

## OREGON JEWISH MUSEUM *Beth Israel Archives*



Researchers explore the rich heritage offered by access to the Beth Israel Archives.

In 2011, the Oregon Jewish Museum received the opportunity to assume the processing, access, and preservation of the collected archives of Congregation Beth Israel, the oldest synagogue in the state. The collection fit the museum's mission to collect, preserve, and make accessible the art, artifacts, and archival record of the Jewish experience in Oregon. It also provided an exciting opportunity for research.

Founded in 1858, the year before Oregon statehood, Congregation Beth Israel became a crucible for new ideas precisely at the time that the western frontier began to attract the imagination of the nation. Young men, graduated from a newly formed rabbinical school in Cincinnati, headed to the western frontier eager to engage with the new ideas of liberal reform that were spreading from Europe. They preached social and religious change, polishing their skills in this small congregation of pioneers, before moving to larger communities. We were eager to become the stewards of this valuable collection, which documented the organization's history.

The largest challenge was the physical safety of the records. Our first priority involved moving the collection out of the synagogue basement where it had been stored for more than 70 years. Standing water, fluctuating temperatures and humidity, and a working oil furnace threatened the integrity of the paper. We moved the oldest and most fragile documents to a storage room on the first floor of the sanctuary building. An additional challenge was determining which records would be coming to the museum. Museum staff and synagogue administrators met several times to work toward an agreement about the point at which records became archival. The archivist had to help office staff understand the life cycle of records and explain that both the staff and the records would benefit from this process; the goal was to protect and organize the records and make them accessible.

## TOOLS USED

- Trained archive staff
- Volunteers: Several new volunteers recruited due to this project
- Collaboration with Portland State University
- Museum relationship with the community
- Outreach efforts resulting in OJM as depository for institutional records from the Jewish community
- Oregon Heritage Grant Funding
- Funding support from Congregation Beth Israel

## Preservation

We conducted a survey of the synagogue buildings, which resulted in the discovery of two additional locations that held records. Knowing that we did not have funds to process 200 linear feet immediately, our archivist prioritized the four series with the most immediate research value and moved them to the museum, out of immediate harm.

## Arrangement

Twelve volunteers working two – four hours a week sorted, refoldered, and documented the contents of the series for access.

## Access

We documented the collection using the museum's in-house database system and produced a printed finding aid. The importance of this collection led us to seek a broader audience for this acquisition. In 2012, the museum and Portland State University entered into an agreement under which the university would host the museum's finding aids. This allows their Judaic studies students access to the collection and allows the museum to transition from item level arrangement to the industry standard of encoded archival description finding aids.



The museum discovered records through a survey of synagogue buildings and prioritized those with the most research value before moving them.



The project generated excitement within the community and serious discussions with other Jewish institutions about transferring their collections to the museum.

The collaborations resulting from this project are exactly what the museum was seeking. This project and its successes will fuel the museum's efforts to become the depository for all of the institutional records of the Jewish community in the state. The excitement that this project has generated within the community has already resulted in serious discussions with other synagogues, clubs, and family businesses about transferring their collections to the Oregon Jewish Museum.