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THE HISTORY OF THE MONTEFIORE INSTITUTE

By *Jack Switzer*

The Little Synagogue on the Prairie is the Montefiore Institute, built about 1915 by Jewish farmers of the Montefiore bloc settlement to serve as their synagogue, Hebrew school, library and community centre.

The “colony,” a few miles north of Sibbald, Alberta, mid-way between Calgary and Saskatoon, began in 1910 when several Jewish families filed homesteads on the arid land. About twenty-five families – 85 souls - comprised the Montefiore Jewish community at its peak.

The settlement was named after Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), a London-based philanthropist and Jewish folk hero. The Montefiore Institute was located on the farm of Joseph and Fanny Chetner.

The Montefiore Institute hosted several weddings and many other social events, as well as visiting speakers. Its library held Yiddish, Hebrew and English books. Sadly, three men and three infants were buried in a make-shift cemetery near the synagogue.

Support from the Jewish Colonization Association was too little and too late to save the Jewish famers from poor crops and the many hardships of frontier life on the prairies. By the mid-1920s many had left the area for the better opportunities and more vibrant Jewish milieus of Calgary and other centers.

Community use of the Montefiore Institute ended about 1927. The building was used as a granary until it was moved to the town of Hanna in about 1940, where it served as a residence until May 2008.

PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

We have much to be proud of over the past year. The Society has done an incredible amount of work to rescue one of the last surviving Alberta wooden prairie synagogues. Board and committed members have raised significant funds; worked to ensure that the building will be restored with care and sensitivity; moved forward with planning the building’s long-term interpretation, including developing a furnishings plan; and continued our research to uncover documents and photographs of the colony’s history.

Two days in particular really stand out in our minds. On June 10th and 11th, 2008 we picked up and moved the synagogue from Hanna to its

temporary storage and are just weeks away from bringing it to Heritage Park Historical Village.

The Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project is an unprecedented community effort to bring a Jewish voice and presence to one of the largest historical parks in Canada. Once completed, in 2009, the restored Montefiore Institute will serve to acknowledge the long and productive history of the Jewish people in Alberta. It will say with quiet dignity and grace, “We were here right from the beginning and we helped build this land.”

On behalf of Trudy, Halyna, Shel, Manny, Jack, Leslie, Bobby and Betti, I want to thank our donors and volunteers for their support. We look forward to seeing you at our 2nd AGM.

Sincerely,
Irena Karshenbaum



OUR LITTLE TUMBLEWEED ROLLING
DOWN THE HIGHWAY ON JUNE 11 2008.



A DESCENDENT OF THE MONTEFIORE COLONY REMEMBERS

By *Shel Bercovich*

According to the 1911 Canadian Census, my grandfather, Saul Bercovich, and three oldest uncles arrived in Canada some time in 1907. My grandmother, Mariam, and their 4 other children arrived soon after. The family stayed in Montreal for a short time with a relative of Mariam's, then were enticed to Calgary by "free" land, apparently by a countryman, a Mr. Goldman. This might have been the Goldman who settled on a farm in the Rumsey Jewish colony in 1906.

On May 9th, 1910, my grandfather and three uncles each filed in Calgary for a homestead near Sibbald, Alberta.

Under the Homestead Act, they each got a "home quarter" (1/4 section, 160 acres) for \$10.00 and were able to take an option on another quarter for \$3.00 per acre to be paid out over 3 years.

During their time on the farm, the settlers built the Montefiore Institute. Until they could afford to bring in a rabbi, it appears that my grandfather officiated at weddings and possibly other religious events as well.

Crops were not particularly good in the Sibbald area. They were subject to drought, pests and hail and the farms did not do well. Finally, in 1923, a number of the farmers had had enough and they abandoned their farms. Some, like Saul, moved to Calgary, but many of the younger ones moved directly to southern California, where they continued to have "Montefiore Society" gatherings for many years.

On May 30th, 2008 when our society took possession of this lost synagogue, I was able to put my hand on the side of the building

in which my father, Max Bercovich, had his Bar Mitzvah almost exactly 90 years before.

HELP LOCATE THE SYNAGOGUE STAR

When the building was complete, a wrought-iron Star of David, apparently made in one of the colony farm shops, was proudly affixed on high on the front gable wall. It was still there even when the colony and its synagogue building had been abandoned. But now, only a star shaped opening in the wall remains. Was the star taken to Edmonton when the graves were moved to the Jewish cemetery there in the late 1930s? Was it taken to California when some of the settlers moved there? There is the possibility that it still exists, and the Society would love



THE OPENING WHERE THE STAR OF DAVID ONCE WAS.

to find it and return the star to its original place on the building. If you have any information, please let us know at info@littlesynagogue.ca.

DONOR LISTING

At the close of the project, we will be publishing the names of all donors in appropriate newspaper publication(s) as well as other printed material (i.e. book about the project). In accordance with the Personal Information Protection Act, we need confirmation of your wishes regarding disclosing your name. If you **DO NOT** wish to have your name disclosed preferring your donation to remain **Anonymous**, please inform us in writing by September 30, 2008 at Elbow River RPO 94016, Calgary, Alberta, T2S 0S4.

DONATIONS STILL NEEDED

Please make a cheque payable to "Heritage Park Society – Synagogue Project" and mail to Elbow River RPO 94016, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2S 0S4. Donations are tax deductible.

info@littlesynagogue.ca

www.littlesynagogue.ca

Heritage Park
Historical Village
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