



Saving the Synagogue – History of the project

Once a vibrant Jewish community with four synagogues, the Minnesota Iron Range has only one remaining, B'nai Abraham Synagogue in Virginia, Minnesota. Built in 1909, B'nai Abraham's historical significance was recognized in 1980 when it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the official list of properties in the nation deemed worthy of preservation. The synagogue was in use until the late 1990's when the lack of congregants forced it to close its doors.

A group of interested people, many with a family connection to the Jewish community in Virginia, became concerned about the deteriorating condition of the synagogue and set about the task of restoring and preserving the building and finding new uses for it. And so the *Friends of B'nai Abraham* came to be. The restored B'nai Abraham will be used by the people of Virginia and the surrounding Range communities, and will be available to all Minnesotans. There will be a permanent museum-type exhibit honoring the Jewish presence on the Range, and its contribution to the Virginia community. Some of the B'nai Abraham Jewish ritual objects have been cleaned and will also be on display. The Virginia Area Historical Society will be our partner assisting with programming and day to day management. Although restoration is not yet completed, the building may be open for its first visitors two days a week this summer.



The Virginia Synagogue, B'nai Abraham, was erected in 1908. It is built of red brick with beautiful stained glass windows.

Did You Know?

The first Rosh Hashanah dinner held in Virginia took place at the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Mesberg in 1894.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

Our committee is busy writing grants, talking to officials and doing all we can to raise money. We need you to help – make a donation, tell us if you have a family foundation, copy old pictures that we can use on the website, send us memories and anecdotes.

HELP US KEEP OUR JEWISH HISTORY ON THE RANGE ALIVE!

What has been done

- Created 501(c)3 *Friends of B'nai Abraham*
- Stabilized the building:
Replaced roof, rain gutters and downspouts
- Removed damp basement ceiling tiles and carpet

- Cleaned and stored ritual and historical objects
- Hired professionals to do a re-use study
- Met with community officials, and had an open house for the community

- Developed a website:
www.IronRangeJewishHeritage.org

In Progress

Restoration of the sanctuary, ceiling replacement, insulation, electrical wiring, flooring and painting

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Why Are We Doing This?

The people who have joined together in this effort believe that we are all a part of what went before us and that history is important. We believe that the synagogue building is worth saving both for the people of Virginia and for the history that it represents. The building itself, in partnership with the *Virginia Area Historical Society*, will house meetings, concerts, speakers, and exhibits for the Virginia area. It will also contain a small exhibit about the Jewish community that once lived, worked and raised their families in that community or the surrounding Range communities. Those people were active residents of Virginia and contributed their time and money to make Virginia and the other Range cities good places to live. They deserve to be remembered.

Save the Date August 18, 2007 - Culture and Cuisine Program

The *St. Louis County Historical Society* will feature B'nai Abraham and Jewish culture at their Culture and Cuisine Program at the Duluth Depot on August 18, 2007. The program will feature a "Jewish" buffet dinner and a presentation by Marilyn Chiat PhD, an Art & Architectural Historian, on the history of Jews on the Iron Range with a focus on B'nai Abraham and the Jewish community of Virginia. There will be photo displays at the Depot showing some of the flourishing Jewish businesses from the first half of the 20th Century in Virginia, as well as other photos showing the B'nai Abraham sanctuary in the process of being restored.

Important Visitors

In early May 25, 2007, students from the *St. Paul Talmud Torah Day School*, along with teachers and parents, will travel to Virginia to do their part to help preserve B'nai Abraham. They will tour the building, learn a bit about the synagogue's history, do an art project incorporating ideas from the images and symbols on the stained glass windows and meet some local residents. For their mitzvah (good deeds) project, some of the children will carefully pack up all the prayer books that remain in the building to protect them while building renovation is underway. Others will pack up the dishes and other kitchen items that remain in the building so they can be stored, plant bushes and help in other ways. They will also tour the Virginia Area History Museum and stop at Mineview In The Sky to view the nearly three mile long and 450 foot deep Rouchleau mines just outside of town.

Cooperation is the Key!

The *Friends of B'nai Abraham* (Friends) and the *Virginia Area Historical Society* (VAHS) have agreed to work together to promote their common interests. The Friends have agreed that the VAHS will be able to utilize the synagogue building for appropriate temporary and traveling exhibits and various programs. In turn, the VAHS will staff the building two half days per week during the tourist season, and open and close the building for approved public events. We look forward to many interesting exhibits and events in the coming months.



Repairs are underway at B'nai Abraham.



Birthday party in the 1940s.

Visit our web site at:

www.IronRangeJewishHeritage.org

Excerpts from a paper delivered at a meeting of the St. Louis County Historical Society on March 1, 1955 by Mrs. Morris Greenberg of Eveleth, Minnesota

“As early as 1890 we find Jews among the settlers here. First residents were in the mining settlement of Tower and the Vermillion Range. When Mr. Sam Milavetz, who now lives in Virginia, came to Tower in 1892 he found several Jewish families already settled there. They were Mr. and Mrs. W. Simon, Mr. and Mrs. J. Gordon, and Mr. and Mrs. L. Gordon. With the discoveries of iron ore and the development of mines on the Mesabi Range, Jews spread out and settled in what is now Eveleth, Hibbing, Virginia and Chisholm.

Among the early settlers in Virginia were John Mesberg, Solomon Sax, Morris Shanedling, Adolph Keller, Sam Milavetz, J. Roman, Julius Shanedling, Ben Milavetz, Max Lewis, S. Dorfman, Herman Baer, J. Garon and A. Kenner.

These Jewish people who came from Europe ..., carried with them many fine characteristics, such as tolerance, brotherly love, charity and kindness.they have contributed greatly to the development and progress of this great section of the country, still maintaining their identity as Jews.”

A special thank you to all our supporters.

Grants awarded to the Friends of B'nai Abraham

- Matching grant from the State Historic Preservation Office of the Minnesota Historical Society - \$5,000
- Matching grant from the Iron Range Resources - \$15,000
- Minnesota Center on Energy and the Environment - \$10,000
- Beverly Foundation - \$25,000
- Virginia Community Foundation - \$2,500

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