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Historian explores roots of Jewish families

BY JILLIAN FELLOWS
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Jewish families have played an important part in the history of the Grant County community.

The Indiana Jewish Historical Society held an informational presentation on Sunday afternoon discussing the role of Jewish families in local history.

Grant County Historian Bill Munn started the presentation at the Marion Public Library on Sunday with the earliest known Jewish settlers.

The first recorded Jewish settler arrived in Grant County in 1840 in New Cumberland, which was near present-day Matthews. His name was Jacob Newberger, a German immigrant, and he set up a business near the town's famed covered bridge. He was also an activist in the area.

"He was very outspoken in his anti-slavery views," Munn said. "He was one of the earliest members of the Republican Party in Grant County when it was founded in 1852."

After the Civil War, Newberger moved to Wabash, which had a larger Jewish population at the time. Another Jewish settler, Jacob Baer, came to Marion and set up a store on the north side of the downtown square where Beatnik's now stands. After Baer's death, that store changed hands to Morris Blumenthal and the Marks family. The Blumenthal and Marks families would go on to become prominent Jewish families in the area. A stained glass window in the Beatnik's building still reads "Marks."

"Blumenthal and Marks did very well," Munn said.

"By the time the gas boom occurred in 1883 you had a small and successful Jewish population here in Marion."

Another notable Jewish family was headed by David Maidenber, an immigrant from Eastern Europe who arrived in 1906.

"The early 20th century was a time of major immigration from Eastern Europe because of the pogroms," Munn said. "The risk of going to America was considerably less than staying."

The Marion Jewish community did not start with a synagogue. Sinai Temple wasn't built until 1936.

"After World War I, there was a significant expansion in Marion Jewish history," Munn said. "Marion was certainly on par with Muncie, Kokomo, Wabash and Anderson in the early 20th century. It was the place to be."

Two factions in Marion, orthodox families and reform families, joined together to open the new temple. Munn said it was "an instantaneous hit" as a place of worship, memory, education and social gatherings. It was also a solution to exclusion from Marion's clubs and social life.

"In the 1920s and 30s anti-Semitism started to crop up in Marion," Munn said.

He added that Marion and its surrounding areas have a "really checkered past in terms of racial and minority relations. Jews were excluded from a lot of Marion's social life."

"As a minority, there is value to solidarity," Munn said.

Munn also touched on a few of Marion's modern-day Jewish families and the impact they have had on the city. The list included Anne

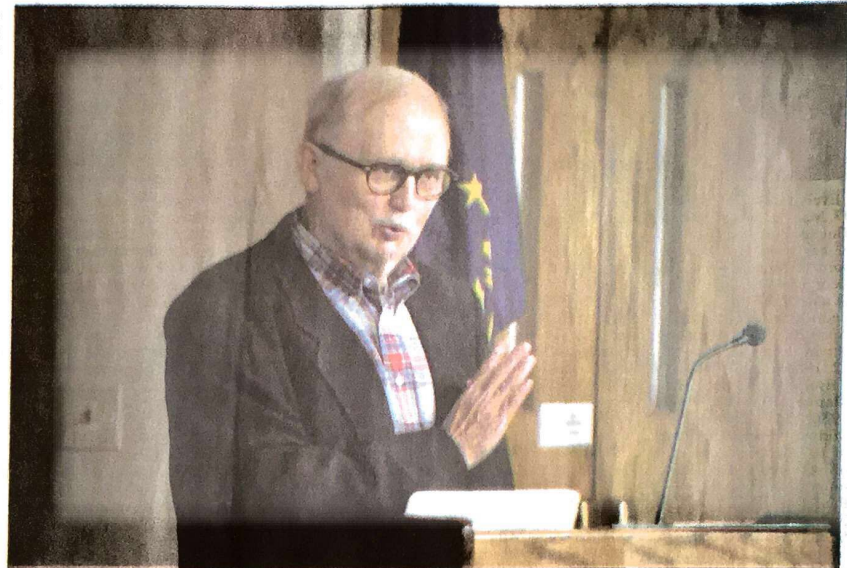


Photo by JILLIAN FELLOWS / jfellows@chronicle-tribune.com

HISTORY: Grant County Historian Bill Munn speaks during a presentation on Grant County's Jewish history on Sunday.

Secktor, who was a 16-year member of the Marion City Council, philanthropist Betty Fleck and Tony Maidenber, who is a former *Marion* mayor and state senator.

Marion's Jewish population has shrunk significantly in the last few decades, with many children opting to move away to pursue careers and families. Munn said the reason younger generations have moved away is because of three words, "opportunity, opportunity and opportunity. They went out into the wide world and did well."

Munn accompanied his presentation with historic

photos and documents. Eileen Baitcher, executive director of the Indiana Jewish Historical Society, said she most enjoyed learning about the early Jewish settlers.

"Bill is a true teacher," she said. "He has such a wealth of information."

Jackie Steiner was one of the audience members at the presentation. Her family moved to Marion many years ago and she said she found the Jewish community to be "a very warm community. It was like our second family that we have enjoyed all this time and will continue to enjoy."

Steiner also praised Munn's informational presentation.

"It was terrific. Bill goes into detail that brings out so much in a story," she said. "(Marion is) a city that needs to be reminded of its heritage and who worked here, who brought things in, who took care of what needed to be done and that we were very involved with all of the community."

One theme of the presentation was the importance of passing stories on from generation to generation. Munn said, "these are the things we pass on to the next genera-

tion and make come alive," echoing the mission statement of the Indiana Jewish Historical Society.

"The mission of the Indiana Jewish Historical Society is to collect, preserve, publish and share the history of the Jewish experience in Indiana," Baitcher said.

She also added that "I think it's important for any group, any ethnicity to think about and remember their roots. I think it's very important that we all know who our first Jews were in this county, what they did and how they led the way for more Jews to follow."