

Synagogue dedication

The Kneseth Israel Synagogue was dedicated in ceremonies on June 4-6, 1954. Present during the opening were, from left: Rabbi Gerald Lerer; the Rev. James J. Blair of the Appleby Manor Presbyterian Church; Abe Chinn; Armstrong County Judge J. Frank Graff; Ed Steiner, the master of ceremonies;

Ralph Adelson, chairman of the synagogue's board; Kittanning Mayor Burgess H. "Harry" Himes; Attorney Ed Golden; Bernard Adelson, president of the congregation; Father F.X. Foley of St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church in Kittanning; and Rabbi David G. Shapiro of Congregation Beth Israel of Indiana. (Photo submitted by Ralph and Dorothy Adelson)

Sale of synagogue is end of an era for area's Jews

By Bob Susini
Staff Writer

KITTANNING — A part of history in the borough has ended.

Since opening ceremonies were held to open the new Kneseth Israel Congregation synagogue in 1954, Jewish people from around Armstrong County have gone there for services.

The building was recently sold to First United Methodist of Kittanning. The sale of agreement may be signed tonight.

Bernard G. Adelson, president of the congregation, said a dwindling membership forced the sale. Ralph Adelson, his brother and chairman of the synagogue board, said in the early 1960s, 65 families belonged to the synagogue, numbering about 200 people.

Now, Ralph Adelson said, the membership included just 29 people, with the average age being 75 years. The youngest members were in their 40s, he added. He said the synagogue had a "thriving congregation" in those years.

His wife, Dorothy, said the number of people at the synagogue decreased because "there's nothing for them here. They had to look for positions (employment) elsewhere."

The sale, she added, was the "practical thing to do. There were not enough people to keep it going," Mrs. Adelson said. "There would be no one left to decide (a

sale in the future), so we have to make the decision, unfortunately."

The Kneseth Israel Congregation began when Jews from Kittanning and Ford City walked to Manorville to meet with other Jewish families to make plans for holding services for The High Holidays in 1905. Those people were the "nucleus of the congregation," according to its history.

In 1911, the Jewish community in Kittanning became organized, calling themselves Kneseth Israel, and employed Rabbi Dolgoff as the first full time cantor, shochet and Hebrew teacher. He conducted Hebrew classes at his home on South Jefferson Street, with all religious services held in the Odd Fellows Hall on Jacob Street.

In 1914, congregation moved its quarters to second floor of the Academy Building on North Jefferson Street, which was used for services, classes and meetings. Four years later, the congregation purchased a house on North Water Street for \$4,000. A mortgage on the building was paid off in full on Sept. 5, 1941.

Ground breaking ceremonies for the Kneseth Israel Synagogue took place on Jan. 25, 1953 and it was dedicated in ceremonies on June 4-6, 1954, Bernard Adelson said. The religious leader of the congregation at that time was Rabbi Gerald Lerer.

The synagogue held its final service on Oct. 3, celebrating Yom Kippur, Bernard Adelson added.

He said there are no immediate plans for the members of the congregation, but added that they might meet this weekend. The money from the synagogue's sale as well as any equity in banks, he added, must go to charity.

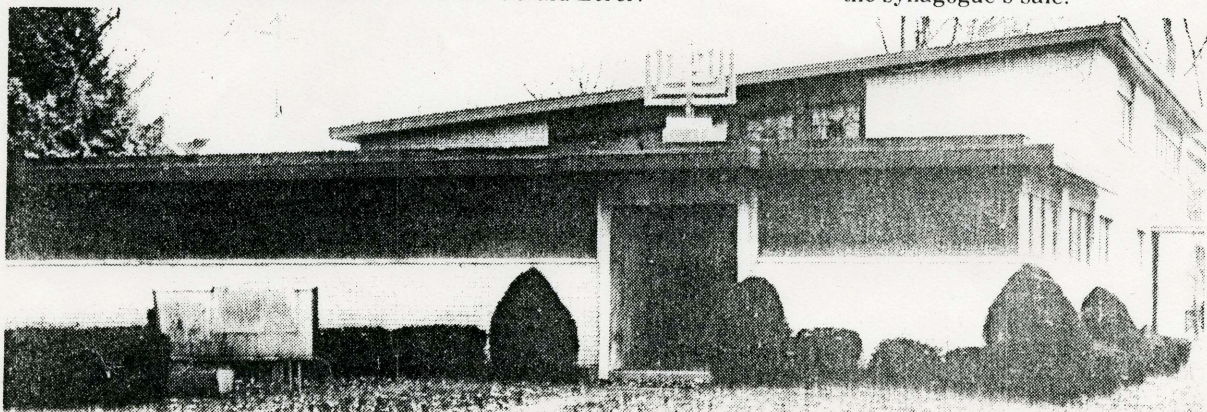
Asked if there will be another synagogue in Armstrong County, Dorothy Adelson said, "If Armstrong County recovers and booms, there will be another synagogue, but not in our time. You have to have a thriving community to bring the people."

Bernard Adelson said the stained glass windows in the synagogue, a well-known feature of the building, were each contributed in memoriam. They are expected to be kept by the new owners.

A spokesman for the First United Methodist Church said the church hopes to carry on the "tradition of ministry" in the community begun at the synagogue.

Dorothy Adelson said the congregation's "Book of Remembrance" has been donated to the Armstrong County Historical Society to be used as a historical reference about the congregation. Kneseth Israel, she said, means "gathering together in Israel."

"It's very sad. There're just no words to describe it," she said of the synagogue's sale.



The former Kneseth Israel Synagogue on North Water Street has a new owner.

Leader-Times **OPINION**

Michael O'Hare, Managing Editor

Jim Dudek, City Editor

Lonnie L. Pepler, Publisher

A closing that affects all of us

The usual signs of poor economic health are unemployment, limited housing starts, poor retail business, etc.

Tough times are reflected in those statistics.

But a more direct and tangible sign of the difficulties are when a community's social structures begin to collapse and disappear.

Sadly, we had one such sign this week with the planned closing of the sale of the Kneseth Israel Synagogue to the First United Methodist Church of Kittanning.

Just the sale part is news, the synagogue having held its last service Oct. 3.

The congregation was conceived in 1905, becoming organized in 1911. The synagogue was dedicated in June of 1954.

It is not the sale of the building that we mourn here; in fact, its passage to First United Methodist Church is a sign of growth there.

But we lament why the building must be sold. As explained by Ralph Adelson, chairman of the synagogue board, the member-

ship included just 29 people. His wife, Dorothy, noted the congregation has dwindled (having had some 65 families in the early 1960s) because members moved to find employment elsewhere.

Diversity is so essential to the quality of life in an area and a poor economy erodes that diversity slowly but surely.

So much was lost with the closing of the Kneseth Israel Synagogue. The congregation should know this community shares in its grief.