

# A Historian by Yearning: A Conversation with Elder Marlin K. Jensen

*Elder Marlin K. Jensen and David F. Boone*

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*Boone: Elder Jensen, would you begin by telling us of your own life and experiences and what you feel has helped to prepare you in your calling as the Church historian and recorder.*

*Jensen:* To begin, I'll acknowledge I'm becoming an old man. I have lived a long time and have personally experienced a lot of history. I grew up in Huntsville, Utah, which is generally best known for being the birthplace of President David O. McKay. He was such a commanding figure in that small community during my youth that my interest in the history of the Church and its leaders was stimulated early on. When I returned from my mission to Germany in 1964, I began to build a modest Church history library. At BYU I majored in German and minored in history, intending at one time to obtain an advanced degree and teach at the university level. However, several experiences at the end of my undergraduate work, including a long conversation I had with Judge Monroe McKay during a horseback ride, convinced me to go to law school.

I ended up the next fall at the University of Utah College of Law, where I earned a Juris Doctor degree. My legal training certainly helps with my current assignment. Thinking clearly and rigorously, understanding the structure of logical (and illogical) arguments, appreciating how words can facilitate or obstruct communication, and being able to weigh evidence are critical legal skills that are also essential to professional historians.

After law school I pursued what I would call a country law practice, living on a family farm in Huntsville and practicing in Ogden in small firms or on my own for a time. This approach to the practice of law provided a little money but more importantly some freedom. With some of that freedom I bought time and used it to read and involve myself a little in historical endeavors.

My legal career lasted nineteen years, and now my service with the Quorums of Seventy has extended to nearly eighteen years. Happily, during this period of full-time Church service, I served for a time more than ten years ago as assistant executive director in the Church Historical Department and later for several years as the executive director. Then, when I returned from a three-year European assignment in the summer of 2004, I was called to be the executive director of the Family and Church History Department.

In the spring of 2005, just prior to April conference, President Hinckley called me to the office of Church historian and recorder. I was very humbled by the prophet's call but did have the presence of mind to ask President Hinckley what his expectations of me were. He said, "Read the scriptures and do your duty."

So, that was my orientation to the office of Church historian and recorder, and I've been trying to do what President Hinckley suggested. Together with Elders Gary J. Coleman and Sheldon F. Child, assistant executive directors, and some very able staff members, I have been studying scriptural passages that pertain to the work of the historian and recorder. I feel we have gained valuable insights into the purpose of history and the keeping of records in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I continue to feel inadequate. As I replied to a similar question in an interview with the *Church News*, "I am really not a historian except by yearning."<sup>1</sup> I'm comforted in my shortcomings, however, by the knowledge that as important as they are, professional training and experience alone are not sufficient qualifications to pursue the work of Church history. More important is the influence of the Holy Ghost, which refines, focuses, and inspires us to do better work than would have been otherwise possible.

I also draw consolation from being surrounded by exceptional associates. Richard E. Turley Jr., for example, is the managing director of the Family and Church History Department. He is also a lawyer by training but is certainly one of the brightest and best-read scholars in the Church. He has a profound grasp of Church history and an understanding of doctrine to go with it. He is very able and is a wonderful asset to the Lord's work.

I might also point out that the Family and Church History Department, as its name implies, is a combination of what was once two departments. Each half of the department has its own associate managing director who leads the day-to-day work of family or Church history. In the case of Church history, Steven L. Olsen, who has a PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago, is the associate managing director. He is also a very capable and thoughtful person. He is assisted by several dozen committed, professionally trained staff, many with advanced degrees from various disciplines, all of whom add skill and value to the work of Church history.

*Boone:* Do you have any insights or thoughts on the significance or direction of Doctrine and Covenants 21, verse 1—“Behold, there shall be a record kept among you”—and what that means to us and how it applies to the membership of the Church generally?

*Jensen:* Section 21 and the command to keep a record were revealed on the day the Church was organized. I think that fact alone evidences the significance Church history ought to merit in our lives. We often speak of the importance of doctrine and ordinances in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but I think the extensive use of historical narrative by the prophets who wrote our scriptures is also worth noting. Perhaps both doctrinal and historical content contribute to the scriptures functioning as “the word of the Lord . . . and the power of God unto salvation” (D&C 68:4).

Moreover, without the benefit of memory, our eternal perspective is seriously diminished. Occasionally the newspapers report on someone who through an accident or otherwise has lost his or her memory. Such victims of amnesia have great difficulty relating to the present, much less the future, until they recover some of their past.

Book of Mormon readers know that “remembering” is a concept that comes up again and again in that sacred book. The passage I have come to appreciate most since becoming Church historian is “And now, O man, remember, and perish not” (Mosiah 4:30). That plea from King Benjamin makes a pretty good case for the value of Church history.

But there are other reasons to concern ourselves with remembering. One is the idea that for our Father in Heaven—as it says in at least two places in scripture—“all things are present before mine eyes” (D&C 38:2; see also D&C 130:7). God is simultaneously aware of all things—past, present, and future. This comports with the scriptural definition of truth, which is a “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). If our quest as God’s children is to become like Him one day, then coming to know of “things as they were” provides us with a critical perspective.

Alma recognized the power of remembering “things as they were.” His incomparable sermon in Alma 5 (punctuated by a series of soul-stirring questions) begins with the question, “Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers?” (Alma 5:6). The starting point for Alma’s efforts to motivate Church members to greater faithfulness was to take them back to their past. In looking back, we obtain a sense of identity that enables us to deal successfully with the present and maintain hope for the future.

I have one other reflection to share on Doctrine and Covenants 21:1. As every lawyer knows, if you are trying to defraud someone, the first thing you do is destroy the pertinent records. If Joseph Smith had intended to mislead the world, why would he have published a revelation commanding that “a record [be] kept”? As a result of that revelation, we have probably the best-kept records and the most extensive archival collections of any religious organization of comparable size on earth. To me, that’s strong evidence that Joseph Smith was a true prophet and desired to preserve a true record of the Restoration. As busy as he was and with all of the demands made of him, he exerted great effort from the beginning to ensure future generations would have a record of the Church’s history.

*Boone: That is a great insight. Since your brief interview with President Hinckley was really pointed, specific, and direct, what have you determined in terms of your responsibilities and duties and job description as a Church historian?*

*Jensen:* After long and prayerful consideration of pertinent scriptural passages by both the assigned General Authorities and Church history staff members, a scriptural mandate has been articulated. We feel the purpose of Church history is to help Church members make and keep their sacred covenants. The achievement of this purpose is to be accomplished in three ways:

First, Church history (in its various manifestations, that is, publications, historical sites, museum exhibits, and so forth) is to witness to the truths of the Restoration. Because our history is so rich, there are many people, places, and things we could be concerned about. Focusing on the core truths of the Restoration will guide our efforts to prioritize and accomplish what we can within the resource limitations that exist.

Second, Church history is to help us remember, in Book of Mormon terms, “the great things that the Lord [has] done for [our] fathers” (Ether 7:27). This notion is bolstered by Moroni’s admonition that before praying to know the truth of the Book of Mormon we should get ourselves in the proper spiritual frame of mind by reflecting

on all of the things God has done for His children from the time of Adam until the present day “and ponder it in [our] hearts” (Moroni 10:3). Note that the antecedent of “it” is all the things God has done for His children. Church history is to help us retain a consciousness of these things in our minds and hearts as an essential part of our personal conversion. It’s a powerful, as well as a humbling, concept.

Finally, Church history is to preserve the revealed order of the kingdom. What we have in mind here is the preservation of the revelations, documents, procedures, processes, patterns, and so on that provide order and continuity for the exercising of priesthood keys, for the proper functioning of priesthood quorums, for the performance of ordinances, and so forth—those things that are essential to salvation in the kingdom of God.

This perspective of Church history’s purposes and the role of the Church historian distinguishes our mission from the work being done by trained scholars in other research libraries, historical societies, archives, or museums. While aspiring to the highest professional standards, we who labor in the Church’s historical enterprise must seek to build faith and also bring souls to Christ. This is a noble and lofty ambition, one not easily achieved and perhaps not fully appreciated by our professional colleagues. Nevertheless, we feel it is our mandate and must be pursued.

*Boone: You have commented extensively on the work of the Church historian. Is there anything more you would like to say about the office of Church recorder?*

*Jensen:* The functions of recorder and historian are complementary. Originally, Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, and their successor historian-recorders kept a historical record but also recorded such things as membership records, minutes of meetings, patriarchal blessings, and ordination certificates for priesthood offices. Over the years, for valid administrative reasons, some of these recording functions have been taken over by the Presiding Bishopric’s Office, particularly the Member and Statistical Records Division.

Nevertheless, there is still much to be done as Church recorder. In this information age, a significant duty I have is to chair the Records Management Committee of the Church. This committee is charged with creating the policies, processes, and systems that will help manage and preserve essential Church records. This includes everything from First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve meeting minutes and business transactions of Church departments to annual historical reports from the ecclesiastical units of this global Church. Because probably 60

to 70 percent of Church business is now conducted electronically, just helping create systems and procedures for the content management, preservation, and eventual disposal or retention of electronic records could take more than this recorder's lifetime!

To me, the most solemn duty of the Church recorder is to receive from the Temple Department a record of the temple ordinances that have been performed in all temples of the Church. To assist with the preservation of these sacred records is something that has implications for time and eternity. Joseph Smith taught that "whatsoever you record on earth shall be recorded in heaven" (D&C 128:8).

*Boone:* *Have you had any thoughts since you have been in this office about why you and why now and the significance of a historian-recorder being sustained when it hasn't been done for a number of years previously?*

*Jensen:* I really don't know why the office went unfilled for a few years—actually since Elder Dean L. Larsen was released in 1997. I do know, however, that during those years Elder D. Todd Christofferson, who served as executive director of the Family and Church History Department, left nothing undone. Because the office is a constitutional or scriptural one, I think the title, if I can be worthy of it, lends a certain credence and authority to what those of us working in the Historical Department do.

This is, by the way, a very exciting time for Church history. One evidence of that is the First Presidency's approval of a new Church History Library, which is currently under construction in Salt Lake City on the block east of the Conference Center. It will be ready for occupancy sometime in 2009. The building will total about two hundred fifty thousand square feet of space. It evidences the importance placed by the First Presidency and the Twelve on the keeping of records and the providing of access to those records.

On the content side, the Joseph Smith Papers Project being carried out under Historical Department leadership is one of the most significant historical projects of our generation. Project workers are compiling all of the critical papers, journals, diaries, sermons, business papers, legal papers, and revelations Joseph Smith produced, received, or dictated during his lifetime. It will be a ten- to fifteen-year project resulting in the publication of two dozen or more volumes and the electronic publication of several more.

In addition, a trio of historians—Richard E. Turley Jr., Ronald W. Walker, and Glen M. Leonard—working with Historical Department staff assistance, are finishing a landmark volume on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Along with the Utah War, that tragic event has its

150th anniversary during 2007, and publication of the book sometime during this year by Oxford University Press will be a significant event.

Another development I feel supports the need for an authoritative voice for Church history at this time is the current interest in academic circles in Mormon Studies, of which Church history is an important part. Utah Valley State College and Claremont Graduate University have recently established Mormon Studies programs. Utah State University has begun a Religious Studies program that includes an examination of Mormonism and its history. Not long ago I met Douglas Davies, a scholar not of our faith who has founded a Mormon Studies program at the University of Durham in England. He holds an annual symposium on developments in Mormonism. I know that scholars at the University of Wyoming are considering the founding of a Mormon Studies program there. So there is obviously much going on in the academic world that makes the office of Church historian needful and relevant.

I also want to point out that in discharging the responsibilities of this office, I am guided and counseled by two members of the Quorum of the Twelve, Elders Russell M. Nelson and Dallin H. Oaks, who are appointed by the First Presidency to serve as Church history advisers. We meet regularly with these wise and experienced men and are blessed to have the benefit of their prophetic insights. They in turn can readily access the First Presidency on issues requiring their approval. I have great confidence in this process and know that if we follow it, Church history will be on solid ground.

*Boone:* You mentioned earlier that the Joseph Smith Papers Project will be the single most significant historical project of our generation. Why is that so?

*Jensen:* President Hinckley has said that everything we have in the Church is the lengthened shadow of Joseph Smith. He was the organizing force of what has become a global Church and the means of salvation for the entire human family. The study of his life and teachings is therefore of great interest and importance. To bring together the documents that represent his life's work and to publish them with helpful annotation and contextual commentary will increase appreciation for his contribution to mankind. Hopefully it will also hasten the day when Joseph Smith is widely seen in his true identity as the great prophet of the Restoration. Certainly, in the future, any respectable scholar working on the beginnings of Church history will need to demonstrate a mastery of the content of these documents to be credible. Although the projected volumes will likely appeal primarily to a highly educated audience, they should also spawn a variety of derivative



products that will make information about Joseph Smith's life available for interested parties of all educational levels.

*Boone: What is your role in the process?*

*Jensen:* My direct involvement is as chair of the editorial committee whose members review each volume as it is finalized for publication. The day-to-day work of supervising the project and of overseeing the papers is done primarily by Ronald K. Esplin, working under the direction of Steven L. Olsen and Jill Mulvay Derr. Many other talented historians and staff members have committed themselves to the success of this significant endeavor.

*Boone: Elder Jensen, as we learn about and remember the life of the Prophet Joseph Smith, what are your personal feelings? What have you learned about the Prophet Joseph and his ministry?*

*Jensen:* I stand in awe of Joseph. His actual ministry was relatively short. I look at what he accomplished in that brief time and am amazed. The results of the Joseph Smith Papers Project will give us even greater insight into his character and genius. I think at this point two things about him stand out for me.

One is how resolute Joseph was. I remember being in Nova Scotia while touring the Canada Halifax Mission a few years ago. I had never met a better mission president or group of missionaries. They were hardworking and worthy but were experiencing little success in the challenging Maritime Provinces of Canada. Finally in my attempts to support and encourage the missionaries, I remembered a quotation from the Prophet Joseph in which he said, "If I were sunk in the lowest pit of Nova Scotia, with the Rocky Mountains piled on me, I would hang on, exercise faith, and keep up good courage, and I would come out on top."<sup>22</sup> That statement gave hope to that little band of missionaries, and it should give hope to all of us. Joseph Smith was definitely resolute, and we can be grateful he kept going in so many seemingly hopeless situations and came out on top.

His tenacity is impressive by any measure. Imagine him in prison. Think of the practical challenges of administering the Church with headquarters in Ohio and Missouri. Consider the effort involved in getting an orderly city to rise out of the swamps of western Illinois. And throughout these trying times he worked to be an acceptable husband and father. His gift of scripture to the world is a work of unsurpassed worth. And all of this was done under the most inconvenient and difficult of circumstances—even during times of outright opposition and persecution. It certainly makes me want to do the best I can and never complain or quibble about anything that comes my way.



The second point I wish to make about Joseph Smith is more personal. It is something that has its origin in the time my family and I served in the New York Rochester Mission (1993–95). Palmyra and the Sacred Grove are in that mission. We were frequently in the Sacred Grove and had occasion to think deeply about the First Vision. I have had a growing conviction since that time that Joseph’s honest sharing of his personal experience in the grove with God and His Son, Jesus Christ, is intended to teach us vital truths: a personal God does live; we can speak to Him in prayer; He will speak to us through the Holy Ghost and answer our prayers. This knowledge is critical, since when all is said and done, true religion consists of a relationship between each of us and our Heavenly Father, which only He and we really know about. There has to be an institutional Church with priesthood authority and saving ordinances and covenants, but all of that would be to little avail if there weren’t on the part of each of us a relationship with and feeling of accountability to a loving Heavenly Father. It is the strength of our religion, and we have Joseph Smith to thank for it.

*Boone: What is the responsibility of professional historians, both members and nonmembers, in terms of reporting, recording, or preserving the history of the Church?*

*Jensen:* I think it is to record and report Church history as honestly and accurately as possible. Nevertheless, the question is sometimes asked, “Do you tell everything?” To answer that question, I think we have to look to the purposes of Church history as we have distilled them from scripture. If we intend to witness to the truths of the Restoration, promote remembrance of God’s goodness to us, and preserve the revealed order of God’s kingdom, we are, in a real sense, building faith. I think in that process we must exercise discretion and good judgment in the telling of Church history. The audience for which the material is intended must also be taken into account.

A good guideline is provided by a statement I have heard Elder Dallin H. Oaks make, “Some things are true but not useful.” It’s really not that we have anything to hide—most facts concerning Church history are in the public domain in some form—it’s more a question of propriety and whether good will be done and faith increased if we tell it. Will it be useful?

I once read an essay entitled “What Ever Happened to Reticence?” The author made the point that it’s not unusual today to sit down to dinner with someone we have just met and within a half hour to know the intimate details of that person’s life—everything from recent surgeries to errant children! In Church history there’s good reason to be

reticent sometimes. Accurate history can be written without revealing every wart and freckle. Indeed, an unwarranted focus on small imperfections may distort history.

The responsibility we have to be judicious about the administration of historical material is also reflected in the standards we have established for access to the Church Archives. The principal restrictions deal with materials that have been catalogued as “private, sacred, or confidential.” Except for the sacred category (which typically has to do with the temple) these standards are similar to those of other collecting institutions. I know some feel the Church holds its collections a little more tightly than it should, but my observation is that we are very fair in allowing access to them.

*Boone:* What can the rank and file of the Church do to help preserve history?

*Jensen:* I think it was President Spencer W. Kimball who said that the history of the Church is really the history of its individual members. He is still remembered for urging us all to keep a record of our lives, and he left a wonderful set of journals himself. President Hinckley has also been a diligent journal keeper. So I suppose the most obvious answer to your question is that we should follow their examples by keeping journals and at some point compiling our entries into personal histories and eventually into family histories.

I also want to stress the significant role in preserving history played by Church leaders, clerks, and secretaries who are responsible for the annual histories that are to be submitted to Church headquarters by wards, stakes, and missions. These can be rich sources of local and regional history if thoughtfully and diligently compiled each year.

Quite frankly, our challenge as well as our opportunity is to raise the interest and involvement level of the average Church member in the subject of Church history. We are currently surveying various segments of our potential audience to determine which Church history offerings might be the most compelling and produce the personal engagement with Church history that we feel all Church members ought to have.

We are also working on a strategy for delivering Church history to a worldwide membership. The Internet has great potential, and our Church history Internet site ([www.lds.org/churchhistory](http://www.lds.org/churchhistory)) is a good beginning. You can log on and take a virtual tour of Church historic sites, for instance. During 2006 we also established a Joseph Smith Web site ([www.JosephSmith.net](http://www.JosephSmith.net)), which is very well designed and has had substantial use. We are also exploring ways to cooperate with the *Ensign* and *Liabona* magazines to produce regular articles on pertinent

historical topics. All of this and more, I hope, will awaken in Church members an appreciation for Church history and a desire to preserve their own family and local histories.

Someone said that a people can be no greater than its stories. I think the history of this Church from its inception to the present day consists of interesting, inspiring, and touching stories about exceptional, as well as ordinary, people. We don't intend to rest until they have become well enough known to members throughout the world that they are used in priesthood and auxiliary lessons, recited regularly at dinner-table conversations, and told at family home evenings in every land where Latter-day Saints reside.

*Boone: With the Church's population balance more outside the United States, how do we help those in international areas recognize that the history we sometimes take for granted is their legacy, their history, their story?*

*Jensen:* We know it is critical to consider the needs of the international Church members in all the planning and work we are doing. A few years ago, the Brethren sensed a need to provide additional historical information to Church members, and the fine volume *Our Heritage* was produced. It has been translated into over thirty-eight languages, and I know it is greatly appreciated by members living in international areas. But more needs to be done. We can't expect international members to continue to send historical records, artifacts, and artwork to Salt Lake City to be stored in our archives or the basement of the museum unless we give something in return. As noted, some exporting of our historical treasures can occur in Church magazines and via the Internet. Many countries now have their own Church Web sites. As time and resources allow, we can provide historical material for these Web sites that will constitute modest Church histories for each country. Recently the First Presidency approved the establishment of a small museum at the Gadfield Elm Chapel in England. Opportunities to establish similar repositories in other international areas will undoubtedly arise.

We also feel an urgency to encourage local initiative in the gathering of historical materials and the writing of local, regional, and even countrywide histories. Some of this is occurring, but it needs to become more strategic and systematic. As you can see, there is yet much to accomplish.

*Boone: Periodically we hear about handcart treks, commemorations of the Prophet Joseph Smith, or other activities taking place in areas outside the United States. But how do we teach the members in the United States about the history and experiences of the Saints in foreign lands?*

*Jensen:* As talented as our staff people are and as generous with funding as the Brethren have been, we simply won't be able to respond directly to every need that exists. We do hold the rich historical collections of the Church, but to turn these into the books, articles, Web pages, museum exhibits, or historical sites that potentially are needed in either the domestic or international Church is a very large undertaking.

I think much of our role has to be that of a facilitator, making the historical sources available, consulting and advising, but leaving much of the actual production work to others. Some good work is already being done. Just off the top of my head, I can think of fine histories written on the Church in Africa by Elder Alexander B. Morrison, in Russia by Gary Browning, in East Germany by Garold N. Davis, and in Mexico by F. Lamond Tullis. I would like to see more writing by native authors, but at least we've made a solid beginning.

There's another issue here, however, dealing with a basic shortcoming in our technological world. There is so much information today and relatively so little knowledge. Studies and anecdotal information confirm that most adults rarely read more than one or two books a year. Our scripture reading habits as Church members may be better than that, but I doubt our Church history reading habits are. So even if we help produce narrative, artifactual, or virtual material, we still need to get a love of Church history into the hearts of our people so they will want to consume what is offered.

*Boone:* *Elder Jensen, are there studies that need to be done by people who teach or study Church history? Are there studies we ought to be researching and writing on?*

*Jensen:* Yes, the Church Archives contain a wealth of original sources waiting to be tapped. We hope soon to develop an approved plan for a more systematic approach to the writing of Church history. But in the meantime I invite any interested scholar from the Church Educational System, Brigham Young University, or elsewhere to contact our department for assistance in developing a project or for help with an existing one. We would be pleased to provide ideas, sources, and guidance to anyone seeking to write a major paper, a master's thesis, or a doctoral dissertation.

To give some idea of how wide open the field is, just this past year our department has begun a cooperative effort with scholars from the Church Educational System to write an institutional history of Church education. From our point of view, it would be desirable if similar research and writing projects could be undertaken on the history of the Quorum of the Twelve, the Quorums of Seventy, and the Presiding

Bishopric, to enumerate just a few of the possibilities. Perhaps a history of the office of Church historian and recorder is also in order!

I want to emphasize that our resources aren't reserved just for scholars and professional historians. We hope interested lay members, nonmembers, family historians, and those writing local unit histories will also take advantage of our facilities, collections, and talented staff.

**Boone:** *Are there projects that the Brethren would prefer that religious educators or teachers not work on? Are there topics other than the sacred, private, and confidential that we should avoid?*

**Jensen:** I can respond only for myself, but I know of no prohibitions that have been issued. It seems to me if the Brethren have authorized a “no holds barred” examination of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, any legitimate project not involving sacred, private, or confidential material might be considered.

**Boone:** *A final question—what do you perceive the role of the Church History Department and the Church historian to be in the broader world of Mormon history?*

**Jensen:** I see much good resulting when faithful historians, writers, and teachers add their leaven to the bread of Mormon history. Elder Neal A. Maxwell was fond of pointing out that we are not only to build up the kingdom of God but also to establish His righteousness (see D&C 1:16). His point was that for God's kingdom to prosper, there must be a climate of general goodness or righteousness within which to operate and spread the gospel.

I think that notion applies to the climate we can help create for the advancement of Church history. The scholarship of incisive, faithful Mormon historians needs to be injected into the marketplace of ideas. Truth always does very well in that setting. I think the more receptive and open we are to a discussion of the historical conclusions of others, the more our own ideas will be considered. This creates a healthier climate for advancing God's purposes and for truth to prevail in the long run. **RE**

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## Notes

1. Marlin K. Jensen, *Church News*, May 28, 2005, 12.
2. Quoted in John Henry Evans, *Joseph Smith, an American Prophet* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 9.