

# CITY/FAITH & REASON

## 'Hugging priest' in demand

GRAEME MORTON  
CALGARY HERALD

If life had taken another turn, Father Leo Couture could have been a standup comedian or a motivational speaker. He possesses the irrepressible optimism and rapid-fire "gift of the gab" to handle either post.

But a higher, wiser power thought Couture would make a great Roman Catholic priest, and thousands of people the 76-year-old has touched over the years can only say, "Amen."

Couture, who continues to lead a Catholic parish in the heart of Mennonite country in Steinbach, Man., is still in demand as a speaker and leader of spiritual retreats. He was in Lethbridge recently for such an event.

After 51 years as a priest, Couture says he has no plans to put his feet up and retire. "I think I'd go nuts," he says with a chuckle. "I'm a people person. That's why they call me the hugging priest."

"The Gospel is all about relationships — that's where it starts and finishes." Couture admits he was an irrepressible charmer and flirt as a young man.

"I had this beautiful Jewish girlfriend who I used to take roller-skating when I was 13," he says. "Lots of girlfriends, I tell you. . ."

After taking theological training at St. Boniface College and Laval University, Couture was ordained in 1956, turning his back on a career as a doctor, "or a trombone player like Tommy Dorsey."

His pastoral career included "14 glorious years" as rector at Winnipeg's majestic St. Boniface Cathedral, where he helped co-ordinate the 1989 visit of Pope John Paul II, and an extended posting as chaplain to the religious order of Grey Nuns.

Couture seems happiest when he's at the grassroots level, working with a parish full of the faithful.

"The future strength of the church is in the lay people — forget about us guys in the robes," he says.

Couture says he often draws inspiration for his weekly homilies from cartoons or from innocent slices of everyday life.

"I tell people that every time they turn on a light switch at home, just to think about how they can light up the world of the people closest to them — their spouse, their kids, their friends," he says.

GMORTON@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM

# Little synagogue on the Prairie

GRAEME MORTON  
CALGARY HERALD

When you think of physical icons of Alberta pioneer life, towering grain elevators and classic one-room schools spring to mind.

But a little synagogue, a Jewish house of worship, on the Prairie?

They did exist, and through the efforts of a group of dedicated Calgarians, one will rise again at Heritage Park during the next two years.

"It's definitely a passion, a real labour of love that a number of us share," says Irena Karshenbaum, president of the Little Synagogue on the Prairie Project Society.

The society has launched a \$1-million fundraising campaign to move, restore and equip the Montefiore Institute, a small synagogue that served a Jewish colony of pioneer farmers for 15 years in the early 1900s.

The society has already purchased the former synagogue, which was converted to a private home in eastern Alberta decades ago.

Next spring, they'll move the building to Heritage Park, where it will undergo a painstaking restoration, which is expected to take 12 months.

Karshenbaum foresees a fully-restored synagogue with trained guides explaining the role Jewish settlers played in Alberta's formative years, by the spring of 2009.

"They were few in numbers, but the Jewish community went on to make major contributions to Alberta society," says Karshenbaum.

She says three Jewish farming colonies, at Sibbald, Trochu and Rumsey, became part of the stampede of European settlers who populated the arid southern Alberta prairie in the early years of the 20th century.

This synagogue, known as the Montefiore Institute, was built in 1913 to serve a Jewish colony of about 30 families near the present-day village of Sibbald, just west of the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.

"The majority of the Jews in this community came from Russia and eastern Europe, fleeing oppression," says Karshenbaum.

"In Canada, Jews were able to own land. That was a big attraction for many of them. But once they got to southern Alberta, they found the farming conditions pretty harsh."

The Montefiore Institute, named for Sir Moses Montefiore, an Italian-born Jewish philanthropist, served as a synagogue, school and as a gathering place for all Sibbald-area residents,

## Historic house of worship moving to Heritage Park



Graeme Morton, Calgary Herald

Irena Karshenbaum and her society are raising \$1 million to restore a 94-year-old synagogue and move it to Calgary next spring.

not just Jews. The Montefiore settlers hung in until about 1925, when they'd finally had enough of prolonged summer droughts and icy, windblown winters.

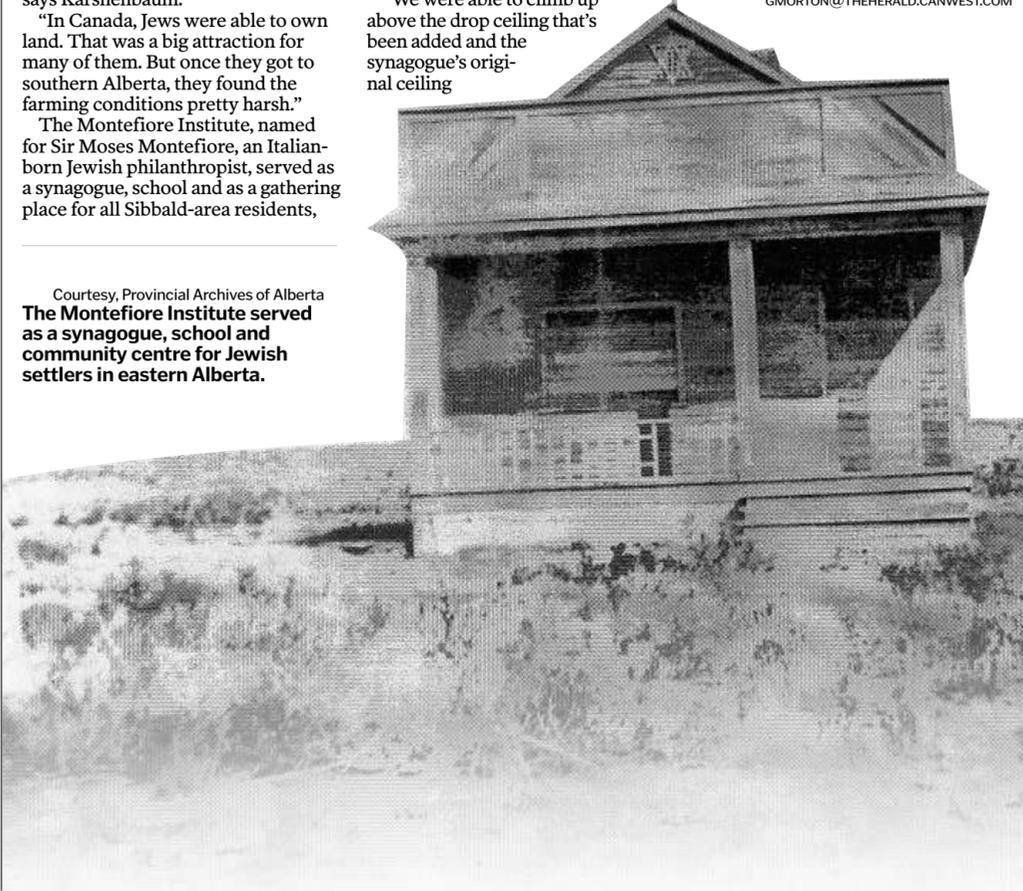
Karshenbaum says some moved to Calgary and Edmonton, but the majority headed for southern California, where they became chicken farmers.

Little Synagogue project advisor Trudy Cowan, an experienced heritage and museum consultant, said the restoration will be a long process because much of it involves patient, precise "hand work" by expert artisans.

"Although it was converted into a private home long ago, it's got an impressive amount of original historical content left intact," says Cowan.

"We were able to climb up above the drop ceiling that's been added and the synagogue's original ceiling

Courtesy, Provincial Archives of Alberta  
**The Montefiore Institute served as a synagogue, school and community centre for Jewish settlers in eastern Alberta.**



## Faith calendar

### Sunday

■ Unitarian Church of Calgary, 1703 10th St. N.W. Service at 10:30 a.m. with leader Penny Kome: Canada Day and Patriotism.

### Upcoming

■ Calgary North Central Christian Women's Club's breakfast program, Tuesday at 9:30 a.m. at the Best Western Village Park Inn, 1804 Crowchild Tr. N.W. Featuring inspirational speaker Laurie Abbot and musician Monika with a K. Call Sandra at 248-8988.

■ Gospel Troubadours present Music Day at Refuge Ranch on Saturday, July 7, at 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Free admission. Call 546-4390.

■ Sharon Lutheran Church, 210 10th Ave. N.E., is hosting its annual Stampede breakfast on July 8 at 11:15 a.m. The church service begins at 10 a.m.

■ Resurrection Lutheran Church, 1102 37th St. S.E., Origins: How The World Came To Be — part of the Origin of the Universe video series, Sunday, July 8, at 7 p.m. Call 293-4861.

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3527 Boulton Rd. N.W.  
www.hopelutheran.ca  
Pastor Stewart Miller  
church@hopelutheran.ca  
One Service only at 10:00 a.m.

**MT. CALVARY LUTHERAN**  
1100 Berkshire Blvd. N.W.  
10:30 a.m. - Sunday School  
274-1080  
Pastor: Dr. Gary Watts  
10:30 a.m. - Worship

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**Presbyterian Churches**

**GRACE PRESBYTERIAN**  
1009 - 15 Avenue S.W. 244-5861 www.grace.calgary.ab.ca  
Senior Minister: Reverend Victor Kim  
Associate Minister: Reverend Leslie Walker  
Pastoral Assistant: - Margot Kellough  
Youth Ministry: Tony Vink  
Music Director: Glenn Potter  
10:30 AM - "GIVING AS GOOD AS YOU GET"

**St. Giles**  
10th St. and 23 Ave. N.W.  
The Reverend Dave Crawford B.A. M.Div. 289-6862  
10:30 a.m. - Worship, Sunday School, Nursery  
400 Midpark Blvd. S.E.

**Trinity**  
Rev. Kendrick Borden  
256-5500  
10:30 a.m. - Worship, Sunday School, Nursery  
400 Midpark Blvd. S.E.

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