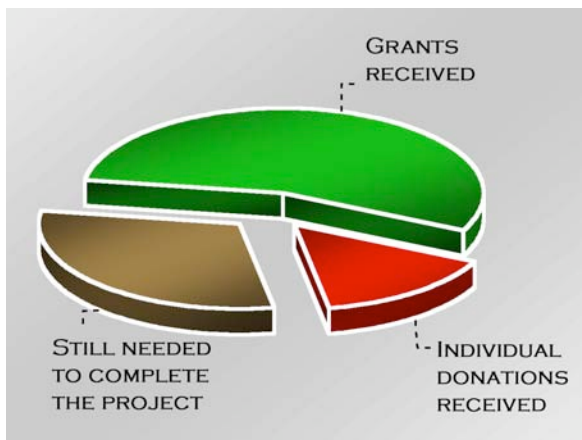


B'nai Abraham, built in 1909, is the last remaining synagogue on the Minnesota Iron Range. It is on the National Register of Historic Places. It had not functioned as a working synagogue since the late 1990s and had undergone significant deterioration. In 2005, the Friends of B'nai Abraham (FBA) was organized with the mission of restoring and preserving the building so that it can function as a community cultural center for all the people of Virginia and the surrounding communities as well as a small museum space to tell the story of the Jewish presence and contributions on the Iron Range. We are a non-profit organization, receiving our 501(c)3 designation in 2005. Together with our partner, The Virginia Area Historical Society (VAHS), we look forward to seeing the building used for many cultural and educational programs for the community.

We have worked hard and accomplished much. Meanwhile, the end is in sight, but we need more help. We continue to write grants, solicit individual donations and continue to be positive about our successes.



Please help if you can. Every donation is important. We have received \$217,500 in grants and over \$60,000 in individual donations from so many of you so far, and that's amazing. We are still short of our goal. Donations big and small - we appreciate them all. We want this to be a project that you will be proud to have been a part of. Among the many needs still to be funded are:

- Hard wood flooring in sanctuary
- Storm Windows
- Re-pointing of brick, parapets
- Removal of the non-original front addition
- Restore the front entrance with new doors, steps etc.
- Repair and protect the stained glass windows
- Redo the serving kitchen
- A maintenance endowment fund

If you are going to be in Virginia be sure to stop and see what the B'nai Abraham has become !!!!

SPECIAL NOTICE: During the Virginia All School Reunion, which is July 1-6, 2008, the building will be open for tours Tuesday, July 1 through Saturday, July 5 from 1-3 pm. Additional open times will be posted on the building.

REPORT FROM OUR PRESIDENT - Marjorie Ostrov

Our progress has been amazing! The sanctuary is light, bright and beautiful with original pews back in place. Restoration in that area of the building is nearly completed only needing the final maple hardwood floor.

Now that restoration is so far along, several events have been scheduled in the building this summer. In June we plan to hold an Open House and Tour for the many agencies and groups who provided the funding and support for our efforts so they can have the first look at the wonderful new space that has emerged.

During the Virginia All School/All City Reunion, July 1-6, members of our Board and other volunteers will be providing afternoon tours of the building.

The Minnesota Humanities Center has scheduled the building as one of the sites for its summer teacher-training workshop: *Building America: Minnesota's Iron Range, U.S. Industrialization, and the Creation of a World Power*. Friend's Board member, Marilyn Chiat, Ph. D, has been invited to present at one of the workshops. The Virginia City schools and other groups have expressed an interest in using the building for future programs and events and we anticipate additional programs as others learn about this wonderful space in the community.



Sanctuary nearly complete

DEMOLITION DERBY - Mike Blehert, Project Manager

Restoration of the sanctuary was highlighted in the October 2007 newsletter and can be seen in the photo on the front page, which was taken during the winter. The new arched ceiling, freshly painted walls and a new sub-floor to replace the one buckled by steam leaks are impressive to behold. The next phase, described below, included replacing all of the mechanical systems located in the lower level, making the building handicap accessible and restoring the lower level floor, walls and ceiling.



Work on the handicap lift tower

Work started just before the ground froze in the fall of 2007 with excavation for the handicap lift tower and for drain tile along the east and south walls. The lift tower, which is a brick addition on the exterior of the building, has been the single most expensive portion of the reconstruction and with a ground level entrance, provides access to both floors. Once the tower shell was built, lower level reconstruction began. The old radiators and wall sections were removed which revealed evidence of past moisture problems. When a portion of the concrete floor was broken out and removed for new plumbing, the contractor found that the entire old floor was sitting on wet clay which also needed to be removed and a new concrete floor was then able to be poured. Next, holes were drilled through the three-foot thick granite block walls for the new natural gas furnace and air exchange system and the kitchen and bathroom vents.

In just the last six weeks, the new lower level has started to emerge. A new ceiling mounted natural gas heat, ventilation and air exchange system has been installed. There is also a new water heater, electric service and electrical wiring. The two new handicap accessible bathrooms are 80 percent complete and the kitchen is roughed in. To improve energy efficiency, the exterior lower level walls have been insulated and storm windows have been installed over five of the stained glass windows that had previously been covered with wire grating. A new stairway from the main floor to the lower level in the original location has been completed and the handicap accessible lift was installed and passed inspection on May 1st.

The building, while not complete, will be open for limited use this summer and with continued financial support, the concrete entrance steps will be rebuilt to replace the sunken and rotted 1970's era wood entrance addition. Additionally, the lower level and portions of the sanctuary still need to be finished and the stained glass windows need to be restored.

It's been satisfying for our Board, funding agencies and our many contributors to see the rapid progress and we're all looking forward to maintaining the momentum into 2009 and beyond. Thank you for your support.

Scenes from our recent history



Youth groups from the Twin Cities visit B'nai Abraham in February when the furnace was out.



Margie Ostrov receiving an Iron Range Resources grant check from Ron Lackner, the Virginia, Minnesota City Finance Director.



Bob Roscoe, our historic preservation and architectural consultant, reviews architectural drawings.

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Archives of B'nai Abraham and Jewish history on the Iron Range

Sam Jaffee, (1888 – 1978)

A Biography In Loving Memory of B'nai Abraham Synagogue's Shamus and Spiritual Leader
Research and information provided by Dr. Harvey I. Kaufman and Sandra Kaufman Harris

Many of the Jewish people who grew up in Virginia, have fond memories of Sam Jaffee, who was an important part of synagogue life. He taught Sunday school, he prepared the boys for Bar Mitzvah and it is even said that he swept the floor.

In Europe, in the late 1800's, birth dates were rarely recorded; instead, a child's birth was remembered in such ways as "in the spring", near Passover, on the third day of Hanukkah, and so on. Sam Jaffee was born in the summer of 1888; upon needing an official birth date in America, he chose August 15, 1888. Sam spent his youth growing up in Kurkel, a small village in Lithuania, which was at that time a part of the Russian Empire. Once old enough to begin his formal Jewish studies, Sam was sent to a Yeshiva in Vilna, Lithuania. One of his sisters, Lyba Jaffee Edelstein, was living in Hibbing, MN and in 1908 Sam came to the United States to join her and her husband, Benjamin Edelstein, who owned a furniture store in Hibbing. Sam later married Ida Miller, who also came from near Vilna. They continued to live in Hibbing until their son, Martin was two years old and they then moved to Virginia where Sam opened a new and used furniture store.



Traditional style ritual hat (kippah)
worn by Sam Jaffee

Since Sam had Yeshiva training, he was asked by the Virginia B'nai Abraham Synagogue's Board to be in charge of the Virginia Shul (synagogue) as its Shamus, but not as a paid employee of the synagogue at that time. During those years there were about sixty Jewish Families in the Virginia area. Virginia had a very active Jewish community, especially for such a small town.


Mr. Jaffee's furniture store was greatly affected by the depression. In 1933, he finally closed the store and considered moving his family elsewhere to find work. Then the Synagogue's Board asked if he would consider remaining at the B'nai Abraham Synagogue in a paid position. He continued on with the Shamus duties, but he also became the acting Rabbi, the Bar Mitzvah teacher, and the person who led services every Friday evening and Saturday morning. He also led services for all of the other Jewish Holidays, for baby namings and funerals, and assisted the mohel for brises.


Sam Jaffee, a quiet and private man, was truly an important part of the Virginia Jewish community and its history. Young boys saw Mr. Jaffee as scheduled each week, in preparation for their upcoming Bar Mitzvahs. Some of the grade school children saw him every Wednesday afternoon throughout the school year, as students were often excused from public school to attend religious education classes at their own synagogue or church. By the late 1950's Ida Jaffee's health was failing. Sam left his position at the Virginia Shul, and in 1957 or 1958 Sam retired, and he and Ida moved to California. He died in June of 1978, two months short of his 90th birthday. He had two children: Martin Jaffee (deceased) and Eleanor Jaffee Reisman. Eleanor is 85 years old and lives with her husband in Aberdeen, Washington.

editor's note: Ritual leadership after Sam Jaffee's years in Virginia

The Virginia Congregation often hired rabbinical students to lead services for the High Holidays from the time that Mr. Jaffee left the congregation in about 1958 until the fall of 1972. Starting in 1972 and continuing on through the Fall of 1995, Jeffrey Freidson, who was then an extended member of Virginia's Milavetz Family living in Minneapolis, would come up to Virginia and the B'nai Abraham Synagogue to lead the High Holiday Services. He became highly respected for his leadership, commitment and service to the Virginia Jewish Community.

This article is excerpted from the complete version, which can be found on, the website: www.IronRangeJewishHeritage.org

We Need Your Help! We Are to Redeem Our House of Worship From the Debtor THEREFORE--- An Entertainment Will Be Given Sunday, February 15, 1925 <small>7:30 P. M.</small> At B'nai Abraham Synagogue--Virginia	Lunch  Tickets \$1
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The Celebration of the Burning of the Mortgage of the B'nai Abraham Synagogue Virginia, Minn. TO BE HELD Sunday, Feb. 15, 1925 Chicken Supper  Plate 75c	9/16
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Interview with Saragrace Kenner Haffron and Pearl Bankman Sakol on Friday May 11, 2007 at Saragrace's apartment in Des Plaines, Illinois.

Present were Leighton and Dianne Siegel, interviewers, Saragrace, Pearl and Pearl's daughter, Katie Sakol.



Pearl Bankman Sakol



Saragrace Kenner Haffron

Pearl and Saragrace have been friends forever and they have never lost touch with one another. They both grew up in Virginia and lived near one another, both eventually settled in Chicago and continued their friendship. Therefore, it was particular good to interview them together.

Saragrace was born on July 19, 1911 in Virginia. Saragrace's father, Abraham Kenner, was one of the original founders/contributors of B'nai Abraham synagogue beginning possibly in 1904, which might be the beginning of the planning period, since the synagogue itself was built in 1909. Abraham Kenner married Gertrude (Gertie) Bresky. She was from Minneapolis. When asked how they met, the answer was when two Jews came to a synagogue (shul) and either one had a son or a daughter, somehow they met.

Pearl Bankman Sakol was born in Duluth, MN on March 5, 1913. The family later moved to Virginia. Pearl's parents were Ethel and Benjamin Bankman. Saragrace's aunt, Hinda Abramson, introduced Ethel and Ben.

Both families moved to Virginia to make a living. Virginia was a fairly prosperous mining town and as such, businesses were necessary for the community, so Jewish families came to fill that gap. They heard there was opportunity on the Range and indeed there was.

Synagogue Life

During the High Holidays everyone came dressed in their best clothes. There was always someone like Mr. Jaffee to lead the service. There were lots of kids in the aisle, running up and down while their mothers were sitting upstairs in the women's section and Mr. Schibel was trying to keep order. As loud as the kids were, he was louder. Saragrace remembers a railing on the front steps of the shul. One year, they put prongs on it to prevent the kids from sliding down.

The membership of the synagogue varied from 40 to 100 families. There were Jews in most of the little towns in the area. Some came to Virginia for the holidays like Saragrace's relatives from Aurora, while those from Gilbert went to Eveleth.

The Jewish holidays were very important to life in the Jewish community. After Yom Kippur, most people broke their fast at home rather than at the synagogue. For Hanukah, the children put on skits that they made up and performed in the synagogue, which their parents thought were wonderful. Hammentashen for Purim was also made at home. The women remember a sukkah in the synagogue backyard. People had parties and other events in the social hall of the synagogue. It was at such a function that Pearl first tasted Bratwurst.

They had poker games at the shul every Sunday night. Legally they weren't supposed to do that, but they did it quietly. They would get the "rake off" and that helped support the shul. The community just loved it and everyone would turn out for the card game and the wonderful supper the women served on those Sunday nights.



This article is excerpted from the complete version, which can be found on, the website: www.IronRangeJewishHeritage.org

A special thanks to 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

Matching grant from Iron Range Resources - \$75,000

Matching grant from St. Louis County Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) \$75,000

Matching grant - Minnesota Historical Society Grant in Aid- \$10,000

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Board of B'nai Abraham: Honor Linda Mack's contribution to B'nai Abraham's historical preservation; Memory of Debbie Feinwachs

Fern Badzin: Memory of Bernard Badzin; Fanny and Sam Katz

Marcia and Jerry Baland: Memory of Monroe "Toots" Shanedling and Nate and Molly Keller

Paula and Don Bernstein: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Bobbie and Allen Bright: Memory of Leo Bright

Marilyn and Harvey Chiat: Honor of the birth of Dianne and Leighton Siegel's new grandson, Ezra James; honor of Noyme Blum's 80th Birthday; Memory of Beverly Deutsch; Memory of Leland Gottstein; Memory of Marie Segal; Wishing Dr. Mel Sigel a speedy recovery; Honor of Etta Fay Orkin's 75th Birthday

Judith and Rodney Cooperman: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Frank Clayman: Honor of Shirley Hamburger

Karen and Morris Davidman: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Nomi and Marty Dworkin: Honor of Ann Phillip's birthday

Margie and Donny Frishberg: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Sue-Ann and Gary Garvis: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Joanne and Bruce Gruen: Honor of Charlie and Margie Ostrov

Phyllis and Buddy Harris: Honor of Sandy and Allen Harris's Anniversary and Birthday of Sandy Harris

Diane and Neil Hoffman: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Thomas and Vicki Hurwitz: Memory of Debbie Feinwachs

Jonathan and Jennifer Karsh: Honor of Leighton and Dianne Siegel

Audra Keller: Memory of Sheldon Flom; Recovery of Mort Silverman; Birthday of Amy Langer; Honor of Dean Phillips; Memory Art Beugen; Memory Harvey Resnick; Memory of Beverly Deutsch; Honor of Don Frishberg's 80th Birthday; Honor of Jeanne Schibel Gross's 95th birthday; Honor of 65th birthdays of Susan Lewis and Pamela Canning; Honor of Catherine Fischer's 65th Birthday; Memory of Mother of Jane Efress; Memory of Dorothy Smith

Colette and Peter Johnson: Memory of Ruth Rubenstein Bearman

Harriet Joseph: Memory of Irene and David Schibel

Martin and Susanne Kanter: Honor of Charlie and Margie Ostrov

Barbara and Keith Knoop: Memory of Rose and Karl Sundquist

Marilyn Marker: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Terry Nolan and Carl Markus: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday

Milavetz Family: Memory of Parents - Frances and David Milavetz

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Arthur and Jan Phillips: Honor of Birthday of Ann Phillips
Phillip and Leah Pickman: Honor of Marilyn and Harvey Chiat; Honor of Elayne and Larry Chiat
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Phyllis and Lloyd Robinson: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday
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Lee and Marlene Rubenstein: Dedicated to members of the Rubenstein family - past, present and future
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Marvin and Stephanie Segal: Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday; Honor of Audra Keller; Honor of Leighton Siegel's special birthday
Leighton and Dianne Siegel: Memory of Pia and Chaim Siegel; Memory of Rose and Clarence Siegel; Memory of Priscilla Siegel; Honor of Charlie Ostrov's 70th birthday; Memory of Gail Rothman
Liba and Tommy Stillman: Honor of Audra Keller; Honor of Audra Keller's special birthday;
John and Kathleen Timmers: Memory of Ed Siegel
Marty and Marilyn Weisberg: Wishing Audra Keller the happiest and healthiest of special birthdays
Anne Shanedling Wolf and John Ribnick: Memory of Stephan Larsen Wolf

Gifts of kind and other aid - 2008

Judy Kuller: 1883 prayer book, printed in Russia, owned by Harry Shanedling, formerly of Virginia

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