



# THE VIRGINIA SYNAGOGUE NEEDS *You!*

## B'nai Abraham and the Settlement of the Iron Range

by Marilyn J. Chiat, Ph.D.

The history of the Jewish people who settled outside of the mainstream is being lost in the United States. With that loss goes all memory of those Jewish communities that once flourished in many of our nation's small towns and rural areas. Minnesota is experiencing a similar loss with the disappearance of all evidence of the Jewish communities that contributed so much to the magnificent cultural mosaic that identified the Iron Range. The Friends of B'nai Abraham Synagogue is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and reuse of the one remaining Jewish monument on the Iron Range, the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia. It is the goal of the Friends to see that this structure becomes a center for the celebration of the Iron Range's cultural and spiritual diversity.

The discovery of iron ore in northeastern Minnesota in the late 19th century opened the floodgates for thousands of immigrants seeking employment in the newly opened mines. Amongst the earliest to arrive were Jewish settlers, many of who became merchants on main street catering to the needs of the miners and their families. Settling primarily in four communities: Chisholm, Eveleth, Hibbing and Virginia, the Jewish families lived in relative isolation from major Jewish centers. However, similar to the experience of so many ethnic and religious groups on the Range, it was important to the newcomers that they maintain their unique religious identity. Toward that end four congregations were formed, each with its own synagogue. Two of the synagogues, in Eveleth and Hibbing, were originally churches whose steeples had been removed and interiors reconfigured for use as a Jewish house of worship. Two were constructed as synagogues, Chisholm and Virginia. The Chisholm synagogue was a simple clapboard structure that was built in 1913; the only

photograph of the building that has survived is one that shows it in the process of being demolished in the 1960s. The Virginia synagogue, B'nai Abraham, was erected in 1908 and dedicated the following year. Built of red brick with beautiful stained glass windows, it was described in the local press at the time of its dedication as "the most beautiful church (sic) on the Iron Range." Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in the 1980s, the only synagogue in Minnesota to be so honored, B'nai Abraham continued to function as a synagogue until the last decade of the 20th century. As the economic viability of the Iron Range declined, so too did its population. By 1980, the Hibbing and Eveleth congregations had disbanded and their buildings sold. Only B'nai Abraham survives, physical evidence of the once vibrant Jewish community that existed on the Iron Range.

The often heroic efforts made by the Range's early settlers to retain their religious and ethnic identities and to pass them on to future generations must not be forgotten. That is one reason why the beautiful synagogue erected in Virginia must be maintained; it is a visual reminder of the region's diversity. Another reason to preserve the structure is so that it may serve as a gathering space and social hall where not only the contributions made by the region's Jewish community can be remembered, but in addition, where exhibits, conferences, and programs will honor the contributions made by all the many people who came to call the Iron Range home.

The importance of preserving the historic B'nai Abraham synagogue reaches beyond the Range's Jewish community. The uniqueness of the United States is made visible in the diversity of religious buildings that grace our landscape. White clapboard churches with their steeples stretching toward heaven and synagogues adorned with Stars of David were once neighbors in many of the nation's small towns, including those on the Iron Range. These structures visually proclaim the freedom of worship that is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights, a freedom that propelled millions of people to seek refuge in the New World. The discovery of iron ore in northeastern Minnesota held out promises of jobs and the freedom of worship, and although the diversity of settlers attracted by these promises created what has been described as a "tower of Babel" the co-existence of church and synagogue spoke to the sense of community and shared identity that came to characterize the Range. It is the visual evidence of this character that must not be lost.



B'nai Abraham synagogue exterior as it looks today



B'nai Abraham Synagogue's Sunshine Club, whose role was to visit the sick



Fiftieth anniversary celebration of Chiam and Pia Siegel, held in the Virginia synagogue in 1947



The late Daniel Milavetz in front of B'nai Abraham synagogue, ca 1980s

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