Seven

ARGENTINA: BUILDING THE CHURCH ONE *BLOQUE* AT A TIME[1]

C. Laird Snelgrove loved to serve customers at the soda fountain counter. As a child, he had watched his father struggle to provide for his family through the Great Depression. When he was fifteen, his father opened an ice cream business in Sugar House, Utah, and Laird delayed his graduation from high school to help his father build the business. Later he even quit college to spend the needed time with the business. The hard work eventually resulted in success, and the Snelgrove Ice Cream Company became the premier ice cream company in Salt Lake City. The company expanded into a variety of different activities in part because of Laird's ideas. But the basis of the family business was still the ice cream shop, where his best work was done.

1. *Bloque* is the Spanish word for the concrete block used to construct the early chapels.

And now Laird was being asked to leave it all and go on a second mission. His first Spanish-speaking mission to northern Mexico and the southwestern part of the United States had given him fluency in the language. His wife, Edna, had also served a mission and would be a great asset. He had served in a variety of Church positions, including a counselor in the stake presidency of the Granite Stake. He also became involved in a variety of community projects, one being the head of the Sugar House Rotary Club. All this helped give him confidence to accept the call. It was not to Mexico, where he had served, but to Argentina. He did not know much about Argentina and was not sure at first where it was until he looked on a map. But the map did not give the true scope of the country and how many hours of driving or bus travel would be required to get to each city in the mission. Only after arriving in 1960 did he discover what a large and diverse country Argentina is.

President Laird and Edna Snelgrove

A Brief History

Historically, Argentina was first considered a minor, unimportant outpost of the Spanish colonies. What a difference a couple of centuries would make! The Spaniards were interested in gold and silver, and Argentina had little of either. The silver and the indigenous population were on the western part of the continent, primarily in Peru. When an attempt to establish a settlement on the Río de la Plata in 1536 failed, the other side of the continent seemed destined to be where cities prospered. The southernmost outpost of the Inca empire extended into Argentina near the present-day city of Tucumán, and settlements developed along the Inca Trail. Spanish settlers came to these areas to raise food for the main Spanish mining settle-

ments in Peru. Large mule trains carried goods west across the Andes, and breeding mules became an important part of early Argentina's economy. Cattle had been introduced into the area and allowed to roam freely, so settlements continued to expand south and east to take advantage of the availability of animals. Though money was made by rounding up the cattle, it was a precarious existence. Indigenous groups such as the Abipones and the Puelche used horses and firearms to great advantage to rob the small European settlements.

Attempts to settle in the eastern part of the country took time. Any settlement in the region was looked upon with jealousy from the already settled regions of the north, particularly the city of Asunción in present-day Paraguay. A second attempt at colonization in what is now known as Buenos Aires occurred in 1580, when the economic authorities of Asunción finally realized it could be a place where ships could dock to take on fresh provisions and water before continuing to the interior. Placing a settlement at the mouth of the Río de la Plata also provided some protection against the advance of other countries into the region, mainly the Portuguese from Brazil. When the Portuguese did establish a fort and settlement in present-day Colonia, Uruguay, in 1680, the importance of Buenos Aires increased significantly. The city grew rapidly and by 1810 was the largest city in what is now Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

Argentina's independence from Spain was not easy. It began in 1810 with a declaration of independence but took significant fighting and struggle. Once the break with Spain was accomplished, a brief period of relative calm was replaced by the rule of the dictator Juan Rosas, who controlled the country from 1829 to 1853. A federal system was adopted in 1853, and a final unification of the country in 1861 began a period allowing for the evolution of a strong and wealthy country. An important part of that development was the expansion of agriculture, particularly wheat and cattle. The method of de-

velopment resulted in large farms controlled by a few elites and worked by the gauchos and an increasing number of European immigrants. Unfortunately the growth of the European population was accompanied by the almost complete destruction of the indigenous population, who were regularly massacred by Argentine troops. Their constant raiding of cattle encouraged the violence that led to their demise.

The expansion of agriculture was accompanied by a significant increase in exporting those goods, primarily to Europe. The British influence, significant at the time of independence ,increased as they became Argentina's bankers and financed the growth and expansion of agriculture and the building of railroads. The introduction of the first refrigerated ship made it possible to send frozen beef to Europe, transforming the cattle industry of the Pampas. The movement of goods out of the interior to the coast continued to increase the importance of Buenos Aires as the key port for the export of goods going to Europe. Most roads and all railroads moved from the interior to the port.

European immigrants changed Argentina. The elite of Argentina believed that for the prosperity of the country to continue it had to have a rapid increase in population. The first European colonies were established in 1856, and soon agents were scattered throughout Europe, touting the advantages of Argentina to convince people to come to the country. And come they did. In 1914 a full 30 percent of the country's population had been born in Europe. Though 80 percent of the immigrants came from either Italy or Spain, there were immigrants from all parts of the world. Many became tenant farmers, being denied land ownership by the landowning elite who controlled the country. Others stayed in the city of Buenos Aires and became important in furnishing the manual labor for the growth and development of the capital city.

The vibrance of the country was best observed in the city of Buenos Aires. From the early role as a frontier post in a remote

part of the Spanish empire, the city became one of the world's most important and sophisticated commercial and industrial centers. It was a planned city with a large number of great urban avenues lined with similarly patterned buildings. Its central avenue, the famous Avenida de Mayo, was the focal point of the city. Buenos Aires was called the Paris of Latin America because of the combination of avenues, parks, and beautiful buildings. The enjoyment of life was an important characteristic of the citizens of the city. It was among the immigrant community in Buenos Aires that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had its beginnings in South America.[2]

Converts among the Immigrants

Church historian Andrew Jenson's visit to South America in 1923 encouraged Church authorities to think seriously about sending missionaries to Argentina. In the early 1920s the General Authorities were concerned that opening missionary work in this part of the world had to be slow and deliberate. They had to ensure that once missionaries were sent into South America they would not have to be pulled out again as had happened in Japan in 1924. Jenson's descriptions of the civility of the people and the beauty of Buenos Aires certainly were encouraging. When Wilhelm Friederichs and Emil Hoppe, recent immigrants who had been baptized in Germany, wrote glowing reports of interest in the Church among the German community, Church leaders decided this would be the place where the Church would go first. The opening of the mission was to be in December 1925.

Elder Melvin J. Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Elders Rey L. Pratt and Rulon S. Wells of the First Council of Seventy recognized the complexity of what

2. David J. Keeling, *Buenos Aires: Global Dreams, Local Crises* (New York: Wiley, 1996).

they were trying to do when they visited the country.[3] Yes, Buenos Aires was a city of immigrants, but it was not a German immigrant city. The immediate baptism of six German investigators one week after the three missionaries arrived resulted in an important foundation to begin the Church, but most citizens of Buenos Aires spoke either Spanish or Italian, not German. Whenever Elder Ballard spoke in Church, talks had to be translated from English to Spanish to German, which was time-consuming and problematic. The challenge of just determining to whom the Church was going to proselyte continued for a long time. Though the missionaries and the few members wanted a continued presence among the German population, there was little response in terms of interest in the Church. There was much greater interest in the Church from other immigrants, primarily from southern Europe. That lack of success among the Germans eventually changed the direction of missionary work.

Elders Ballard and Pratt did not have success at first and spent most of their time advertising the presence of the Church. Not until they had been in Buenos Aires for several months did they begin to attract families to the Church. They worked with several families, including a Mrs. Morales and her children, who became interested in their message but were unable to be baptized because her husband would not give permission. One who finally accepted baptism was Mrs. Morales's friend Eladia Sifuentes, a Spanish immigrant who had attended many of their meetings. She was baptized on June 15, 1926, almost six months after the baptism of the first German converts; however, she soon left the Church. Soon, though, a couple of Italian immigrant families became interested. Around the end of July, just before the General Authorities returned to the United States, they were holding a meeting in the Liniers section of the city with one of the German families. The Italian family of

3. Within a couple of weeks, Elder Wells became seriously ill and returned to the United States.

Donato Gianfelice was visiting a friend and heard singing in a nearby house. Thinking it strange to have a church in the home of a German immigrant, their investigation resulted in receiving a flier announcing that the official meetings of the Church were being held on Rivadavia Street, and the family began attending the meetings. On August 22 the Gianfelice family and Domenico Quici were baptized.[4]

It was an international Church in Argentina, indeed an immigrant Church. It reflected the demographics of the city of Buenos Aires. Of the eighty-five members of the Church by the end of 1928, all but one family, the González family (a mother and seven children), were immigrants or young children of immigrant families. Twenty-one people had been baptized elsewhere before arriving in Argentina. These early Latter-day Saints had immigrated from Germany, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Yugoslavia, Portugal, and Switzerland. The missionaries were American and German. The meetings were held in two languages, German and Spanish, and a variety of accents were heard and accepted in the meetings.[5]

Reinhold Stoof

For a few years there was indecision regarding the direction of the Church in Argentina. Much of the indecision had to do with the mission president who replaced Elder Ballard. Even though Elder Pratt's letters to Church headquarters in Salt Lake City stressed that missionary work should be focused primarily on the Spanish-speaking population, K. B. Reinhold Stoof, a recent German immigrant to Salt Lake City who spoke no Spanish, was called to head the mission. He came with a missionary from the Mexican Mission, J. Vernon Sharp, so that the work of Elder Pratt with the Spanish-speaking community

4. A. Theodore Tuttle, "Manuscript History of the South American Mission," August 22, 1926, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
5. Frederick S. Williams and Frederick G. Williams, *From Acorn to Oak Tree* (Fullerton, CA: Et Cetera Graphics, 1987), 57–59.

would continue. But President Stoof was convinced that he was called to Argentina for a specific reason. Elder Sharp stated, "Brother Stoof felt deep in his heart that his call was to work with the German-speaking people of South America and that was the thinking when the mission was opened."[6]

Though President Stoof believed he had been sent to South America to work with the German immigrants, he soon realized his expectations had to be somewhat modified because of the nature of Argentina's scattered German population. He quickly recognized that if the Church was to remain in Argentina, the missionaries would have to work primarily among the Italian- and Spanish-speaking population. President Stoof soon learned that there were large numbers of German immigrants in southern Brazil and that missionary work was possible among them.[7] As soon as he could, he made a trip to Brazil and found what he considered a population of German-speaking immigrants ready for the gospel. Missionaries were then sent to Brazil in 1928, and President Stoof was relieved that he was able to fulfill that part of his mission's purpose.

President Stoof struggled primarily with the number of missionaries needed. He just did not have enough missionaries to do much in Argentina, let alone Brazil. From the time he arrived in 1926 until the end of 1934, a total of fifty missionaries were called to South America, an average of just more than six a year. These missionaries then had to be split between Brazil and Argentina. Expansion of the Church beyond the city of Buenos Aires had to wait until 1928, when he sent missionaries to the interior city of Rosario to establish a branch.[8]

6. James Vernon Sharp, interview by Gordon Irving, 1972, 20, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
7. Tuttle, "Manuscript History of the South American Mission," July 15, 1926–May 31, 1927.
8. Néstor Curbelo, *Historia de los Mormones en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Néstor Curbelo, 2000), 54.

Growth and Development

In 1935 President Stoof and his wife, Ella Hirte, left Argentina to return to the United States.[9] He had worked hard to establish the Church in Argentina under difficult and trying times. From 1935 until the Second World War, the Church in Argentina experienced slow but steady growth and expansion. The mission presidents during this time were two young men. The first was President W. Ernest Young, who had served a mission in Mexico under Elder Pratt. He served in Argentina from 1935 to 1938 and was instrumental in establishing the Church in several areas, again with only a limited number of missionaries. He sent missionaries to Bahía Blanca in the south, San Nicolás in the west, and several other areas.

He was succeeded by Frederick S. Williams, who was one of the early missionaries under President Stoof. When he arrived there were 438 members, and the mission had ecclesiastical units in twenty different places. With additional missionaries, he opened the interior city of Córdoba and several other cities.

Political events in the country, particularly changes in governments, resulted in missionaries being refused visas to enter the country. This was in part the result of an increased number of missionaries being sent to Argentina because of the war in Europe. Between 1938 and 1941, missionaries normally sent to Europe had to go elsewhere, so the number of the missionaries sent to Argentina more than doubled. Argentine government officials wondered what was happening and began withholding visas, making it a challenge to get missionaries into the country. As President Williams struggled to expand the work, however, events in Europe seriously affected the Church in Argentina. Missionary work ended abruptly in 1942, when essentially all

9. Grover, "Stoof, Reinhold," in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1192–93.

American missionaries returned home and the mission was left with only a president until after World War II.[10]

President James Barker was left to run the Church in Argentina without missionaries. He struggled to keep all the different branches functioning and active. It was not an easy task because President Barker had to visit the many branches, often to ensure that all was functioning within the requirements of the Church. Many branches were closed during this period. After the war, W. Ernest Young returned to Argentina for a second time as mission president, and the mission grew from no missionaries to twenty-six in only two months. Reestablishing the Church throughout the country and supervising a growing missionary force became President Young's primary responsibility. He was followed as president by Harold Brown, a thirty-two-year-old from the Mexican colonies. President Brown's recent experience with leadership issues in Mexico affected his approach in Argentina, and he worked to get local members into positions of responsibility, particularly as branch presidents. He was followed by a former Argentine missionary, Lee Valentine, whose wife, Amy, was President Young's daughter. His approach was similar to President Brown's, and he was able to send missionaries into additional areas. He was privileged to be the guide to President David O. McKay as he toured the mission, including a visit to Argentina's president, Juan Perón. President Valentine was replaced by Loren N. Pace in 1956, whose work included preparing to divide the mission.[11]

Building the Church in South America

The Snelgroves were a little surprised at the first instructions they received from the General Authorities. When President

10. Williams and Williams, *From Acorn to Oak Tree*, 97–115.
11. Néstor Curbelo, *Historia de los Mormones en Argentina*, 113–35.

Henry D. Moyle and Elder Gordon B. Hinckley extended the call to go to Argentina, they took them to a large globe and talked about Argentina, making special reference to Patagonia in the south and specifically to a colony of Welsh immigrants called Trelew. They suggested President Snelgrove make a special effort to send missionaries among the Welsh in southern Argentina. Missionaries had been in the area for some time but with limited success. President Snelgrove took the advice and expanded missionary work in the area, again with limited success.[12]

The second suggestion, also a little surprising, resulted in greater success. The two General Authorities suggested there was great potential for growth of the Church in Argentina, but some changes needed to be made. During the setting apart, President Moyle told Snelgrove to buy a new mission home. President Moyle had visited Argentina and was not impressed with the old home. Even more emphatic in his condemnation of the home was Elder Harold B. Lee of the Quorum of the Twelve, who had recently returned from a visit to South America. He believed that "this is one of the worst mission homes in the Church."[13] The General Authorities also suggested that several chapels needed improvement.

Soon after arriving in Argentina, President and Sister Snelgrove understood the connection between mission growth potential and the dilapidated state of the mission home and chapels. Church buildings represented the Church to the people and thus were either its greatest missionary or most serious obstacle. Argentina and the rest of South America are largely Catholic with traditions of large, beautiful cathedrals adorned with paintings, images, and religious objects. For Catholics the building itself is an important part of the religious experience. In many countries the word *templo* (temple) was the term for

12. C. Laird Snelgrove and Edna H. Snelgrove, interview by Gordon Irving, 1987–88, transcript, 41, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
13. Laird Snelgrove, interview, 1987–88, 44–45.

large cathedrals. What potential converts saw in the physical appearance of the buildings was what often attracted them to the religion. The buildings were not what converted them, but they did attract many to investigate the Church. President Snelgrove realized that without unique and attractive buildings that actually looked like chapels, fewer people would be drawn to the Church.

Early in the history of the Church there were challenges regarding meetinghouses. Because of the slow growth of the Church in South America, the General Authorities were reluctant to make significant financial investments in small branches. Second, only one General Authority, President J. Reuben Clark Jr., had visited the mission before President McKay's visit in 1953. He was part of a U.S. diplomatic delegation attending the Convention on Rights and Duties of States held in Montevideo, Uruguay, and had only a limited chance to visit the branches.

Most Church leaders had personal knowledge and experience only in the United States and Europe, where their attention was greatest because of the growing Church membership. The turn-of-the-century concepts of how Zion was to be built from the blood of Israel found in northern Europe still affected decisions made in the Church. The belief that the presence of the literal descendants of Israel was limited in other parts of the world resulted in a perception that missionary work would be unsuccessful in places such as South America. It was not believed to be a region of importance for the Church.[14]

As a result, limited resources were spent on meeting places in Argentina. Branches generally met in small rented homes or buildings modified to hold Church services. Often the buildings were large enough that there was a small apartment that served as the missionaries' living quarters. This tended to perpetuate misperceptions of promiscuity held because of the ear-

14. See Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham's Children: Changing Mormon Concept of Race and Lineage* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

lier practice of polygamy. A couple of buildings in Argentina were built specifically as chapels, but these buildings were small and paid for mostly by the members. The chapel in Liniers neighborhood of Buenos Aires was the first to be financed by the Church and was large enough to fit a great number of members.[15]

The Church's administrative model also slowed down building construction in the missions. The mission presidents' principal contact with Church headquarters was through the First Presidency. Mission presidents were given a small stipend to cover living expenses and incidentals related to the mission, but it was not much. The Snelgroves received 275 dollars a month to provide for a family of eight, plus whoever else needed help. They were also given financial support to run the mission. It was sufficient because they were also provided with a home, transportation, and education for their children. Additional expenses, above the amount budgeted, had to be approved by the First Presidency. Mission presidents were careful because they were aware the money came from the tithe payers of the Church. Consequently, however, needed repairs and purchases were often not done because of concern for the funds of the Church.

As a result, the chapels were often run down. The members were poor and did not have surplus money to help keep up the buildings. Samuel Boren, an early member, said that he was embarrassed to bring his friends to church: "And maybe I regret this, but I had been postponing to take my friends to church because I was kind of ashamed to take them to the places where we met."[16] Robert E. Wells, a missionary in Argentina in the early 1950s, was involved in the conversion of a well-to-do family in Buenos Aires. A woman first attended the Caseros Branch, which met in an old home that had both

15. Néstor Curbelo, *Historia de los Mormones en Argentina*, 68–71.
16. Samuel Boren, interview by Gordon Irving, 1973, transcript, 4, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

rats and termites. The condition of the building so upset her that she left the meeting in tears and was followed out by the mission president, President Harold Brown: "He calmed her and told her that she just had to see through those things. She agreed that the Church was true, but it was so tough, after the beautiful cathedral that she worshiped in, to go to that place where the branch presidency were Italian immigrants, humble poor people, spoke poor Spanish and so on."

Elder Wells invited her for a second visit, which was even more of a disaster: "Then the termites started to swarm and came out of the floor, masses of these flying ants. So all of the people had to move away from that rickety part. The floor was wooden planks and there were large cracks between them, and so millions of these termites, a cloud of them a yard across, the swarming brown mass came out of the floor and were moving up the wall. So we all just moved over to the other side."

Elder Wells was mortified and apologized to this investigator: "Sister Mellor, someday we'll have nice chapels, and someday we'll have trained people, and someday we will have the reverence, and we'll have all of these other things." Her response showed a change that had occurred since her first visit and conversion: "Wells, don't you apologize. It must have been like this at the time of Christ." Elder Wells was moved by the depth of a conversion that allowed her to see through the outward appearance and recognize the spiritual. The family joined the Church and later saw the construction of beautiful chapels and even a temple that equaled the beauty of what they were familiar with outside the Church. She also became close friends to those Italian converts who presided over the Church when she was baptized.[17]

President David O. McKay's emphasis on the international Church began to have its effect on South America. His visit in 1954 was an important event in changing how Argentina was

17. Robert Wells, interview by Gordon Irving, 1983–84, transcript, 87, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

seen in Salt Lake City. The first difference was in the perception of the role of South America in the Church. It would no longer be just a weak outpost of an American or European church; it was to develop and grow to the point that it became an important region of the Church. President McKay envisioned the construction of chapels equal to those built in other parts of the world. After seeing the Liniers chapel, President McKay told a large gathering of members, "I realize that you are hoping to have your own buildings in the future. I want to promise you that you will have many chapels like this in the future and that the Church will grow a lot as a result of your faith in the gospel and dedication to the Church."[18] He saw the possibilities of a temple in South America equal to those being built in Europe and New Zealand; it was only a matter of time. An important and major change that occurred was that President McKay promised that once a year an Apostle of the Church would visit the members in South America. Consequently, Church leaders acquired a familiarity with the area and a feel for the faith of the members.

President McKay gave permission to the mission presidents to begin purchasing land where chapels could be built. Thus, an additional responsibility fell on the shoulders of the mission president: real estate purchases. This was not an easy task, but it was important for the Church. Between 1954, when President McKay visited, and the 1960s, when the Snelgroves arrived, the Church bought many pieces of property, almost all with a house where members could meet. Several properties were acquired for building large chapels and a new mission home.

The history of chapel building in Argentina is interesting. The first meetings were held near the center of the town, on Avenida Rivadavia 8968. The problem was it was not close to the majority of the members who lived in the Liniers neighborhood. Land for the first chapel was soon acquired in Liniers.

18. Hugo N. Salvioli, interview by Gordon Irving, 1978, transcript, 10, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

In 1929 Lugia Notaros, recently retired from his job with the railroad, and his wife, Marianatonia, moved into a small, one-story home on Tonelero Street. Two years later they donated the property to the Church with the stipulation they be allowed to remain in the home as long as they lived. The home was set back away from the street, which allowed enough space to build a small chapel on the property. Construction began in September 1929 and was finished in November 1931. The building served as the Liniers chapel for eight years. Realizing the chapel needed to be expanded, President Stoof began negotiations to purchase an adjacent lot, which the Church obtained the year after he left. Construction soon began on a larger chapel with room for both a chapel and other meeting rooms, including a heated baptismal font. On April 9, 1939, President Frederick S. Williams dedicated a chapel large enough to hold most of the members of the Church in Argentina.[19] The chapel served the Liniers area until the late 1960s, when a modern chapel was constructed in a different area.

The first mission home in Argentina was in the center of the city. In the early 1930s the Church bought a large old home on Manzone Street 268 in Villa Luro. It was a beautiful home but still a surprise to the mission president's wife, Corraine Williams, who arrived in the winter of 1938. To her it was a large, unheated house in which the only warmth came from a kitchen stove: "My first impression of the mission home made my heart sink within me. High ceilings, tile floors, drab colored walls, huge shuttered windows and as cold as an ice box." It was fine for President Williams, who remembered the living quarters of President Stoof when he was a missionary. Some Americans struggled with differences in home construction from that which they experienced in the United States. The

19. For a copy of the prayer, see *El Mensajero*, May 1939, 78; see also Williams and Williams, *From Acorn to Oak Tree*, 153–59.

lack of central heating was a hardship for Americans but not a serious problem for most Argentines.[20]

In 1948 the Church had purchased a home on 2130 Virrey de Piño Street. This was where the Snelgroves lived. It was beautiful but too small because it served as a mission office and a private residence for the mission president. The family lived upstairs, where there was also a room for sick missionaries, thus providing little privacy for the president's family. When President Joseph Fielding Smith toured the mission in 1960, the Snelgroves asked his wife, Jessie, if she wanted to go upstairs and see the rest of the house: "No, I've seen enough on the main floor." Sister Snelgrove understood her nervousness: "She didn't want to go up and see what was there."[21]

After that experience, the Snelgroves began to look for a new mission home. They found a beautiful home on Gáspar Campos Street, which they rented for the family to live. This separated the living quarters of the family and the mission headquarters, which stayed in the original mission home. They then purchased a home in the Belgrano section of the city and began to remodel the house to serve as the new mission home. A representative of the Church Building Department in Salt Lake City visited, stopped the remodeling, and bought a vacant lot, where they constructed a larger mission home with specifications for exactly what they considered necessary. The Snelgroves lived in the newly constructed mission home for a brief six weeks before returning home.

Constructing Chapels

The construction of mission homes and chapels at this time is one of the most significant events in the history of the Church in South America. It is a story not without complications, chal-

20. As quoted in Williams and Williams, *From Acorn to Oak Tree*, 85.
21. Laird Snelgrove, interview, 1987–88, 51.

lenges, and struggles, but a history little known or appreciated. There were sacrifices by many North American members, faith and hard work by construction missionaries, and financial sacrifices by members; the results were monumental. When the Snelgroves arrived in South America inn 1960, five functioning chapels had been built in all of South America, three of which were small and inadequate. By 1965 there were twenty newly constructed and dedicated chapels, forty-five under construction, and thirty-three proposed to begin that year. The Church owned 140 pieces of property. At one time there were more than five hundred construction missionaries working in South America. The visual result of the program for the Church was significant. But the program was much more than just constructing buildings. Elder Tuttle often stated the purpose of the building program of the Church was to build not only buildings but also men.[22]

The Church Building Committee was originally developed in the Pacific islands, but shortly after President Moyle became a member of the First Presidency, he conducted a survey of the needs for meetinghouses worldwide and set into motion a program of construction that was impressive. The Church Building Committee soon expanded and became a separate department in the Church administration that answered directly to President Moyle. The head of the committee, Wendell B. Mendenhall, extended the construction program first to Europe and then to Latin America. One who worked with Mendenhall described how he worked. He did what he thought was necessary to get the job done, "even though it might step on people's toes here and there."[23]

22. Arthur T. Allen, interview by Bruce D. Blumell, 1973, transcript, 49, James Moyle Oral History Program, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. The number of buildings comes from the reports by H. Dyke Walton, "Building Activity in South America: 1 July 1965"; copy in author's possession.
23. Richard D. Poll, *Working the Divine Miracle: The Life of Apostle Henry D. Moyle*, ed. Stan Larsen (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 196.

The first hint the South American mission presidents had that something significant might happen with the building program occurred in March 1958, when Neff Taylor of the Architectural and Engineering Department of the Church arrived in Buenos Aires "for a study of the proposed building program." His itinerary took him to Uruguay and Brazil before he returned home. He visited the few chapels under construction. A year later President Pace of the Argentine Mission, aware of the use of construction missionaries in the building program in the Pacific, asked Elder Spencer W. Kimball if he could start calling local members to serve as construction missionaries. He was cautioned against doing so until the program was formally introduced into South America.[24]

By January 1961 the Church was ready to establish the full program in Latin America. There were a few chapels being built in Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, but nothing like what was about to happen. On January 28, 1961, Wendell B. Mendenhall arrived in São Paulo, Brazil, accompanied by his assistant, H. Dyke Walton, and William F. Jackson, who had been appointed the construction supervisor in South America. They looked at the construction of the mission home and chapel in Pinheiros, a suburb of São Paulo, and immediately made changes on the mission home being built on the same property. As they talked into the evening, President Bangerter got excited: "He [Mendenhall] told inspiring story after story of the inspiration which attends this work from the South." A couple of days later the three visitors were in Curitiba in the Brazil South Mission, where Mendenhall talked about some struggles: "He mentioned the opposition he had faced in the program in high and low places until it had become understood. He gave me an insight into the power of faith which actuates him and the tremendous dedication he has put into his work since having been called by President McKay. I gained the understanding that the program had the full backing of the First Presidency

24. "Manuscript History of the Argentine Mission," March 3, 1958, March 18, 1959.

and that it will indeed make a big part of the new era of growth and development in the Church."[25]

After visiting with President J. Thomas Fyans and generating similar excitement for the program, the visitors from Salt Lake City met with the five South American mission presidents on February 2, 1961, in a special conference in Buenos Aires. Mendenhall explained that the program would be "under supervision of men sent from the United States" and that the branches would not have to provide money to finance a portion of the construction of a chapel, which was the common expectation in the United States. Labor from the missionaries and local members would be used to supplement this lack of funds. Mendenhall informed the group that it would not be a volunteer-type program, but those who served would receive a call from the mission presidents and have certain requirements similar to full-time proselyting missionaries. The mission presidents unanimously voted to accept the program, which President Bangerter suggested "was a sweet and historical moment in the history of the Church in South America." Mendenhall then went to the Liniers chapel for a meeting with members to explain the program, talking more than an hour and a half and "completely tiring the audience."[26]

Turning over responsibility for the building program to the Church supervisors was attractive to the mission presidents, who had been spending more time than they wanted on real estate issues and chapel construction. Four administrators arrived in South America and established a construction headquarters in Montevideo, Uruguay: a general supervisor, a real estate administrator, a treasurer, and an architect. Their responsibilities included visiting the different proposed chapel sites and determining which chapels should be built first in conjunction with the mission president. They then submitted a funding re-

25. William Grant Bangerter, diaries, January 28, 30, 1961, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
26. Bangerter, diaries, February 2, 1961.

quest to the First Presidency. An American building supervisor with construction experience would come to South America as a missionary to build the chapel. His construction workers would be young South Americans, called by the mission presidents on special construction missions for up to two years. These young men worked without pay but received their meals and clothing from the members in the branch where the building was being constructed. They were assisted in the work by members of the local branches who helped whenever possible. The financial contribution of members, which was traditional in the Church, would be between 10 and 20 percent of the total cost because of the work of the construction missionaries and support by the members. The program was impressive.[27]

The immediate question for the mission presidents was where the decision-making and administrative center of the program would be. President Snelgrove had been led to believe it would be in Argentina, and that was the original idea of the three visitors before arriving in South America.[28] But even before the missionary conference in Buenos Aires began, the three visitors changed their minds and decided Uruguay was a better place. They visited the property the Church owned in the Carrasco section of Montevideo and liked the city and the country. William Jackson, in particular, was impressed with Uruguay and felt comfortable with President and Sister Fyans. They also recognized that the political situation in Argentina was not as stable as in Uruguay. Therefore, construction offices were built on the block where Elder Tuttle would live.

Brother Jackson and his wife, Ruth, arrived on March 8 and began planning for the offices. By the end of the month he became seriously ill, returned to Salt Lake City, and was later assigned to Mexico City. Ruth Jackson wrote of her feelings for Montevideo and her disappointment: "We have never been

27. For an examination of the program, see H. Dyke Dalton, *They Built with Faith: True Tales of God's Guidance in L.D.S. Chapel Building Worldwide* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publisher, 1979).
28. Samuel Boren, interview, 1973, 19.

anywhere where we felt so much at home, and we will always remember it."[29] The following month, Jackson's replacement, David Ross McClellan, arrived in Montevideo along with the other three supervisors, Arthur F. Smith, real estate; Samuel Boren, treasurer; and Fernando Juárez, architect.[30] McClellan was the supervisor and had extensive experience in construction. Smith had significant experience working with real estate in the United States. The other two were Latin Americans, Juárez from Mexico, and Boren, an Argentine who had been working in the United States. Boren, in particular, was pleased to return to South America. The administrators moved into rented houses and began working.

The property the Church had purchased in Carrasco was indeed impressive. It was a full block of just under seven acres and included space for several houses, a chapel, and what Elder Tuttle eventually hoped would be the first temple in South America. It was one of the first significant developments in the neighborhood and visually established the Church in the city. The "Mansana Mormona" (Mormon Block), as it came to be known, became recognized throughout the city. The four supervisors quickly developed an impressive plan for the block. They designed a mission home for the Uruguayan Mission, a home for the Tuttle family, four homes for the construction supervisors, and a building that served as the construction offices. Two of the homes were eventually converted into four duplexes. They left sufficient space at the end of the block for a temple and a chapel.[31]

This was a period of adjustment. The primary difficulty came from misunderstandings concerning administration of the program. The Church had not yet developed a concept of regional administration; that would happen within a few years. Because the Church was in a transition, exactly who made de-

29. Ruth Jackson to Helen Fyans, April 15, 1961; in Helen Fyans's possession.
30. "Manuscript History of the Uruguay Mission," April 30, 1961.
31. Arthur Allen to B. M. Butler, October 14, 1965, 1, found in the Arthur Allen, Letters and Correspondence, Church History Library, Salt Lake City

cisions concerning construction was not established. To whom should the building committee report: the mission presidents, Elder Tuttle, or their departments in Salt Lake City? This conflict was highlighted in a June 2, 1962, meeting with all the construction supervisors and builders in Buenos Aires, called by Elder Tuttle to establish line authority. Elder Tuttle carefully outlined the difference between secular and ecclesiastical responsibilities and explained that as a General Authority his responsibility was to give priesthood direction to all their work. During the meeting, a supervisor carefully but forcefully disagreed: "Well, President Tuttle, how do we harmonize the fact that we have a letter from President McKay in which he has told us to take our direction from Wendell Mendenhall regarding these buildings?"[32] The conflict was not resolved, and the issue of administration was to be a serious concern for Elder Tuttle during his entire stay in South America. He expressed his frustration to President Moyle in a 1963 letter: "You may recall that last year I told you the reason I knew so little about the building program and had no relationship to it was because I had been instructed to stay completely out of it." President James Vernon Sharp of the Peruvian Mission wrote a letter to Elder Tuttle indicating he had talked to Brother Mendenhall, who suggested that because of the conflicts over administrative control, the entire program in South America might be shut down. Fortunately that did not happen.[33]

The conflicts were not only between construction personnel and Elder Tuttle and the mission presidents but among the staff of supervisors in Montevideo. All were capable men who knew their individual professions, but all had strong personalities. When they were sent to South America, they were not instructed as to the relationship they should have with each other. Arthur Allen, who replaced Ross McClellan as general su-

32. Arthur T. Allen, interview, 1973, 48.

33. A. Theodore Tuttle to President Hugh B. Brown. There is no date on the letter, but it was probably written at the end of September, 1963; James Vernon Sharp to A. Theodore Tuttle and Marné Tuttle, April 23, 1963; copy in Marné Tuttle's possession.

pervisor, explained the challenges: "The Building Department didn't make it clear enough, or these men didn't understand it clear enough who had the authority. . . . These difficulties came in because each of them felt they were a king in their own right, as it were—that they had complete authority to act there and nobody had any authority over them except the Building Department headquarters."[34]

McClellan was given administrative responsibility but struggled to maintain control. The different men did what they felt needed to be done and were often unwilling to take direction from McClellan or Elder Tuttle. McClellan worked hard to bring everyone together without success. Mendenhall made some changes after consulting with McClellan and Smith in a 1963 meeting in New York City. McClellan's responsibility was changed, and he was given an assignment for finances and replaced as supervisor by Arthur Allen. Brother Juarez was asked eventually to return to Salt Lake City, and Brother Boren was given a different job connected to the program but under direct supervision of Elder Tuttle and not the Construction Department. Though there continued to be challenges, many of the problems were resolved with these administrative changes.

The conflicts were often over where chapels should be built and how large they should be. These differences began early. In 1961, within a month after arriving in Uruguay, Elder Tuttle met with McClellan and stated, "Many are the problems of the Building Committee in South America."[35] In the 1962 mission presidents' conference in Lima, Peru, the presidents asked Dyke Walton if they could get smaller chapels that were more suited to the size of the congregations. The notes of the meeting showed their concerns: "The mission presidents request some type of re-analyzation to find a means by which buildings could be built more rapidly and at a lower expense." The results of the discussions were inconclusive. Those concerns were expressed

34. Arthur T. Allen, interview, 1973, 38.
35. Tuttle, "Manuscript History of the South American Mission," September 19, 1961.

on a regular basis, including an observation by Elder Spencer W. Kimball during his visit to South America in 1964 when he questioned both the size of the chapels being built and the extra features put into the buildings. He stated to the mission presidents that he "was concerned over the luxury and cost of buildings. He would like to see more buildings and the luxuries and frills taken out so that the price could be cut down."[36]

The conflict was primarily between what Mendenhall and his supervisors in Montevideo envisioned and what the mission presidents felt was needed. When proposals by the presidents were made for buildings, Mendenhall questioned their limited size: "One of the mistakes I think you are making in South America, you're building all your buildings too small."[37] He believed that buildings should be constructed with future potential of growth in mind and not what was presently happening. He believed that within a few years small branches with small congregations would grow into large stakes, and then the buildings would be too small. He was correct in most cases, with the branches becoming several stakes in some areas. What Mendenhall did not adequately appreciate was that because of the size of the cities and the difficulties of transportation, most members did not own cars but traveled to church using public transportation, often making two or three transfers just to get to a centralized chapel. Mission presidents believed it would be more effective to construct more chapels that were small closer to the homes of the members. Within a few years, the Church resolved the problem by instituting the concept of phased construction of chapels in which additions were built onto small chapels as the congregations grew.[38]

36. "Manuscript History of the Uruguay Mission," June 30, 1962, minutes of mission presidents meeting, Buenos Aires, May 13, 1964; in Arthur Allen, Letters and Correspondence, 1973.
37. Arthur Allen, interview, 53.
38. Paul L. Anderson and Richard H. Jackson, "Building Program," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:236–38.

But in South America at this time, the desires of the mission presidents and Elder Tuttle were overruled by the Building Committee in Salt Lake City. Big buildings were built, many large enough for multiple wards and stake offices. Mendenhall believed the buildings were appropriate for the future size of the Church, but there were a couple of surprises. One of the most unusual occurred in the city of Santa Lucia. In the interior of Uruguay, because of the size of the cities, the construction of a chapel was an important event for the city. In some cities the chapel became the second-largest religious structure in the city, second only to the Catholic cathedral in the center of town. In Santa Lucia, a decision was made to build a chapel large enough to serve several wards and function as a stake center. In addition, connected to the chapel was a gymnasium and stage, larger than most found in the United States. Santa Lucia had no more than fifteen thousand people but was an important stop for trains going to Montevideo from the interior. The city was expected to grow rapidly because of the train station. In addition, the city donated the land with the expectation that the gymnasium could be used by others in the town, which has been the case. Unfortunately, after the construction of the chapel, the use of trains in Uruguay was discontinued in favor of buses and trucks, and Santa Lucia did not experience the expected growth. In 2004, there was only one congregation in the building, along with the stake offices. The building is prominent in the town and is the pride of the members of the Church.[39]

These problems, however, were minor in comparison to the importance and value of the construction of buildings in South America. Many leaders have suggested that these buildings became the greatest missionary tool of the Church. President Fyans maintained that one chapel was worth at least

39. Néstor Curbelo, interview by Mark L. Grover, 2001, Buenos Aires; copy in author's possession.

eighteen missionaries.[40] The buildings changed the image of the Church in South America from being a small sect to a recognized religion. The actual construction of the building brought significant attention to the Church. People were attracted to the buildings and began to ask questions. André Martin, a construction missionary, stated, "The building resulted in growth. Where there was a small branch of the church, there is now two stakes. The building attracted investigators to the Church."[41]

Elder Tuttle breaking ground for the Liniers chapel

The way the buildings were built also attracted interest. They were erected by young men who received no salary for their work and began working with little or no construction training or skills. The building construction supervisors were mostly North Americans who often spoke no Spanish and had some experience in construction but often not with buildings of this nature. The buildings were partially paid for by local members who, for the most part, had no money to contribute toward the construction of buildings of this size. Yet the quality of the buildings were of such high standards that they surpassed the construction standards of the average building in South America.

Building Missionaries

Dr. Wong, an eminent Brazilian architect, thought Latter-day Saints were crazy. Contracted to assist in the design of the Santana chapel in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, he believed the complexity of the building would require significant construc-

40. Thomas Fyans, interview by Mark L. Grover.
41. André Martin, interview by Mark L. Grover, 2001, Buenos Aires; copy in author's possession.

tion expertise on the part of the building workers. When he realized the Church planned to build it with a crew of young men with no experience in construction, his response was, "You'll never build these buildings with boys." Ross McClellan's response to this challenge was, "Dr. Wong, when we finish that building, we'll invite you to the dedication. We'll build them all right. We may have to build them two or three times, but we will build them and they'll be right and you'll be proud of them." Dr. Wong did attend the dedication and expressed his admiration for the building. He also apologized for questioning the ability of the young construction missionaries.[42]

The key component in the building of the chapels were the young men who worked on the construction. The church required that the cost of the construction be partially paid for by the local members who would use the building, but the percentage of member participation was between 10 and 30 percent of the total construction cost. In the United States, where the members had adequate salaries, this type of financial expectation was possible, but in poorer countries there was not much available cash among the members. Members had done it in South America on a few chapels but with extreme difficulty. For example, in the Durazno chapel in Uruguay a young female member cooked donuts for two years without compensation, and all the proceeds were used to pay for the chapel. It was a considerable sacrifice on her part to work all day long and often into the night cooking to make enough money for the building.[43]

42. Ross McClellan, interview, 16. This type of reaction was very common. The local engineer for the Ponta Grossa Chapel in southern Brazil, Nicolau I. Kluppel, felt the same. "When he was first approached about the building being done with inexperienced help (building missionaries) he said it could never be done. Next time he went and found how it was progressing he said, 'Well, maybe it could be done:' and each time he visited he became more and more convinced that it could be done and he was amazed and pleased with the building and that it was done under such conditions" (notes for the opening at the Ponta Grossa Chapel, June 29, 1960; found in Arthur Allen, Letters and Correspondence).

43. Walter and Filipini Romero, interview by Mark L. Grover, June 6, 2001, Durazno, Uruguay; copy in author's possession.

The solution was to call construction missionaries. The concept was simple. Young men were called for a period of one to two years to build the chapels. They worked primarily in their own country. They received no salary, but they did get clothes and food provided by the local members. Most often a female member cooked for them. The missionaries received a small amount of cash for toiletry needs, again provided by the members. Generally they lived in makeshift quarters on the chapel property. They got up at six in the morning, when they would get ready for the day and have scripture and missionary classes, often taught by a local member or the construction supervisor. Then they worked the entire day. In the evenings they occasionally went out with the proselyting missionaries to teach investigators. The experience was rigorous and demanding. Unlike many of the normal construction workers in these countries, they did not have the number of breaks or advantages that were normal on construction sites.[44]

Presidents Tuttle and Fyans with construction missionaries in Salto, Uruguay

There were challenges under these conditions. The missionary had to envision the experience as a mission and not just another job. The supervisor had to be careful, or the situation could easily deteriorate. The branch members had to support the building by assisting the missionaries. If this did not happen, there could be serious problems, and the construction would suffer. For example, when Garth Wilkinson was assigned to take over supervision of the construction of the Santa Lucia

44. Some of this information comes from a series of "Circular Letters" sent to construction supervisors between May 14, 1963, and May 29, 1965 (Arthur Allen, Letters and Correspondence). The description of typical work days comes from a variety of interviews conducted with construction missionaries throughout Latin America, primarily in 2001; in author's possession.

chapel, he found that conditions and morale were not good. He immediately began to change the conditions. The rooms of the missionaries were cleaned. The branch construction committee was asked to upgrade the quality of the clothing provided to the missionaries and improve the caliber of food being prepared. Scripture classes, which had been discontinued, were started again. The construction missionaries began to work with the proselyting missionaries at night, and in turn the American missionaries came to the chapel to work on their diversion day (preparation day). A situation that had deteriorated with time became a spiritual and rewarding experience for both the missionaries and the branch members. Elder Tuttle's statement that the program was not only to build buildings but to build men became a reality: "It was about this time that you could see the change that was coming over the boys and their tremendous growth. They began singing as they worked and the harmony between them began to grow. Their love for the branch president and his counselors and for the members of the branch began to become evident and vice versa. There were happy greetings when the members of the building committee came to the project."[45]

The result for the young construction missionaries was beneficial in several different aspects. Most were young enough that they did not yet have a trade. The service gave them background and experience in all aspects of the construction process so that after two years they returned home with a trade that immediately provided them with career opportunities. Many of the missionaries worked in some type of construction business as their career. Some eventually owned their own construction companies.

Elder Tuttle saw that the program also developed leaders in the Church. Garth Wilkinson in Santa Lucia explained this advantage: "The Lord needed leadership in South America, and

45. Garth O. Wilkinson to the "construction supervisory," November 7, 1966, 11, Arthur Allen, Letters and Correspondence.

this was a wonderful program for developing this leadership and that each one of them would become future branch, district, and in time stake president."[46] That hope came to fruition in many of the missionaries' lives. Some of the young men were to serve additional proselyting missions after finishing their construction missions. Most who remained in the Church served as leaders in different administrative levels.[47]

For most missionaries, the greatest value of the experience was not in skills learned but in the spiritual growth gained. Along with the physical work, they were providing a spiritual service to the Church, and their reward was spiritual help. Most construction missionaries remember the mission primarily for the things that were learned about the Church. Most look back to the experience of the mission because it provided strength to confront the struggles of their lives. Many believe that the success they have had with their own children serving missions and remaining faithful in the Church was a direct result of their service as construction missionaries.[48]

A few female missionaries were also called to be secretaries in the construction offices. Dirce Pinheiros, from Araçatuba, Brazil, after serving a proselyting mission in Brazil, went to Uruguay, where she learned both English and Spanish. She appreciated the experience and had a career working with all three languages.[49] Cora Nora Grant lived in a small town in Argentina where the Church had been opened and then closed, but she always remained faithful. Her only contact with the Church was when the mission president or missionaries would occasionally come and visit with the members. After one such

46. Garth O. Wilkinson to the "construction supervisory," November 7, 1966, 9, Arthur Allen, Letters and Correspondence.
47. Examples include André Martin, stake president in Argentina; Leonel de Sá Maia from Brazil, temple recorder and mission president; Juan Martín Borges, stake president; and Irajá Soares from Brazil, stake president, Area Presidency.
48. This is best shown in five interviews of construction missionaries done in the city of Melo, Uruguay. All expressed similar feelings as to the importance of the mission in their lives; interviews in author's possession.
49. Dirce Pinheiros Marquez, interview by Mark Grover, August 12, 2004, Florinápolis, Brazil; copy in author's possession.

meeting with President Snelgrove, she accepted a call to serve a mission that took her to Uruguay and then São Paulo, Brazil. Though there were some difficult challenges in the mission, she sees it as the most important event of her life: "For me it was an inspired call. It helped me so much."[50]

Construction Supervisors

William Sessions worked in construction most of his life.[51] His father was a carpenter, foreman on construction projects, and eventually deputy labor commissioner for the state of California. As a young man, Bill worked as an apprentice carpenter under his father's supervision and then went into the home construction business in southern California with his brother, Robert. He was a single parent with four young children when he met Emily Ann Hoop, who was also raising two young children. Their marriage in 1961 resulted in a family of six children under the age of ten. Emily joined the Church a few months after their marriage, and they began a life together in southern California.

The tranquillity and normality of their life suffered a significant shock in 1964 when they received a phone call from Dyke Walton of the Church Building Committee. They had heard rumors that Bill's brother, Robert, who was in the local stake presidency, was going to be called on a mission, so Bill and Emily were surprised when Walton asked if they, and not Robert, would be willing to go to Argentina on a three-year construction mission. During the official interview in Salt Lake City a few days later, Walton told them, "I want you to know this will be the hardest thing you've ever done in your entire life," but he assured them that it would have a similar mea-

50. Cora Noel Grant, interview by Mark L. Grover, May 31, 2001, Buenos Aires, 22; copy in author's possession.

51. Biographical information on William and Emily Sessions was obtained from interviews on April 16, 2001, and April 13, 2004, by the author; copies in author's possession.

sure of rewards. They would be provided with a small home, transportation, and a small stipend. Bill and Emily returned to California, turned the business over to Bill's brother, sold all their house furnishings and car, rented out their home, and prepared luggage of forty-four pounds per person.

They also answered questions from friends and neighbors about why they were so willing to make a large sacrifice at that time in their lives. Emily's answer was simple: "The Lord has called us to do this, and we don't feel like it's a sacrifice."[52] That attitude was exemplified when just before leaving Bill was diagnosed with mouth cancer. Unwilling to change their plans, they identified a doctor in Argentina who would be able to administer proper treatment. A second biopsy, taken as they were leaving for Argentina, revealed that the growth in his mouth had disappeared, never to return. The Sessionses and their six children boarded a Pan American airliner in New York City, heading for South America with some anxiety but also calm reassurance, knowing they were serving the Lord.

Those types of calls were common to members in the United States with construction experience in the 1960s and early 1970s. Dyke Dalton, who served for two years in the Pacific and then became an administrator throughout the world, described his first call. As he waited to be interviewed by Wendell Mendenhall, he decided that if it were a job offer he would turn it down, but if it were a call he would accept. Before going into the interview, a friend angrily walked out of Mendenhall's office complaining that what was being asked of him was too much, to leave his business, go to a foreign country, and work as a missionary without salary. Dalton accepted the call and saw the positive differences in his life compared to that of his friend who had been so upset. The mission changed Dalton's life as it did the Sessionses' lives and many other faith-

52. Sessions, interview, 7–8.

ful members of the Church who worked on these construction projects.[53]

The calls these families received were similar to those received by mission presidents. They left their businesses and homes for a period of two to three years and took their families to South America. They received living expenses and some help with the education of their children, if they were near an English school. However, most went to cities without this educational option. They were expected to supervise all construction details of building large chapels, obtain all necessary materials, and handle all the technical and cultural issues in an unfamiliar land. All had experience working in construction, but most did not have background working on a building of this size, and many had limited supervisory experience. Even more challenging was the fact that their building crew was composed of young men between eighteen and twenty-five with little or no experience. If this were not difficult enough, the supervisors had to work in an unfamiliar language with a crew that did not speak English. It looked like a recipe for failure, but it resulted in amazing success.

Construction of Chapels

The approach for building chapels was fairly similar throughout South America. The architect from Uruguay would visit the site and determine what was needed to fit the local needs. That information was sent to Salt Lake City, where the architectural plans would be drawn up and sent back. A local architect would look over the plans, making necessary changes. The buildings were similar throughout South America. The similarities became somewhat of a problem because of geographical differences in the climate and culture. The chapels in southern Argentina and Chile were being built in cold climates and should have included double-paned windows but did not.

53. H. Dyke Dalton, *They Built with Faith*, 13.

The same building in the warm climates of Brazil needed to have large windows that opened to allow the movement of air to help alleviate the effects of tropical heat. They did not. Those changes were made in later construction plans but did not occur in the early buildings.

The Sessions family first went to Montevideo, Uruguay, where they met with their construction supervisors and Elder Tuttle. After receiving two weeks of instruction and training from Arthur Allen, head of construction for all of South America, they flew to the city of Mendoza in western Argentina and settled into their small but adequate home.

The chapel they were to build would be the second in the area. Construction on a chapel in Godoy Cruz, the neighboring city, had begun a year earlier in November 1963 under the supervision of Cohen Allred. Soon after the Sessions family arrived, Allred familiarized Bill and Emily with the city, showing them the lumberyard and introducing them to plumbers, electricians, and other local contractors who could be used on the project. Allred gave them their first construction missionary, Elder Juan Zapatera, and they began constructing the stake center.

When they arrived, nothing had been done except purchasing the property. The land was situated in prime city property, a seven-acre lot on Emilio Civit Street. A beer brewery that had been on the property for many years had been torn down, but there was still a large one-story house where the Mendoza Branch met for their meetings.

The first task was to prepare living quarters for the missionaries. A small building on the side of the lot lent itself well. They rebuilt the inside of the building into a living space and expanded the structure enough that it would house the ten to twelve missionaries who would work on the project at the same time. The building included a kitchen, sleeping area, and large dining area with tables and chairs.

The second task was to organize a groundbreaking. This proved to be more difficult than expected because of the ground. There were large rocks, and the years of beer trucks coming onto the property had compacted the ground to the point that it was almost impossible to dig without heavy machinery. For an entire week before the ceremony, a piece of ground the size of a table was kept constantly moist and worked so that the earth could be penetrated to turn the soil. The ceremony was attended by Elder Tuttle and representatives of the city, including the mayor of Mendoza. Additional missionaries arrived, and they were ready to begin.

Bill Sessions received a surprise when he opened the building plans only to find that they were written in Spanish and in the metric system. Preliminary plans came from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City but had been redone and adjusted by a local architect. Bill knew some Spanish but not enough to immediately know what was written. Sessions saw the hand of the Lord in his ability to learn enough Spanish so quickly that he was able to understand and use the plans in a short time. The building was large but less sophisticated than the homes he had been building in the United States. As a stake center, it was to include a chapel, cultural hall, classrooms, and administrative areas.

The first task of the construction was to dig up the foundation and clear the area of the large rocks. The ground had to be dug and leveled enough to pour the cement floor. The rocks were so large that they could not be moved by hand. Bill consulted with the local architect who gave him some advice, then Bill returned home, and began fasting. The day after the fast a local contractor came by and offered them the use of his small bulldozer which, though held together with "wire and faith," was able to do the job. Within a short time they had cleaned the area and created a large pile that Emily suggested "looked

like a small mountain when they got through moving those rocks."[54]

As soon as the top level of rocks was gone, the missionaries began digging the footings. They did not have the digging equipment Sessions was used to, so the three-and-a-half- to seven-foot footings were dug by hand and cement poured into the holes. The ground was then compacted with handmade tampers, and the floor was formed with cement poured into large squares.[55] The wheelbarrows they found in Argentina were not large enough nor strong enough to handle the amount of cement required to fill the footings. Sessions again prayed and then drew up plans for a large wheelbarrow, took the plans to a machine shop, and had the wheelbarrow built. He took large tires off a motor scooter to use on the wheelbarrow. When his missionaries saw the size of the wheelbarrow he was planning and realized that they would be pushing it full of cement, they doubted it could be moved: "All the South Americans thought he was nutty. This man has lost his mind." The wheelbarrow was used for the entire construction project.[56]

The walls of the chapel were made of cement blocks. The block-making machine became a trademark of chapel construction in South America. Designed and built there, it was used in the construction of all the chapels built at this time. This type of block construction was done in Argentina, but the blocks for this chapel were smaller and stronger.

The block maker was moved from site to site and used to manufacture hundreds of thousands of cement blocks, made two at a time. The Mendoza chapel alone required more than forty thousand cement blocks. The process went like this: The mold for two blocks rested on a wooden pallet. Semidry cement was poured into two molds, and a vibrator turned on to compact the cement. Another pallet was brought down sev-

54. Sessions, interview, 19.
55. Emily Sessions to family, May 14, 1965; copy in Emily Sessions's possession.
56. Sessions, interview, 22.

eral times to compact the cement into the molds and eliminate air bubbles.[57] The molds were then lifted away, and the newly formed blocks were taken to a curing shed, a large structure covered in plastic and nicknamed "the sweat house." Inside the structure there were enough wooden frames for four to five hundred bricks to be placed. To cure the blocks, they had to be left overnight in a humid environment. Just outside the steam house was a fifty-gallon drum, partially covered by adobe, that was one-fourth filled with water. The water was heated with a fire beneath the drum and brought to a boil, creating steam. Underground pipes carried the steam into the curing shed. The fire was kept burning all the time to produce the right amount of steam. The blocks were left all night in this environment, which allowed for enough time for the blocks to be cured. The blocks were then stacked near the construction and allowed to age about a week. At this point they were ready to be used. Any that were broken or cracked were discarded.

A train of workers would move the blocks to the chapel wall. Generally the missionaries placed them and grouted them into the wall. The grout was made on-site from sand found at a dry riverbed near Mendoza and was brought to the site each day by the missionaries. The holes where the studs were placed were filled with cement. Each bucket of grout was handed up the wall one at a time. Ladders and frames were built as the walls grew. One can only imagine the number of buckets of cement carried up the frame to fill the blocks.

After the walls were constructed, workers placed a large thirty-six-inch beam made of cement that extended across the cultural hall and the stage. After the beam was in place, at least forty-one trusses were built to extend across the roof of the chapel and the cultural hall. They were nailed together on-site on large tables. One of the missionaries, Elder Viaselli from Brazil, had never worked with a hammer. He "hammered until his hands bled. He was smiling all the time and would just wrap

57. Emily Sessions to family, February 4, 1965.

rags around his hands and keep on hammering . . . and talk to us in Portuguese." Each of the trusses placed on the roof were raised into position by a homemade crane with a ten-foot steel I-beam and a sixteen-foot piece of timber for the extension. It was affectionately called the "cachi-bachi" or "thingamajig." The first truss put into place created jubilation. Emily Sessions described what happened: "Everybody just cheered. It was the most exciting day. . . . They were so proud of themselves. They had really accomplished something that they could never have dreamed of before they came on this mission, watching this building go up under their own hands. It was miraculous."[58]

A tower was built with cement blocks and partially filled with cement. The next step was to put on the wooden roof. That included building the ceiling, covering it with felt, and then putting on the shingles. The interior of the building was also constructed with wood floors. Most of the electrical and plumbing work was done by local contractors and not by the missionaries. The walls were sheet-rocked and then painted.

The quality of the construction can be seen in the passing of time. The Florida chapel in Uruguay was built during the 1960s and renovated in the year 2000. With a new paint job, the chapel looks like a new building. In contrast, the chapel in the town of Bello Union in northern Uruguay was built in the 1980s by a local contractor using the same type of block construction. The walls of this chapel are cracked in several places, causing the building to look older than the chapels built earlier. The walls of the chapels built under the construction missionary program continue to be strong and impressive.

Missionaries in Mendoza

Though the size of the crew in Mendoza varied, there were generally twelve missionaries at a time on-site. The ma-

58. Sessions, interview, 36. For a description of the raising of the first truss, see letter from Emily Sessions to Mom and Dad, June 15, 1966.

jority were from Argentina, but there were also missionaries from Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Spain, and one from North America. The majority were in their early twenties with limited or no experience in the construction business.

Some missionaries had been members of the Church for many years, but most were recent converts. One example was André Martin from Buenos Aires. His parents had died when he was young, and he was adopted by a couple who also passed away by the time he was twelve years old. Consequently, during his teenage years he lived in a variety of places, including sleeping in a truck and in a factory where he worked. He had no family, so he completely supported himself. He worked during the day and went to school at night. He and a friend bought a truck and then a van and rented out both. A friend introduced him to the Church, which he immediately enjoyed, in part because it gave him a large group of friends. Within six months the branch president called him in and asked him to go on a mission. He was interviewed by the mission president, and he accepted the call that came in a letter from the First Presidency. He decided to accept because he felt it was the right thing to do and because it would teach him a trade. His first chapel was in Mendoza, and he worked on the construction site for most of his three years as a missionary.[59]

It was not easy for the missionaries. The rules and regulations for the construction missionaries were similar to those of the proselyting missionaries. They received no pay and depended upon the members for support. They had specific times to be in bed and to get up. They had scripture and gospel study in the mornings and occasionally worked with the proselyting missionaries in the evenings. They were not allowed to swim, date, attend movies, or dance. They worked long hours with limited breaks and time away from the job. The traditional Argentine two-hour break in the early afternoon was not taken.

59. André Bernardo Martin, interview by Mark L. Grover, June 23, 2001, Buenos Aires; copy in author's possession.

They were not given vacation time and were not allowed to return to their home to see their families. They were expected to accept callings in the local branch organization as long as it did not interfere with their work. In return, they received work experience and training on all aspects of the construction of a large building. Many were given supervisory experience and learned all the details of building construction. Returning home, their prospects in the construction business were greatly enhanced.[60]

They appreciated that religious experiences were intermixed with the work. The missionaries would get up at 5:45 a.m. and, before beginning work, have a half-hour gospel study of the scriptures, led by Bill Sessions. A nearby church learned of the study sessions and began to ring their bells during the study period. Bill Sessions just talked over the bells. It did not take long for the neighbors to complain to the church, and the practice was stopped.[61]

One significant example was that of Juan Martín Borges. In an interview conducted thirty-five years after he worked in Mendoza, he suggested the importance of that experience: "For me my mission was the cement in my life, miraculous cement. . . . I can't think of Elder Sessions without giving thanks to God for him."[62]

It took time for him to come to that conclusion. There was significant conflict between Borges and Sessions during his almost two years on the construction crew. Borges arrived in Mendoza three months into his mission. His personality was strong, and he struggled with authority. He immediately had a conflict with Sessions. After being told to do something he did not want to do, he told him, "You're not my father. You can't tell me what to do. I'm not going to do that."[63] After

60. Sessions, interview, 29.
61. Sessions, interview, 24.
62. Juan Martín Borges, interview by Mark L. Grover, May 14, 2002, Mendoza, Argentina, 12.
63. Sessions, interview, 27.

being in Mendoza for three months, he asked for a transfer to another chapel. Sessions was tempted to comply because it had not been an easy experience for him, but he saw in Borges potential that could be developed. He decided not to transfer him, saying, "Borges, I'm not going to transfer you the way you are to anyone because I don't think they deserve that. If you can come and tell me before your mission is over that you want to be transferred, and if you can show me that you've earned that transfer, I'll transfer you." After two years he again asked for a transfer, which Sessions gladly supported because of the maturing that had occurred.[64] He had become one of the best workers on the project.

For the most part, Sessions was pleased with the missionaries. There were occasional problems, but not more than he would have encountered with a hired crew in the United States. What was different was the presence of the Spirit on the site. Brother Sessions stated, "You're a mile high. It's a spiritual high." Sister Sessions described it this way: "You're living as a missionary. Even though he [Bill] was building, he was devoting all this time to the Lord and to teaching these boys the gospel, also teaching them a trade to better their lives."[65]

Twenty-five years later, on a spring day in 1999, André Martin returned home from Church hoping to enjoy a relaxing Sunday night. The evening was interrupted when the phone rang and the caller informed him that a fire had just destroyed the roof of the chapel in Mendoza. Martin was the South America South Area supervisor of building maintenance and construction and was on a plane early the next morning to survey the damage. It was not an easy trip for Martin because he had worked as a construction missionary on this building. Emotions were close to the surface as he saw the charred walls of the chapel, but it was when he went inside that the tears began to flow. Visiting the building were most of the old members

64. Sessions, interview, 29.
65. Sessions, interview, 31.

in Mendoza who had spent their nights and weekends helping to build this chapel. They all identified parts of the building that included their own personal work and effort. They loved this building as if it were their own home. These members were not just mourning the loss of a building; they had lost part of themselves. André joined them in their tears and grief over the partial destruction of the building.[66]

Leaving Argentina

When Laird and Edna Snelgrove left Argentina in 1963, the problem of small, inadequate chapels was well on its way to being resolved. The Church owned thirty-nine pieces of property, many with chapels, and one mission home. There were also numerous plans for additional chapels to be built wherever there were branches of the Church. As new areas were opened to missionary work, the amount of time between the organization of a branch and the construction of a chapel was relatively short and occurred if a small but solid membership was developed. The presence of a chapel in an area attracted significant attention and often resulted in additional growth and expansion.

With the growth that occurred, Argentina entered a new phase that was the result of a stable and strong membership. The mission had been split, and the Argentine North Mission now administered a large part of the country. President Snelgrove established the new missionary programs that came from the mission presidents' conference in Salt Lake City in 1961 and had used programs and ideas both from President Bangerter in Brazil and President Fyans in Uruguay. A strong local leadership had been developed with such men as Juan Carlos Avila, Hugo Catron, Antonio Gianfelice, Angel Abrea, and others. President Snelgrove believed they were ready to organize the

66. Andrés Bernardo Martíns, interview by Mark L. Grover and Néstor Curbelo, June 23, 2001, Buenos Aires, 9; copy in author's possession.

first stake in South America. But that was not to happen until after he returned home. He left Argentina on September 21, 1963, and returned to his ice cream business. His legacy continued, however.[67]

President Arthur Strong

Arthur Strong almost did not make it to Argentina. In early 1963 he visited with President Joseph Fielding Smith and was called to preside over the Argentine Mission. He was pleased with the call but then the challenges began. While he was in President Smith's office receiving his call, his mother passed away. Shortly after the visit, he was in a car accident. Then came the most serious challenge: his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer and entered the hospital for a mastectomy. When the General Authorities heard about the operation, they immediately called Elder Tuttle and told him the Strongs would not be coming; their call had been canceled. A special fast was held with the Strongs' friends and members of the ward during which their stake patriarch gave Sister Strong a blessing promising recovery in time to go on the mission. Strong talked with Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, chair of the missionary committee, and told him of the blessing and asked that their call not be canceled. Presidents McKay and Moyle of the First Presidency made a visit to the Strongs' home to see for themselves. As a result of the visit, they decided to reinstate the mission call and allowed the Strongs a couple of additional months of recovery and suggested they go to Argentina by boat instead of plane, giving Sister Strong time

President Arthur Strong and family

67. "Manuscript History of the Argentine Mission," September 27, 1963.

to completely recuperate. They arrived in Argentina a couple of months late.[68]

President Strong made few changes in Snelgrove's program. He began an intensified program of preparation for the stake organization in Buenos Aires. That program included leadership training, the introduction of home teaching, and a focus on the family. As often happens with a new mission president, the number of baptisms decreased for a time, which caused President Strong some concern. During his time in Argentina twelve chapels were dedicated, eight of which were started during his period. It was a time of strengthening and development before organizing the stake, which occured in November 1966, just after the Strongs left.

Conclusion

The construction of chapels in South America has continued at a rapid pace since its beginning in the 1960s. The size of the chapels diminished significantly, and a program of phased construction became the norm. Chapels were built closer to the neighborhoods where the members lived. These smaller chapels could be built in as little as six months, in comparison to the five years it took to build the earlier, larger chapels. American construction supervisors were soon replaced by the young men who had worked as construction missionaries. The construction missionary program began to be phased out in the late 1960s, but limited participation occurred up through the late 1970s. Young men who would have been candidates as construction missionaries were instead called as proselyting missionaries. Eventually private construction companies were contracted to build the chapels. A few of these companies are owned by members of the Church.

68. Arthur Hobson Strong, interview by Joseph S. Willes, June 2, 1976, Salt Lake City, 3, Oral History Program of the Salt Lake Foothill Stake.

The building of chapels brought together American construction supervisors, construction missionaries from all over South America, and local members. They overcame lack of building knowledge, language differences, and conflicts to build a monument to the Church that has continued to be impressive to the present day. It is a story of faith, hard work, and miracles.