

Local group seeks new life for historic Iron Range synagogue

By ERIN ELLIOTT
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When the B'nai Abraham Synagogue was built in Virginia, Minn., in the early part of the 20th century, the bylaws of the B'nai Abraham Society, which owned the building, afforded membership to "Hebrews of good moral character." Nearly 100 years later, it is a new generation of Hebrews of good moral character that is trying to preserve the historic synagogue.

The Friends of B'nai Abraham Synagogue is a Minneapolis-based, non-profit organization dedicated to the restoration of the building for use as a communal public facility. The synagogue, which was built in 1909, is the only remaining synagogue north of Duluth and the only synagogue in Minnesota listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"Some of our vision for that building is for it to be used as a community building, to be used as a museum of the Jewish contribution to the [Iron] Range, maybe a museum of other ethnic cultures as well," said Ann Phillips, a Friends member. "We're working with the Virginia Area Historical Society and the St. Louis County Historical Society to make this a reality."

It was Phillips' grandfather, Julius Shanedling, who helped build the synagogue. Shanedling immigrated to Virginia from Lithuania in 1892, when Virginia was first incorporated. As the iron ore industry began to flourish, an influx of immigrants came to the region and Shanedling opened a men's clothing store. In 1909, he made a trip to New York and Washington, D.C., to secure donations for the new building that would serve Virginia's growing Jewish population.

"The new structure will be the finest

church edifice on the range, being of solid brick and will cost approximately \$12,000 aside from land and furnishings," noted the Virginia Enterprise (now the Mesabi Daily News) on Oct. 8, 1909.

"It is the only synagogue built on the Range as a synagogue," Phillips said. "Others were built as churches and converted to synagogues."

The Jewish population in Virginia peaked in the 1950s with about 80 families. The community continued to flourish until the 1980s, but membership declined as families migrated to larger cities. Services at B'nai Abraham continued intermittently until the mid-1990s, but, eventually, not enough people could be found to staff and maintain the building, or provide a minyan.

"It, for all practical purposes, was shut down," Phillips said. "Some of the materi-

als were lent to another synagogue in the Twin Cities, by that I mean the pews and some of the chairs. The building suffered water and steam damage, and it was a sad situation."

In 2004, the son of a former B'nai Abraham congregant contacted the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest (JHSUM) to inquire about the building's preservation. The JHSUM asked Marjorie Ostrov, one of its board members, to set up a committee to see what could be done.

Ostrov and her husband, Charles, a former Virginia resident, contacted former residents and other interested people, including preservationist Marilyn Chiat. The informal group of about 20 people later became the Friends of B'nai Abraham Synagogue.

The Friends group, which holds the title to the building, used a matching grant from



Courtesy of Ann Phillips

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the Minnesota Historical Society to pay for a reuse study that was completed in September 2006.

According to the study, "The reuse team recommends that the Friends of B'nai Abraham undertake the rehabilitation work according to a comprehensive master plan, completed in distinct phases, and integrating not only an approach to rehabilitating the building, but also to concurrently researching its history, developing a set of programs that can take place there, and ensuring its long-term financial viability."

The group also received a matching grant from the Iron Range Resources Board to begin some of the architectural and construction work.

A survey has been developed to gather input from individuals and organizations on possible uses for a restored B'nai Abraham Synagogue. Ideas include a retreat or meeting space, concert and recital venue, or simcha location. The survey can be completed online at: www.ironrangejewishheritage.org (click on "How You Can Help").

The group is also seeking financial donations to help in restoration efforts. Donations can be mailed to Friends of B'nai Abraham Synagogue, c/o Dr. Charles Ostrov, Treasurer, 1788 Maryland Ave. N., Golden Valley, MN 55427. The Friends group is a 501(c)3 organization and all contributions are tax-deductible.

"It will be a museum which we hope will draw people from all over the country," Phillips said. "People do stop in and visit synagogues wherever they are in the world."

For information, contact Phillips at 612-377-5075 or Marjorie Ostrov at 763-544-6459, or visit: www.ironrangejewishheritage.org.