

Larry E. Dahl and Don Norton, comps., *Modern Perspectives on Nauvoo and the Mormons* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003).

## Foreword

In April 1999 my wife, Roberta, and I were asked to move to Nauvoo for three to five years to direct a Brigham Young University “Semester at Nauvoo” program. The program was to be housed in the Joseph Smith Academy, formerly St. Mary’s Academy, recently purchased by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from the Sisters of St. Benedict.

We moved to Nauvoo in September 1999 to get the academy ready for the winter semester, which was to begin four months later. Preparations included changing some dormitory rooms into faculty apartments, renovating the former home economics room into a study hall and library, setting up a computer lab and a faculty office complex, establishing administration offices, and installing a full-service food services operation in the space on the first floor formerly known as the “sugar room.” BYU Food Services administrators and technicians designed and installed the kitchen in space made ready by Nauvoo Restoration, Inc. craftsmen, with the aid of local plumbing and stainless steel fabrication contractors.

The semester began on schedule in January 2000. During 1999, after the announcement of the intent to rebuild the Nauvoo Temple, there was much discussion in the town about why The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would want to build such a large building in such a small place and what impact it might have on Nauvoo. Questions were raised about the vast potential increase in the number of visitors to Nauvoo, as well as whether large numbers of Church members would come to settle in Nauvoo permanently, significantly affecting the political and cultural environment. With a population of only 1,100 people and a limited tax base, genuine concerns surfaced regarding public services capabilities, roads and traffic control, emergency services, utilities, city planning, and so on.

In addition to current and future considerations, attention has been focused on the whole history of the Mormons in Nauvoo, the early period of 1839–46, as well as the more recent past involving the acquisition of the temple block and other properties in Nauvoo, the cleaning up and making beautiful of the flats, and the restoration of buildings. Most of the citizens are very appreciative of what has been done to improve the town. Many are supportive of the coming of the temple and the inevitable changes that it will bring. Some are apprehensive about the possible heavy and increasing influence of the Mormons in Nauvoo.

As I became aware of the issues and feelings described above, I had an increasing interest in trying to capture and preserve the ideas and attitudes of the citizens of Nauvoo and the surrounding area concerning Nauvoo, its history, its current events, and its future. I felt that those who have lived here for a long time and whose families were among the early residents would have the best collective memory of the early history, or at least of the perceptions that have been passed down through the generations about what took place and why. Likely, they would also have strong feelings about what is happening now in Nauvoo and what the future portends for this quiet, beautiful, little city on a bend of the Mississippi. Hence, this oral history project took shape.

It is interesting to note that one’s perception of history does not depend alone on what events actually took place but is also heavily influenced by the assumptions and personal biases one brings to the issues. In this project we desired and invited honest responses and perceptions, regardless of whom they favored. Candid and civil discussion of events about which people do not all share the same perceptions is a healthy thing. It offers opportunity for better understanding and genuine friendliness among those of differing persuasions. It is hoped this project will work toward that end.

In August 2001 I sent the Nauvoo Historical Society a written explanation of the oral history project with a request for its endorsement. On September 21 the society sent a letter of endorsement along with a list of thirty-three names of persons who might be interviewed. Some more names were received from Dan Hahl, who has lived in Nauvoo for many years and has operated businesses in the city (see appendix, p. 399).

We decided to conduct the project under the auspices of a regular university class—English 430R, “Editing for Publication,” with Professor Don Norton as the instructor. Nine students enrolled in the class. Additional students assisted with the interviews. Each student was assigned three interviews to tape, transcribe, edit, and submit to Don Norton for review and further editing, then return to the persons interviewed for their approval. Of the persons we invited, twenty-seven agreed to be interviewed. Twenty-six of the twenty-seven persons interviewed signed a “Permission to Copy and Distribute” form. The one person who did not sign the permission form was positive about the experience but simply did not want her words printed for “the whole world” to read.

The procedure began with a telephone call from me, explaining the project and inviting the person to participate.

Once permission was given, students made appointments and conducted the interviews, then followed the process to completion.

A generous donor who wishes to remain anonymous provided funds to have this book published. A copy of the book was given to the donor, each person interviewed, each of the students in the class, Don Norton, the Nauvoo Historical Society, the Nauvoo Public Library, the Joseph Smith Academy library, the Brigham Young University Harold B. Lee Library, the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church's Public Affairs office in Nauvoo, Continuing Education and Travel Study at BYU, and a few individuals who were close to the project and helped in some way. Final preparation of the text for publication was done by Don Norton and his editing students. The publishing was done by the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

The oral history project was a good experience for the students. They learned interviewing, transcribing, and editing skills that will be useful throughout their lives. They also gained an understanding of and enthusiasm for oral history—the realization that every person's life and memory is an interesting and valuable historical resource.

Hopefully, the project also provided a worthwhile experience for those who were interviewed and will do the same for those who read the book. Perhaps the book will encourage others to conduct similar projects to help preserve the history and culture of a generation, much of which will be lost if it is not recorded in some way. And what better way is there to record it than in the voices and language of the people who lived it!

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