

Forming a Communitywide Connection through Chain Links

By Carol Greenberg

Over ten years ago, Savannah Jewish News ran an article that began, "Meddin, Coleman, Traub, Edel, Lasky, Kooden, Levy, Willensky, Eichholz... What do these names and about 200 others have in common? They are all names listed on Congregation Mickve Israel's historic Confirmation Chain." At that time, the effort was to repair that engraved chain presented to the congregation on Shavuot in 1935 by Henrietta Steinheimer (now Victor), A.J. Cohen, Jr. and eight other members of their religious school graduating class to reflect their commitment to Judaism and symbolizing Jewish continuity.

This gift began a tradition that has continued and also spawned a renewed effort called Chain Links to identify all the teenagers involved since 1880 and to make this unique symbol of Jewish history relevant to today's youth. In honor of the chain's 75th anniversary, MorningStar Cultural Arts Group created Chain Links as part of a larger *Georgia History Project on Diversity* that includes research, oral histories, film, and educational curricula. This project, following its first successful six months, needs to recruit more volunteers and sponsors for 2011.

Over the years many people have devoted time and finances to restoring the chain and display. Dr. Joel Greenberg, Judy Byck, Aaron Levy, Alan Gaynor (of blessed memory), Margie Levy, Ellen Byck, Matiel Leffler, Becky Smith, Teresa Victor and Henrietta Victor's granddaughter Rachel, Leslie Westmoreland, the Gilmores at Bay Camera and Julian Weitz of Friedman's Art Store among countless others have participated in preserving this piece of history.

The actual chain currently hangs in

the Jewish Museum housed at Congregation Mickve Israel, accompanied by a list (in booklet form) of decades of engraved names, with a set of 40 framed photos (the earliest from 1885) on the walls of Shalom School and in a photo album. But many photos were missing, not all photos had identifications, no one before 1935 was listed on the chain, and the displays were static and ineffective as an educational tool.

Since 1989, MStarArts has donated over three hundred programs, events, and oral history projects (some resulting in films, books and cable shows), but all of which were the result of time for formal research, support funds and volunteers' enthusiasm. Low on all three, but wanting to make a start to mark the 75th year, MStarArts wrote a proposal to local universities. Professors Stephen Wagner and James Janson (SCAD), Daniel Skidmore-Hess (Armstrong), Jon Bryant and Cathy Skidmore-Hess (GSU), selected four students to participate in research skills workshops and oral history training.

Fall term interns trained with chief archivists, historians and guides at Georgia Historical Society (Lynette Stoudt), Live Oaks Public Library Genealogical Collection Room (Sharen Lee), Congregation Mickve Israel (Rabbi Arnold Marc Belzer, William Raffel, Carol Greenberg and Lauree San Juan) and then completed unsupervised research.

While Hans Spenkle (GSU) filmed oral history interviews, Brigitte Garland, Charity Troy and Kendra Bradley (SCAD) located photos, corrected listings and identified faces. Joining Hans' footage of Isser Gottlieb, David Byck, III and wife Ellen is Peter Masterpoulis' BSA interview of Philip Solomons, Sr. and Jane Kahn's interview of Marion Levy Mendel and daughter Joan Levy both descended from the Sheftall family

who were among the 41 original Jewish settlers who established Kohell Kadosh Mickve Israel (the holy congregation of Mickve Israel) in 1733. Volunteers are needed to finish research and conduct interviews this winter on A. J. Cohen, Jr. (and wife Kelly) and Henrietta Victor. Training will be provided. Henrietta's interview is of particular interest to GSA who have identified her as important to the local Girl Scout history in advance of celebrating their 100th anniversary in 2012.

Volunteers with specialized skills are needed to design a computer program based on our research with an interactive display about growing up Jewish in Savannah during different eras, and explaining Jewish educational traditions to the uninitiated in time for the February, 2013 Georgia Day 280th anniversary.

Go to www.mstararts.org (click Gallery page) to see a rough photo slide show. Donate funds to Mickve Israel or MorningStar Cultural Arts earmarked "Chain" to link yourself with this project. E-mail Carol M. Towbin Greenberg at MStarArts@aol.com or call 912-927-9922 for more information.

THE SAVANNAH

Class Confirmed at Synagogue



*The Savannah Press, June 8, 1916.

It reads Photo by Girard-

This class of boys and girls were confirmed this morning by Rabbi George Solomon in the Mickve Israel Synagogue. Reading from Left to right, first row: Master Sims Guckenheimer, Miss Theresa Rosenbaum, Miss Olga Adler and Master James Hoffman. Second Row: Master Edgar Collat, Rabbi George Solomon, Master Morris Eisenberg and Master D. A. Byck, Jr.

