

Monroe County History

Bloomington, the county seat of Monroe County, was settled in 1815. It is the home to Indiana University, founded in 1820, it is one of the oldest institutions of higher learning west of the Alleghenies. The first Jewish family to arrive in Bloomington was the brothers Isaac, Samuel and Levi Kahn, from France around 1855. Soon after their arrival, they opened their clothing business. In 1860 their nephew Moses joined the business. After serving as intern in the business with his uncles for several years, Moses joined Solomon Tannenbaum in business. In 1883, after a disastrous fire, Tannenbaum withdrew from the partnership. Moses paid back all creditors, re-opened the business, and was one of the founding members of the Bloomington fire department. Moses died in 1920.

The Becovitz family came to Bloomington in 1893 from Poland. Abe opened a fruit store, but by 1900 he had moved out of the county. Two of his sons moved to Bedford (Lawrence County) to open a junk business. Later they opened a clothing store called *Loubens*. After an argument between the brothers, Loubens became *Ben's* store, while Louis started the *Vogue*, an upscale women's clothing store. Louis also opened an audio store called *HiFi Specialists*.

Other Jewish families in Bloomington were Zelda and Clarence Baum, Ida Lashofsky, and the Kadison and Cohen families. The Kadisons owned a cigar and billiard parlor on the west side of the square, which opened in 1909. In 1916 the Kadisons joined Moses Wolf selling clothing.

In 1917, Irving Fell came to Bloomington to study music at Indiana University and to help his family in the scrap metal business. Fell operated the first Hebrew Sunday school, which met at various homes.

The Moses Montefiore Synagogue, designed by architect George H. Miller, was completed in 1889. It was rebuilt in 1892 after a fire. It served as an active synagogue until 1959, when it was sold to the Unity Church.

The first Hillel (the college division of B'nai B'rith) building was built in 1936. Members of the Jewish community began using it for a Sunday school.¹ The wife of the Hillel Rabbi, Mae Clement, wrote a book called *Without My Gloves* about her life in Bloomington in 1940, discussing the anti-Semitic attitude of the community. In 1943 the Indiana/Kentucky Association of B'nai B'rith convinced the National Hillel Commission to purchase a three-story brick building (the Cravens' dormitory for men) as the new location for the IU Hillel. Ben Becovitz started the drive for the new Hillel building; the building was dedicated in 1943.

Little social interaction occurred outside of holiday functions between Jewish faculty and the few Jewish businessmen and professionals in town. By 1965 the Jewish community had 25 families and had decided to incorporate as the University Jewish Community, while still using the facilities of Hillel and IU. Known as the Beth Shalom Congregation, by 1971 they built Beth Shalom Synagogue. Both the Hillel and the Beck Chapel on the Indiana University campus were used for Jewish events. By 1973, there was a Bloomington Jewish Community building on 3rd Street. Also in 1971, a Jewish section of the Valhalla Memory Gardens was established.

Some of the Jewish faculty did not want to affiliate or help with fundraising. Melvin Plotinsky broke away and started a new group called Anshe Torah. This group no longer exists.

Dr. Henry Fishel established the Jewish Studies Department at Indiana University in 1969. The Jewish Studies Department at Indiana University became one of the leading centers in the United States. It was established in 1969 and designated as the Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University.

G. George Fox talks about being a rabbi at a reform congregation in Bloomington, 1908-1910 in *Lives and Voices: A Collection of American Jewish Memoirs*. Stanley Chyet, ed. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication society of America, 1972.

Footnotes

¹ The Hillel was established to serve the needs of the Jewish students at Indiana University.

² http://www.zbt.org/about_zbt/history.htm (Accessed September 12, 2006).