

LaPorte County History

LaPorte County, nestled in the Dunes Region of Northwest Indiana had its first white settlers beginning in the early 1830s. Both Michigan City and LaPorte grew as the most populated hamlets of the county. LaPorte grew due to Section 4 of LaPorte County's Act of Incorporation, stating that county commission meetings were to be held near the center of the county; this also attracted residents and business to the center of the newly formed county. Michigan City would thrive due to economic benefits of being on Lake Michigan, but it would quickly be outclassed by Chicago's larger port.¹

The Jewish history of the county is centered in Michigan City and LaPorte that afforded immigrants the opportunity to peddle and trade goods, a skill that a number of Jewish immigrants took advantage of to establish themselves financially. The earliest artifacts of the Jewish community in the Dunes region are two gravestones found in LaPorte County. Dating back to 1837 these stones are believed to be those of Jewish peddlers in the region.²

The first congregation of the region, B'ne Zion, or Sons of Zion, was organized in 1854 and was centered in LaPorte. Their first meetings had no regular rabbi, nor did it have a permanent building. This community was built up of 40-50 various families from throughout northwest Indiana, including Gary, Valparaiso, Plymouth and Michigan City.

As a congregation, their first act was the purchase of land for a Jewish cemetery in 1859. The B'ne Zion Congregation still actively maintains the land, situated within Patton Cemetery in LaPorte. The congregation was able to afford the purchase of their first, and only, home in LaPorte. Situated on the corner of "West and First St," which is today Indiana Ave and Osborn St., the members of B'ne Zion purchase a lot in 1864. By

1869, a small red brick temple had been built.³ Between these two significant accomplishments, the membership adopted a revised constitution, establishing fees, rights, duties of officers and, most importantly, the “Reform Service according to the doctrine [sic] laid down in the prayer book of Dr. Einhorn.”⁴

Members were charged dues as part of the building costs, maintenance and salaries. A \$10 admission charge was to accompany the membership application as were \$2 per month to LaPorte residents and \$1 per month for those from anywhere else.⁵ These fees, along with a sale of seats (\$135-\$330 each) allowed for the building to be owned by the congregation by the dedication of the temple in 1869.

Through membership dying, moving or leaving the faith, the congregation dwindled. In 1886, Rabbi Jacob Wile resigned his post, because the congregation unable to afford his services. He stayed on as a “reader” and choir director for \$400 a year. The congregation continued to shrink and by the mid 1890s regular services were never held, except for an occasional wedding or funeral.

In 1898 the congregation finally met to sell the vacant building and invest the proceeds to care for the cemetery and for “charitable purposes.”⁶ The property went for \$3,000 to Edward Michael, who subsequently tore the building down. The pews and the pulpit were donated to Dr. Stolz in Chicago for a Sunday school at his new temple. The rest of the belongings were donated to the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society for the groups use. The B’nai Zion Cemetery Association formed in 1867 to care for and improve the cemetery is the only remaining Jewish organization in LaPorte.⁷



The Guggenheim-Wile Building in LaPorte (LaPorte County).

Jacob Wile, the first and only rabbi of the B'ne Zion Congregation, presided in the constructed temple. He was a successful businessman and influential member of the LaPorte community. Having arrived in LaPorte in 1854, he established the *Citizen's Bank* in LaPorte in 1857. From this time until the construction and dedication of the temple in 1869, services were held on the second floor of his bank. He was featured in the 1880 History of LaPorte County, being one of only two Jews cited in the county.⁸ His business partner, Jacob Guggenheim finally made the 1904 edition. The Guggenheim family

lived just three houses down from the Wile's on the same street. Both of their homes, and their business are notable historic building still standing in the city of LaPorte.

Partnering between these successful Jewish families was not unusual. Guggenheim and Jacob's brother, Simon Wile, partnered with the Fox Family to establish the *Fox Woolen Mills*, the success of which provided LaPorte with desperately needed jobs. The Fox contributions to LaPorte were above and beyond the economic benefit of the Factory. Samuel Fox was born in



Jacob Guffenheim's home in LaPorte (Laporte County).

Bavaria in 1838. He came to the United States in 1854 and was in LaPorte in 1858. He started a business with Jacob Wile and by 1864, they had started the Woolen Mill. Samuel died in 1894. The Fox family altruism played an important role in LaPorte's history. The patriarch, Samuel made the first donation of Fox Park, a 100-yard public park in 1911. The sons both continued this tradition. Herbert gave land for what would become the *Beechwood Golf Course*, a municipal course still in play today. Maurice, however, gave the most lasting and impactful donation to LaPorte's community.

As a tribute to his deceased parents, Maurice proposed a civic auditorium and gymnasium center for "all individuals and civic and educational groups or bodies, membership of which is not limited by race, nationality or religion," and with a ban on any group that was biased or against the Government.⁹

Civic Auditorium and Gymnasium, given by Maurice Fox in honor of his parents in LaPorte (LaPorte County).



Other influential individuals included Jacob Meyer, who came from Germany, and served in the city council, Nathan Low who owned *Lows Clothing Store* in LaPorte. M. Henoch owned a building in which the services of the congregation were held before they owned a temple in LaPorte, as well as *Schnewind Shoe and Boot* store in LaPorte.

Isadore Levine was the first person of Jewish faith to sit on the Indiana State Supreme Court. Justice Levine was born March 25, 1897, in Michigan City, Indiana, and died April 5, 1963, in LaPorte, Indiana. He attended the University of Michigan and received an B.A. in 1920 and a J.D. in 1921. He was admitted to the Indiana bar and opened a general law practice in



Isadore Levine's home in LaPorte (LaPorte County).

LaPorte. In January 1955, he was appointed to the Indiana Supreme Court to fill a vacancy.

Michigan City

In Michigan City, in 1900, Oheb Sholom Cemetery Association was founded. They acquired a part of Greenwood Cemetery for Jewish burials. The first Reform services were held in 1904, renting halls for the high holy days. They organized a congregation in 1912 named Sinai Congregation. The Ladies' Aid Society was founded in 1920 (AKA Sinai Temple Sisterhood). In 1930, the congregation bought a former church. In 1953, they dedicated a new temple. They had a Religious School, youth group and a B'nai B'rith. This was taken over by the Sinai congregation in 1947. In 1961, the cemetery name was changed to Sinai Temple Cemetery. In 2004, the temple celebrated their 90th anniversary.

Footnotes

- ¹ Healthy Communities of LaPorte County, Brief History of LaPorte County, www.laportecounty.net/history/brief_history.html (accessed September 14, 2006).
- ² Dunes Region Jewish History. Find Citation.
- ³ Nettie Stern and Edith Backus, History of B'Ne Zion, Stern and Backus, not published.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Excerpts from Minutes of Meetings of Congregation B'Ne Zion on 10/30/1898 and 11/30/1898
- ⁷ At time of Publication.
- ⁸ Dunes Region.
- ⁹ LaPorte Paper.



Sinai Temple Cemetery in LaPorte (LaPorte County).