

## Allen County History

Fort Wayne, the county seat of Allen County, developed from a fort founded in 1794. Early pioneers were attracted to Fort Wayne by the profitable fur trade.<sup>1</sup> The first known Jewish man in the area was John Jacob Hays, who moved to Cahokia, Illinois on the Mississippi River in 1793, and eventually was appointed an Indian agent at Fort Wayne.<sup>2</sup> He left Fort Wayne in 1823.

Construction of the Wabash & Erie Canal in the 1830s fostered further commercial possibilities and caused a great influx of immigrants to the growing community. Although no Jews are listed in the 1840 census, Sigmund Redelsheimer had arrived the year before and soon established a general store on Columbia Street in partnership with Abraham Oppenheimer, also Jewish. Redelsheimer would help found the first Jewish congregation in the state. In 1844, Isaac Lauferty arrived to establish a clothing store, and later a private bank. In 1875, the city directory lists Lauferty as a banker and broker.

By 1848, there was a sufficient number of Jews to form The Society for Visiting the Sick and Burying the Dead (in 1861, they changed their name to Congregation Achduth Vascholom), making it the oldest congregation in Indiana. The Society for Visiting the Sick and Burying the Dead purchased land in Fort Wayne for a cemetery, but this land proved not to be large enough for the group's needs, so in 1884, the congregation purchased acreage within the larger community cemetery (Lindenwood Cemetery - listed in the National Register of Historic Places). An Orthodox Jewish Cemetery would be dedicated in 1911.

The next aspect of life that was import to these individuals was the education of their children about their religion. They established a religious school in 1854.<sup>3</sup> Caring for the cemetery and creating the religious

school united members of the congregation, but the issue of reforming the synagogue deeply divided members, causing many to leave the synagogue. Until 1859, Congregation Achduth Vascholom met in the house of one of its founders,<sup>4</sup> Frederick Nirdlinger. When the new synagogue was dedicated, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (proponent of the Reform movement) came to Fort Wayne. Congregation Achduth Vascholom became a charter member of the American Reform Movement of Judaism. The synagogue moved four times; they moved to their current location in 1961.<sup>5</sup> The first and second building no longer stand, but the third temple is used by a local not-for-profit; the fourth building is their current home. The Congregation has a Temple Museum, founded in 1928 and was designated the Goldmann Memorial Museum in 1931.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1880s and 1890s, Jews from Russian, Poland, and other eastern European countries began immigrating to the city. Because of divisions between the German Jews and the Eastern European Jews (described in the chapter “Jews in America”), these Eastern Europeans formed B’nai Israel Congregation. In 1912, another group of European Jews formed B’nai Jacob Synagogue. Just some of the founders of B’nai Israel included Sam Fieldbleat, a clothing storeowner; Louis Novitsky; and Morris Tarlitz (Tarletz). When B’nai Israel disbanded in 1936, members split their loyalty between Congregation Achduth Vascholom and B’nai Jacob. B’nai Jacob became a Conservative Congregation in 1938. In 1955, they moved into a new location, but left that in 1997.<sup>7</sup>

Always involved in the philanthropy and charity of their community, the Jewish women formed the Ladies’ Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1861 to help Union soldiers of all faiths. Eventually this organization grew to be one of the state’s most powerful philanthropic/charitable organizations. When it disbanded in 1921, the newly formed Fort Wayne Jewish Federation picked up its philanthropic work.<sup>8</sup> The Federation was a welfare and relief organization that had a goal of coordinating the work and fundraising of the Jewish community. By 1939,

they had hired their first executive director, Joseph Levine, who became one of their most influential directors. He also founded the Indiana Jewish Historical Society and served as its president for years.

### **Business Owners and Community Leaders**

Jews were always active in the business life of Fort Wayne. This included everything from clothing to dry goods to scrap dealers. This listing is just some of the business owners found in the city directories, county histories, and community memory.

Scrap dealers included Abraham Levy (1895), Abe field (1910), *The Huntington Scrap Yards* owned by Larry Levin (1903), and Aaron Heiligman's yard - he was a founder of B'nai Jacob.



Fort Wayne had several Jewish owned alcohol related businesses including a beer production facility owned by Jacob Becker from 1861-1872, a liquor store owned by Leopold Falk from 1861-1872, and a wine distributor owned by Sam Heilbraner from 1861-1866, and then again 1870-1872.

Clothing, shoes, leather goods, and other clothing type businesses were the most abundant. Just some of these businessmen included:

*Congregation Achduth Vascholom located in Fort Wayne (Allen County). The congregation moved into this synagogue in 1961.*

- \*Joseph Black - ladies cloths - 1868-1872
- \*Frank Leopold – leather – 1870-1872
- \*Leopold Freiburger – leather – 1872
- \*Abraham Heilbronner - hides – 1861-1870
- \*Victor Jacobson – men’s clothing – 1861-1872
- \*Max Lauferty – tailor 1861-1872
- \**Levy Brothers Store* – clothing store opened 1895
- \*Isaac Kretzman opened his store in 1910. He was a Russian Jew, who became a leader of the non-German Jews. He died in 1921.
- \**Epstein Company Clothing Store*
- \**Kratsch Brothers Clothing Store* – 1900
- \**Benjamin Lehman Clothing Store* – 1895
- \**L. Mautner and Co.*, tailors – 1900
- \*Harry Berman boot maker

Manufacturers included

- \*Mendel Zweig was an umbrella manufacturer. Max Nirdlinger owned a baseball bat factory (1883)<sup>9</sup>

Food or grocery store owners included:

- \* Delicatessen owned by Mendel Hurowitz, in 1916. By 1921, the deli had changed to a grocery. Hurowitz also served as the Rabbi for B’nai Jacob.
- \**Frank Dry Goods*, owned by Marx Frank opened in 1921.
- \**Karn Brothers* meat market, 1900.
- \* Mendel Frank owned grocery store.
- \*Hannah Frankenstein owned a grocery store.<sup>10</sup>

Frederick Nirdlinger was born in Hechingen, Germany. At the age of 16, he came to Pennsylvania and then moved to Fort Wayne. He established the *New York Emporium*, which grew to be one of the largest clothing stores in Indiana. He served as president of Congregation Acduth Vesholom. Nirdlinger was involved in the civic life of Fort Wayne. In 1845, he was an organizing member of new Lodge of Odd Fellows; later, he helped to found the Kekionga Guards. Active in the Democratic Party, he was elected a township trustee in 1855. When Stephen A. Douglas came to town in 1860, he rode in Nirdlinger’s carriage. Nirdlinger’s home became the center of the local Jewish community, serving as a meeting place for most of their religious and

social gatherings. By 1848, when the local Jewish families established the minyan, they met in Nirdlinger's home.

In 1849, the editor of the *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, Thomas Tigar, commented on a rumor that peddlers, many of whom were Jewish, were the cause of a smallpox outbreak. Nirdlinger immediately cancelled his businesses' advertising and his own subscription to the paper. After several days of insults hurled at Nirdlinger, eventually Tigar apologized for his unfounded remarks, but did continue to warn individuals to be careful of the Jewish peddlers.

*Wolf & Dessauer* opened in 1896 by Sam Wolf and Myron Dessauer. Sam's father, A. Wolf was a city council man. The family also opened a store in Huntington run by William Latz; this store closed in 1969. The Fort Wayne location moved into a new structure in 1917, but that was destroyed by fire in 1962. Indianapolis based *L.S. Ayres Company* bought out the stores in 1969.<sup>11</sup>

G. Irving Latz senior owned an A.M. Strauss (see below) designed home and was a founder of the Jewish Federation. He served as an influential businessman in Fort Wayne. He died in 1947.

G. Irving Latz II was a WWII vet, was director of *Fort Wayne National Bank*, on board of hospital, president of the Fort Wayne Jewish Foundation, part of the Fort Wayne Music Society, and active in United Fund drives.

William Latz served as a State Representative for four terms, was Allen County Council President, served as the Chair of Better Business Bureau, sat on the Convention Bureau and Civic Theatres' board, was vice president of the Fine Arts Foundation, and served in the United States Army.

Alvin Strauss, a local architect, opened *A. M. Strauss*. He was born in Kendallville (Noble County) in 1895. His parents were immigrants from Germany; his father was a merchant in Kendallville. After school and an apprenticeship in Chicago, he moved to Fort Wayne in 1915. His early projects (1918-1926) were located mainly in northern Indiana and northwest Ohio. Early work included residences, apartment buildings, commercial buildings, churches, and mausoleums. By 1924, he was building larger, more extravagant homes in Fort Wayne. Strauss built a number of buildings for the local Jewish community, including homes and synagogues, most of which still stand today. By 1927, he was building some of the most prominent structures in Fort Wayne including the *Emboyd Theatre*, the *Lincoln Bank Tower*, and the *St. Vincent Villa*. Strauss was also involved in community affairs including the Chamber of Commerce, Elks Lodge, Fort Wayne Country Club, and the Jewish Federation. He was a

director of the Indiana Society of Architects, president of the Fort Wayne Society of Architects, and was an active member of Achduth Vesholom Congregation. For a more complete look at Strauss' work, see Phylis Brockmyer's "Compilation of Architectural Works by A.M. Strauss, A.M. Strauss Associates, Inc., Strauss Associates, Inc. 1918-1989 Fort Wayne, Indiana."



*St. Vincent Villa in Fort Wayne (now used as the YWCA campus) designed by Alvin Strauss in 1932. It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1994. Photo: Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, 1994.*



*The Lincoln Bank Tower in Fort Wayne was the tallest building in Indiana when designed by Alvin Strauss in 1929. Photo: Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, 1996.*

Many of the second generation Jews moved away from working in the family stores to work in more professional occupations. Isaac Rosenthal was a doctor as early as 1885, serving as president of the Allen County Medical Society. Maurice Rosenthal opened his medical practice around 1905. Byron Novitsky was a lawyer who had a firm in the 1960s; his law firm building still stands. George Gene Nathan was an author and critic.<sup>12</sup> Minette Baum was an active leader in women's Zionist movement.

Allen County contained three different congregations, three Jewish cemeteries, and a large population living in thriving in the community. A possibility of over 549 sites were identified and any relation of Jewish history; 309 could be located - 109 of the 309 buildings no longer exist.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Fort Wayne Historic Preservation Review Board, Fort Wayne Interim Report (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Fort Wayne Historic Preservation Review Board, 1996), 11.

<sup>2</sup> W. William Wimberly, "The Jewish Experience in Indiana Before the Civil War: An Introduction," *Indiana Jewish Historical Society Publication No.6* (1976), 6; Carolyn Blackwell, "Jews," *Peopling Indiana*, Robert Taylor and Connie McBirney, eds (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996), 315; L.C. Rudolph. *Hoosier Faiths* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Frances Lowens, *The Records of Congregation Achduth Vesholom, Fort Wayne, Indiana 1848-1883, Books One, Two, and Three Translated from the German*, (Fort Wayne, Indiana: self published), 1990.

<sup>4</sup> While all were followed in the survey, and are found in the Excel spreadsheet, they are not all listed in this context statement.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Zweig, "The First Hundred and twenty-Five Years," *Indiana Jewish Historical Society Publication No.2* (September 1973), 1-4.

<sup>6</sup> Congregation Achduth Vesholom, Achduth Vesholom Congregation history, <http://uahc.org/congs/in/in010/history.htm> (accessed June 18, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Congregation B'nai Jacob, Congregation Bnai Jacob Conservative Synagogue History, <http://mysite.verizon.net/bnaijacob/history.html> (access 30 August 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Indiana Jewish Historical Society, *IJHS News*, (May 1994), 2.

<sup>9</sup> Indiana Jewish Historical Society, *IJHS News*, (August 1981), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Indiana Jewish Historical Society, *IJHS News*, (February 1979), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Barron and Kathie Barron, *Wolf & Dessauer: An Album of Memories*, (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Self Published), 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Indiana Jewish Historical Society, *IJHS News*, (August 1981), 3.