



Bio

Wendy Besmann is the author of *A Separate Circle: Jewish Life in Knoxville, Tennessee* (University of Tennessee Press) for which she received an Award of Distinction from the East Tennessee Historical Society. A longtime freelancer, she began her career writing about travel for national magazines, including *USA Today* and *Better Homes & Gardens*. Later she created a series of step-by-step workbooks to help parents of children with special needs find better services. In 2021, she earned a Master of Public Health degree from the University of South Carolina. She and her husband Ted (a former ORNL group leader turned USC professor) split their time between Columbia, South Carolina, and their home on Melton Hill Lake near Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Summary of Talk

For nearly 170 years, Jews have flourished within the broader East Tennessee community, while still maintaining the rituals and traditions that define them as a separate people. Drawing on interviews and documentary sources, Wendy Besmann offers a vivid portrait of this tiny society over the decades, showing the complex bonds of kinship, ethics, and culture that have united its many colorful characters. This is the story of itinerant peddlers, wheeler-dealers, and struggling shopkeepers; a poor Knoxville newsboy who turned the New York Times into a flagship newspaper; a quiet record store owner who helped make Elvis a star; the northern businessmen who built a furniture industry in Morristown and the young Jewish scientists who poured into Oak Ridge for the Manhattan Project. Over time, this small circle of East Tennessee Jews evolved from a “cousins club” of merchant families into a geographically diverse and influential population of doctors, lawyers, high-tech workers, and educators. Besmann places these stories in the larger context of American Jewish history, patterns of immigration, and the phenomenal growth of southern university towns.