the 237-ton object from Sixth and G Streets to Third and G Streets, N.W. went mostly according to plan. Saved from destruction by an act of Congress after Metro officials appropriated the original site, the future home for the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington and the Lillian and Albert Small Jewish Museum would never have survived without the crafty logistical skills of a specialist like Patram.

In this issue of *The Record*, memorializing the 125th anniversary of a modest brick edifice as a symbol of and repository for the history of Jewish Washington, we can’t forget the momentous day it was reborn or the man who delivered it. And he can’t forget us either.

### **How did you come to the project?**

I solicited you all. I must have seen an article in the paper. Then I wrote and asked to offer a bid.

### **What was your price?**

\$46,208. That was for the move only. We didn’t do foundation work. Today, nobody would touch that move for less than \$500,000. Easily.

### **What about the mechanics of the move? What kind of prep work was done?**

[At first], the District sent a letter and said the permit is hereby revoked or suspended until we got in additional plans. [The architects] drew up this elaborate set of them, because the District said we’d have to detail how we were going to brace this building. I do a lot of bracing. That’s my method of moving fragile, historical buildings.

### **How long did it take?**

We were probably there two months. Because the bracing is such a slow procedure. First, we had to rip out all that old restaurant stuff down there [on the first floor]. Man, was it greasy.

You don't see it [in many of the photographs], but running up the side of the building was a duct, an old air-conditioning duct or grease vent. When we were moving the building, we had to keep to the right of the street and that got us over into the trees. The tree limbs knocked the duct off. And a newspaper reporter gave us the devil, because a pigeon had built a nest in the top of it and a baby pigeon got killed as it was coming down.

Anyway, we hauled truckloads of junk away -- all the wall coverings and everything had to come off, all of the contents. We want bare walls, because we take a crayon and mark off the holes. That's where the men cut the holes for the beams to go through. When we pulled up the old, rotten wooden floors, I don't know you all's name for it, but we found a lead-lined pit. They said that's where the Jewish women came after their monthly periods for...

### **A *mikveh*, a ritual bath.**

Yeah, ritual bath. So we found that.

### **It was lead?**

It was lead-lined. In the old days, they had lead bath tubs. But we found that.

### **Besides getting it down to the bare walls, what else was done to prepare it?**

We establish what we call a cut-off line, about 12 to 20 inches, maybe, below the first floor, so that we can carry it. This was an oblong building, longer than narrow, so we put in two longitudinal beams and then a series of cross-member support beams.

**So the beams are standard. The bracing, which is down the middle of the building on the outside of it, that's more of an optional thing that you prefer to do.**

Right.

### **That's in the middle of the wall to keep the wall from collapsing.**

They are called whaler braces. Now we've got cable turn buckles going through these windows, going out the other side. Now on the inside, which you don't see in any of these pictures, we bought special long-length timber. That is to keep the two walls from coming inward. So technically, the cables keep it from going outward, the inner pieces from coming inward. That's the methodology I came up with for moving these old buildings and it works very well.

### **After the building got to its destination, what happened?**

We got to the new site in one day. The main object is to clear the streets, so that they can open them up. Probably we didn't position it until the next day, because positioning is very precise. You've got to take a lot of time. You hang plumb bobs on strings from each corner. Then it might have taken two days to block it, get the wheels out. When I say block it, that means to leave it up on cribs for the bricklayer who makes the foundation.

### **Cribs?**

That's like a kids' Lincoln Log set. You stack 'em. You just keep stacking to get whatever height you want. So then we leave it, block supported on cribbing. I forgot how long it took that contractor to do the foundation, probably a couple of months.

It went back exactly like it is, with the lower floor even as you see it now, even with the sidewalks. I made it three or four inches above the sidewalk, so water won't run in it.

By the way, they had trouble. Where your synagogue is sitting now, there used to be some old buildings with old basements there. Those old basements had been filled in. They spent a pile of money having to dig down through all of that stuff. My recollection is they had to go eight feet deep through that old basement trash to get to solid ground down below. You can't set on disturbed earth or disturbed debris. The code says you have to be on solid ground. So they had a big expense of getting down and pouring these concrete footers.

### **Did the synagogue go up on a trailer for the actual moving?**

They are separate sets of wheels called dollies.

### **So you get the dollies under the beams; how?**

You get the gridwork of beams in. You shim everything tight. And then you say, "Okay, we're ready to jack." [The unified hydraulic jack] goes up 14 inches every 2 minutes. After you get it up to the height that you want for the wheels to go in under the gridwork of beams, all of the old walls have to be torn up. So we take a front-end loader and go in underneath of there and demolish the old basement walls and get everything down to a smooth floor.

### **How many sets of wheels did you use?**

Three sets. It's like tricycle landing gear on an airplane. We call it the three-point suspension.

### **And the power?**

Some people call them tanks, but they're not armored. They have the same running gear as a Sherman tank. The beautiful part about this job is it was almost a perfectly level job. We came off of sidewalk level and went in on sidewalk level. We didn't have to drop down into any basements or anything like that.

Here's an interesting point we don't want to forget. We had a problem. We moved back about 150 feet and got back near the corner ready for the big move. It was colder than the hinges of hell. Calling for snow maybe. Now, the gas company had been there digging around right at the first intersection. And just as I walk beside the electrical control box for the stoplights on this corner, it went "poof" and flame came out.

I said, "Hey, we got fire here."

Now everybody is on a stand-by basis. The gas company, the electrical company, city people, everybody is on stand-by. So when this gas man heard me say, "Get the fire extinguisher," he said, "Hey, don't get no fire extinguisher. You busted our gas line." It was gas burning.

Where we crossed that sidewalk, we had cracked the gas main that they had been messing with for a couple of months. And it caused me big problems. It cost my insurance company big money. But here's the cute part: To keep the gas from going into buildings and accumulating, they set it on fire. For a block in each direction, you got fire burning at the top of these manholes. And so cold people were backing up to the manholes warming their butts!

### **How many buildings have you moved?**

A little over 2,000. I specialized in the historical ones, because I had better techniques. I moved the Foundry in Georgetown in 1973. They couldn't get anyone else to even bid on the famous Mother Seton house I moved. It was built about 1750. Stone.

### **You must be a risk-taker to have done this work.**

It's a high-risk business. You've got to have confidence that you'll study it long enough and find a way. The more complicated it is, you know it's going to take ten times longer to move than to move a normal one. You figure that in.

### **What was special about our move?**

The things we found in there, like the *mikveh*. We also found some writings on the wall, a poster or something that was hung on the wall that had been plastered over.

### **Besides how cold it was, the pigeons, would you consider it a routine move?**

Oh no. This is special. Number one, it's heavy. It's old. It was very fragile.

*Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington board member and journalist Sally Kline interviewed William Patram on April 4, 2002, at his home in Fairfax, Virginia. Copies of the complete oral history transcript are located in the archives of the Society.*