Kalamazoo Valley Museum Exhibit Explores the History of Temple B’nai Israel

A new exhibit exploring the 150-year history of Temple B’nai Israel of Kalamazoo will be on display in the second floor Community Case until August 7, 2016, at the Kalamazoo Valley Museum. The exhibit explores the organization’s history and features items collected by the congregation.

The Jewish Congregation has a long history in Kalamazoo going back to 1843, when the first Jewish settlers, primarily German immigrants, came to the Kalamazoo area. They practiced a Reformed branch of Judaism that emphasized integration into the wide, non-Jewish community.

On October 1, 1865, twenty families acquired a Jewish burial ground adjacent to Mountain Home Cemetery. Over the next few months, they continued to meet, and on January 7, 1866, their bylaws were signed, and Congregation B’nai Israel (Sons of Israel) was officially organized. They are now known as Temple B’nai Israel.

The congregation held their services in private homes until 1875, when their first permanent temple was built at 152 South Street, east of Burdick Street. This was the first building constructed specifically as a synagogue in the state of Michigan.

In 1910, the Congregation decided to build a more modern temple and purchased property at 621 South Park Street, between Walnut and Dutton Streets. The building was dedicated on September 15, 1911. The building was later sold to the Congregation of Moses in 1946.

After many years of membership decline and lack of a stable home, Temple B’nai Israel acquired a new home in 1995, purchasing and moving to a former church at 4409 Grand Prairie Avenue, where the Temple continues to grow and thrive today, as they celebrate their 150th anniversary.

The Community Case is an area in the Kalamazoo Valley Museum where collectors and organizations celebrating milestone anniversaries can apply to be considered for future exhibits. For more information, contact Sarah Humes at 269.373.7983.

The Kalamazoo Valley Museum is operated by Kalamazoo Valley Community College and governed by its Board of Trustees. Admission to the Kalamazoo Valley Museum is free.