

# CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF B'NAI ABRAHAM

1910 – 2010

BY MARILYN J. CHIAT, Ph.D.

Iron ore was discovered on the Mesabi Range in 1892. Quickly a remote region of northeastern Minnesota populated primarily by lumberjacks and fur traders was transformed into a bustling industrial area occupied by mining company executives, thousands of miners, and others who came to provide needed services and goods. By 1910, over 77,000 people lived on the Mesabi Range; of that number nearly 1,000 were Jewish.

The Range's first Jewish settlers arrived within a year of the discovery of iron ore, setting up shops on the Main Streets of towns and villages that were being established throughout the region. The names of some of these early settlers can be seen inscribed on the stained glass windows they donated to B'nai Abraham Synagogue, a congregation formed by eighteen families on October 21, 1905. Five years later Virginia's population was 10,000; Jewish residents numbered 120. It was at this time that the Jewish community decided to erect a synagogue, the first one to be built on the Range. Congregants traveling to the East Coast to purchase merchandise for their shops visited synagogues to gather ideas for their new building. Upon their return, they hired a Jewish contractor living in Chisholm to construct the synagogue; a beautiful red brick neo-Romanesque-style structure adorned with beautiful stained glass windows. Dedicated in 1910, the synagogue was described in the local newspaper as the "finest church [sic] on the Iron Range."



under construction 1910



in use 1927



entry annex 1970s



entry restoration 2010

For nearly ninety years, this beautiful building served its congregants not only as a house of prayer, but also as a gathering place for a variety of religious and social events. The building underwent unfortunate remodeling in the years following World War II, including asbestos ceiling tiles and wood paneling in the sanctuary, and an unsightly wooden addition on the façade, but it remained the focus of Jewish life in Virginia. As the grade of iron ore diminished, so, too, did the Range population. By the 1990s, there were few Jews living in Virginia, and the fate of the synagogue was in doubt. Although several surviving congregants tried to maintain the building, it began to deteriorate. Hearing of its endangered situation, a group of concerned people formed the Friends of B'nai Abraham, a non-profit organization whose mission is the restoration and preservation of the structure, and its reuse as a museum and cultural center.

## Our Iron Range Community uses the restored B'nai Abraham Building



Restoration underway



Community access



Community events

The Friends' restoration of this historic building ensures its continued presence on the corner of Fifth Street and Fourth Avenue. Within, its museum documenting the history of Iron Range Jewry perpetuates the memory and contributions of the Jewish people who once lived on the Range. With its partner, the Virginia Area Historical Society, B'nai Abraham will now be used for cultural and educational programs open to the entire community.

### Your continuing interest and contributions are vital to our success.

Still needing funding are, among many other things:

- An endowment for future maintenance of the building;
- Installation of a security system including smoke, water and carbon monoxide sensors and alarms;
- Resurfacing the interior stairways;
- Installation of exterior metal stairway handrails;
- Completion of landscaping; (A landscaping fund has been started.)
- Sidewalks to the handicap lift;
- Construction of a serving kitchen including appliances;
- Restoration of the balcony area;
- Completion of the entryway vestibule

We've made great progress but are still short of our goal.		All donations are fully tax deductible.
<p><b>Please send your donation to:</b></p> <p>Friends of B'nai Abraham c/o Charles Ostrov, treasurer 1788 Maryland Ave. North Golden Valley, MN 55427</p>	<p>Name: _____</p> <p>Address: _____</p> <p>City, State, Zip: _____</p> <p>Amount: _____</p> <p>To contribute stock contact: York Securities, Inc. 800-221-3154 directed to Kathleen -or- <a href="mailto:costrov@gmail.com">costrov@gmail.com</a> -or- <a href="mailto:phill037@umn.edu">phill037@umn.edu</a></p>	
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Memory of:    <input type="checkbox"/> Honor of: _____</p> <p>Send acknowledgement card to: Name: _____</p> <p style="padding-left: 150px;">Address: _____</p> <p style="padding-left: 100px;">City, State, Zip: _____</p>		

Clip and mail or donate online. Go to the "How You Can Help" page of our website.  
[www.IronRangeJewishHeritage.org](http://www.IronRangeJewishHeritage.org)