

Rosenblum: Iron Range rallies to save Jewish center

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Much has been written about the once-in-a-lifetime convergence Thursday of Hanukkah and Thanksgiving, affectionately called Thanksgivukkah. The two family-centric holidays won't merge again for 70,000 years, give or take a few.

But for Minnesota Jews and others who treasure our state's historical gems, here's another miracle to celebrate. It's called the [B'nai Abraham Museum & Cultural Center](#), in Virginia, Minn.

A thriving synagogue for more than 70 years, (on the Iron Range!), B'nai Abraham was all but abandoned in the 1990s, as young Jews bolted for college, jobs or mates, and their aging parents moved to warmer climates.

Today, its painstaking restoration as a community educational center is nearing completion.

"To be honest, I did not think I would live to see this happen," said Marilyn Chiat, 81, who taught art history at the University of Minnesota. She has championed this project for 20 years.

"I look upon it as one of my most satisfying achievements as an architectural historian who has worked to preserve our state's diverse cultural and religious heritage."

It's not lost on Chiat that the word Hanukkah means "dedication," referring to the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after the Jewish victory over the Syrian-Greeks more than 2,000 years ago. Fortunately, the biggest battle of this modern tale centered on keeping the sturdy red-brick building and its 13 stunning stained glass windows from being sold or razed.

Chiat is tickled that a local newspaper once called B'nai Abraham "the most beautiful church on the Iron Range."

The eight days of Hanukkah come from the "miracle" of a tiny drop of oil burning for eight days in the Temple's post-victory menorah. While B'nai Abraham no longer holds services, its preserved sanctuary features a floor-standing menorah.

B'nai Abraham also is a fitting Thanksgiving story, one that celebrates our state's diversity of customs and cultures. "[Vice President] Hubert Humphrey once told a story about our nation's mosaic," Chiat said. "If we had lost that little synagogue, our mosaic wouldn't be as vibrant as it is."

Fleeing the pogroms in the 1890s, Eastern European Jews arrived on the Iron Range in a steady stream. B'nai Abraham was dedicated in 1909. Synagogues also went up in Chisholm, Eveleth and Hibbing. By 1920, the Iron Range Jewish population had exceeded 1,000 people.

To keep kosher, a costly tradition made more difficult by the dearth of kosher grocery stores, many Jews fished, catching and freezing walleye from Lake Vermilion.



2008: An open house at the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia, Minn., the last standing synagogue on the Minnesota Iron Range.

Mark Sauer, Associated Press



2008: The original memorial plaque listing names of members of the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia, Minn. is shown during an open house of the synagogue June 17, 2008 in Virginia Minn.

Mark Sauer, Associated Press

In its heyday, B'nai Abraham was a gathering place for services and Jewish holidays, bar mitzvahs, anniversary parties, bake sales and clandestine poker games on Sunday mornings.

With the exception of local women supporting bake sales, non-Jews rarely stepped inside B'nai Abraham, but they were kindly neighbors, said Margie Ostrov, president of the board of the Friends of B'nai Abraham (IronRangeJewishHeritage.org). The not-for-profit organization was founded in 2005 to restore the building.

"There was very little anti-Semitism," Ostrov said. The same could not be said of Minneapolis, which kept Jews from buying homes or joining certain country clubs into the 1950s.

Ostrov's husband, Charlie, grew up in Virginia. His parents owned one of the town's grocery stores, and the family lived two blocks from the synagogue. He remembers playing touch football on the lawn on Yom Kippur, and one cantor who doubled as the janitor.

"Sometimes he'd be cleaning the toilets when we were studying Hebrew," he said.

As the mines began closing in the 1960s, many residents, Jewish and otherwise, moved away. In the early 1980s, Chiat took her graduate students up to Virginia to learn more about this piece of history. By then, the 125-seat congregation listed just 10 elderly members.

"I'm thinking, what's going to happen with this wonderful piece of evidence of our state's diversity?" she said.

Chiat influenced the synagogue's being listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, the only Minnesota synagogue on it. But by the mid-1990s, B'nai Abraham was no longer in use. Eveleth's synagogue was sold and destroyed as was Chisholm's. Hibbing's was converted into a church.

In 2002, the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota listed B'nai Abraham among the state's 10 most endangered historic structures. Two years later, Margie Ostrov remembers walking into the building. Pipes had frozen and burst. The smell of mold permeated. Floors were warped and stained. In the lower level social hall, an open box of cookies, a bottle of kosher Mogen David wine and napkins still sat on a table.

"It's like they just walked out because they couldn't bear to deal with it," she said.

The Friends, partnering with the Virginia Area Historical Society, raised money to replace the roof. Grants from the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board and Minnesota Historical Society's legacy funds, among others, have supported the purchase of a handicap lift, new hardwood floors and ceilings, releaded stained glass windows, and updated heating and plumbing.

All the work has been done by people from the Range, Chiat noted. The Friends hope to raise the final \$50,000 to finish the work, including a serving kitchen and front entry. But their dream has been realized.

This fall, three groups of Jewish teenagers from the Twin Cities traveled to B'nai Abraham to view exhibits and learn the history of the synagogue and its families. Many of those families are their own. In addition, the center sponsors dozens of annual culture events, from state champion fiddler Mary LaPlant to a lecture by David Paul Wellstone. All are welcome.

"This wonderful little building was almost lost," Chiat said. "I give thanks that it's still with us and, hopefully, will be with us for years to come."

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