

## Wayne County History

Richmond, Indiana is particularly rich in Quaker history and is the home of Earlham College, founded by Quakers in 1847. Even before the establishment of this institution of high learning, the first Jew settled in the county. In 1834 William Brady, a harnesser and saddler, became the first permanent Jewish resident of Richmond; he died in 1872. Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, the leader in American Reform Judaism, reported in his German magazine, *Die Deborah*, on October 14, 1864, that there were Jewish families living in Richmond:

In the State of Indiana there is until now only one (synagogue) in Fort Wayne and a building planned for Evansville; however, communities are found in Indianapolis, Lafayette, and Terre Haute, many Jewish families reside in Vincennes, Logansport, and Richmond.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next several decades, a variety of families from not just Germany, but also East Europe began arriving. Solomon Fox arrived from Alsace-Lorraine in 1871. It is possible that Fox might have come to Richmond to join relatives who had been in the city since 1866. The 1878 Business Directory reports that Solomon Fox was working for Sam and Simon Fox. Simon Fox (1842-1913) was born in France and came to America in 1855, moving to Richmond in 1866. He was a prominent clothing merchant and kept a shop in downtown. Solomon Fox worked for Simon for two years before opening his own hat shop. Solomon died in 1922.

George Fox, born in 1865, came to Richmond in 1871. By 1907 he became a partner in a hat business. George married Millie Spiesberger of Iowa. Millie helped organize the Richmond Sisterhood in 1919. George was an active member of the Richmond Jewish Congregation, Rotary Club, Elks and Masonic Lodges as well as President of the city's Sinking Fund Commission and Director of the State Clothiers Association. George died in March, 1940.

Alvin Fox (1895-1939) was born in Richmond, Indiana, and lived there until 1936. His father, George, made him a partner in the hat business in 1919 and Alvin later worked as the manager of *Richman Brothers*, the successor to the Fox store. Alvin's wife, Claudine, participated in the Sisterhood. Alvin was an active member of the congregation, Kiwanis, and the Elk Lodge.

Solomon and Lizzie Frankel moved to Richmond in 1898 and operated the *Model Clothing Company* (1910). They never affiliated with the congregation. Their son Harry (1888-1948) is best remembered as "Singin, Sam, the Barbasol Man," having sung the shaving company's theme song for seven years. In the early 1930s, Harry was a popular radio entertainer in America and later did advertising work for Coca Cola.

Morris Fivelowitz (later shortened to Fivel) arrived in Richmond by 1905 with his relative Solomon Saffer. Morris' brother, Sam followed in 1905. Like the Frankels, they did not participate in the congregation or Sisterhood. However, many of their children who were born and raised in Richmond became active members of the community in their adult years.

Solomon Saffer worked as a junk dealer. The Saffers' son Mendle ran the *King's Men Shop* in Richmond. Mendle Saffer had joined the Richmond Jewish congregation by 1930 and later was one of the original members of the local B'nai B'rith.

Sam Jaffe settled in Richmond in 1905. Because he could not find employment in Richmond, he went to Cincinnati where he worked for a butcher. Later he moved to Sidney, Ohio where a scrap dealer employed him. After saving enough money to buy a horse and wagon, he began peddling in Ohio and Indiana. He returned to Richmond and opened a scrap yard. In 1933, he opened a coal yard.

Abraham and Fannie Harsh owned and operated the *Tiger Coal and Supply Company*. Harsh donated a Sefer Torah to the Richmond Jewish Congregation. The scroll is now one of three housed at Beth Boruk (the synagogue in Richmond).

Sam Fred was in the clothing business and had opened the *\$10.00 Clothing Store*. In 1919 when Fred took the initiative in organizing a relief campaign for European Jews displaced during World War I. Fred also work to help build the YMCA, helped to organize of the Welfare Fund (parent organization of the Community Fund) and the Richmond Social Service Bureau. When Sam died in 1932, the Richmond Jewish Congregation sent a memorial to the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

Zalmen and Gutel Charongitsky came from Lithuania in 1882; their children followed shortly after. The children shortened their family name to Vigran. Several members eventually settled in Richmond, one moved to Connersville (Fayette County), and the reminder stayed in Cincinnati. Sam Vigran moved to Richmond in 1913, opening a jewelry, sporting goods, and luggage store. Sam joined the Richmond Congregation and later served as its president in 1932-1933. He died in 1933.

Sam was joined by one of his younger brothers, Ben, in 1919. Originally, Ben moved to Connersville with another brother, but only stayed for one year. He left Connersville to move to Rushville, Indiana (Rush County) where he owned a variety store from 1908 until 1913. He left Rushville to purchase a variety store in Oxford, Ohio. He returned to Richmond in 1918 where he opened a ladies, ready-to-wear business. Ben served as an officer in the congregation and joined the B'nai B'rith chapter. He served as a director of the old *American Trust and Savings Company* and was a member of the Masonic and Elks Lodges and of the

Grotto. In the summer of 1945 Ben sold his business to *Hixbie Stores*; he died in 1948. Ben's son, Marvin, was killed during World War II. The Marvin Vigran Memorial scholarship fund for students entering Earlham College was established in his honor.

The third Vigran to arrive in Richmond was Harry. At 19, he moved from Cincinnati to Aurora, Indiana where he opened his own store. He stayed for thirteen years, moving to Richmond in 1919. He bought the *Iloff Store* at Sixth and Main and opened *Vigran's Variety Store*. Harry joined the Richmond Jewish Congregation. His wife, Rose, became active in the Sisterhood.

The second generation of Vigrans to living in Richmond also provided community leadership. Stanley graduated from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He has served for thirty years in the Department of Parks and Recreation, was the first Jew in Richmond to serve on the Board of Directors of the Chamber of Commerce, served as the President of the Board of Directors of the local YMCA, and as a member of their Board of Trustees. His wife Joan was active in the *Richmond Civic Theater*.

Just west of Richmond is the town of Straughn, Indiana. Florence and Frank Breese moved there in 1920. Frank was a timber buyer and ran a sawmill in Hagerstown, Indiana. Another Jewish family, the Goldmans moved to Straughn in the mid 1920s, working as farmers. The Goldman farm consisted of 1500 acres. Sam was the president of a local phone company and on the South Henry School Board. Goldman never belonged to the Jewish congregation in Richmond although his children report that some Jewish practices were kept at home.

David Fehr managed Ben Vigran's *Ladies' Ready-To-Wear Shop* and then opened his own store the *Style Shop*. By 1920 he owned stores in ten other Indiana cities.

The Jewish community of the 1920s in Richmond (and including nearby towns) approached a total of 40 households. This larger sense of community created the organization of a congregation. Before World War I, the Jews of Richmond did not view themselves as a community. In 1919, a representative of the American Jewish Relief Committee visited Richmond, whose visit had a decided impact on the Jews of Richmond. The meeting was covered in the *Richmond Item* on Wednesday, October 1, 1919, and given one of the two top headlines that appeared that day.

In December 1919, the first meeting of the Richmond Sisterhood was held at the home of Millie Fox. A constitution was based on the one used by the Sisterhood of Paducah, Kentucky. It was also decided to join the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, a branch of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform). The women of the Sisterhood played a significant role in developing a Jewish community. They held regular meetings, hosted social events, ran a Religious School, assumed both defense and philanthropic responsibilities, and managed the major communal events.

A local synagogue had never been contemplated before the Depression and was no longer feasible after economic crisis and social dislocation set in. Immediately after World War II, the Jews of Richmond again became involved in overseas charity work. During this period the Jewish population increased and prospered. The first concrete step towards revitalizing the community following a long decline during the Depression and the war was the organizing of the Richmond Jewish Council in 1948. A local B'nai B'rith chapter was chartered seven years later. In 1957 a conscious effort to build a synagogue in Richmond was spearheaded.

Construction on Beth Boruk Temple began in 1962. Debate on the religious identity of the congregation quickly ensued and did not resolve itself until 1965. Another milepost in the maturation of the Richmond Jewish community was reached in 1971 with the acquisition of a Jewish section in the Earlham cemetery.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Lance Sussman, *The Emergence of a Jewish Community in Richmond, Indiana, 1816-1930*, (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1980), 8).