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9

A Generation of Church History: A Personal View

I have been asked to describe my personal experience with the acquisition, preservation, and distribution of Latter-day Saint history while working in the Church Historical Department, now the Church History Department. I have spent more than half my life there. My primary intent is not to present an autobiography, though I will say a few things about my integration into Mormon history and something regarding my early and minor connection to the preservation and study of Latter-day Saint history. But my main purpose is to say something about the business of ensuring that what has gone before us is not forgotten.

Preserving our Mormon past, our heritage as the surviving manifestation of the restoration of Jesus' gospel in the last days—indeed, preserving our identity—to me seems about as important

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as anything we can do to perpetuate our faith. I've been disappointed that those who concur with this thinking appear to be in the minority of our culture, though I am optimistic for the future for a number of reasons.

My paper is divided into two parts: the autobiographical sketch and some points about important advances in the church's efforts to preserve and share its history.

1. MY STORY

I began working in the Church Archives after finishing coursework for a master's degree in history at Utah State University. My wife and I, then having a couple of small children, decided to wait for two or three years before we reentered the doctoral chase, and an opportunity presented itself that we believed would temporarily fit into our plan. A chance meeting with Ronald G. Watt, at the time a manager in the Church Archives, led to my employment with the church.

I had known Ron Watt for several years because I had done research at the Church Historical Department while working on an undergraduate history degree at Weber State College. Ron invited me to apply for an open position in the Church Archives. I had not finished writing my thesis at the time but decided to apply anyway. I wasn't hired. But within a few days another position opened, and I became a church employee on Halloween day, 1977.

I knew something about the Church Historical Department at the time because of the research in Mormon history I had done there as an undergraduate. The man who first introduced me to the Church Archives was a Weber State University history professor named Donald R. Moorman. Moorman was a colorful man, not a Latter-day Saint, who boasted to his students about his expertise concerning Brigham Young as well as his outsider/insider

connection to the Church Archives. (I was, however, suspicious of him early on when, one day in a Utah history class, he bet there wasn't one student in the class who could tell the difference between margarine and butter. Now, I know my way around butter!) There was a charm about Don Moorman. With impish delight, he would play upon his unusual surname every chance he got by declaring to his students that his next son would be named Jack.

Don Moorman scheduled his classes so that every Friday he could travel to Salt Lake City to visit the east wing of the Church Office Building, the location of the Church History Department from 1972 to 2009. Moorman was given access to the papers of Brigham Young and spent years reading them and taking notes. He planned to write the definitive biography of Brigham Young, whom he brashly professed to understand better than anyone else living.

I have surmised that his ambition was to produce a work about the second Latter-day Saint prophet with more veracity than Stanley P. Hirshson's book *The Lion of the Lord: A Biography of Brigham Young,* published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1969—a volume poorly received in Utah history circles. But the enormity of the task, I think, finally sidetracked Moorman into working on a book about Camp Floyd, a volume that his colleague Gene Sessions finished after his death.

I appreciated Don Moorman's efforts to involve his students in hands-on, primary research. He regularly invited students to join him at the Church Archives on Fridays, and I was one of the few who accepted the invitation. He had promised me a good experience, and I looked forward to my first visit to the Church Historical Department. That particular Friday morning Dr. Moorman took me to the east wing of the Church Office Building, showed

me the Church Library, and then took me to the second floor, where he proudly introduced me, one of his students, to the people who manned the public service area of the department—in particular, to the man who supervised the archives search room, a place I would later supervise myself.

As Don buoyantly marched off to his designated domain, an area reserved for him to work on the Brigham Young papers, I was interviewed by the supervisor. He asked me what I wanted. I explained that I had a senior paper to write and thought I would do something on polygamy. He told me that topic was forbidden, and I would have to choose another topic. I therefore received my introduction to church archival protocols at the time.

My interest in Mormon history didn't come from Weber State's history department. I had walked the streets of Nauvoo and explored the Carthage Jail in the late 1960s as a young missionary when there still seemed to be an innocence to those sacred places.

Upon returning from the Northern States Mission, headquartered in Chicago, I enrolled at Weber State, located a few miles east of where I had grown up. It was at the LDS institute of religion located just north of the Weber State campus, where I became a student of Mormon history. Initially Eldon L. Haag and then Kenneth W. Godfrey pulled me into the study of early Mormonism. Because of questions I had about Joseph Smith, Eldon Haag—who taught an institute class called "Joseph Smith: His Life and Teachings"—had me read Klaus J. Hansen's *Quest for Empire*, the first piece of scholarly Mormon history I ever read.[1] Ken Godfrey encouraged me to tackle the Political Manifesto of 1896 instead of polygamy for my senior paper. This resulted in an essay that included my first oral history interview, a compelling discussion for me, with one of apostle Moses Thatcher's family members, who shared the domestic view of some difficult matters

of that period. Another institute teacher, Joseph C. Muren, who later became a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy, introduced me to a thoughtful study of anti-Mormon literature. These were the good men who nudged me toward what later became my professional encounter with serious Mormon scholarship.

I ended up spending far too much time in the institute library, which distracted me from my music major across the street at the college. Eventually I changed my major to history and scrambled to obtain the credits I needed to graduate in that discipline. By the time I left Weber State, I knew I wanted to study Mormon history. As a result of my loitering at the institute, I departed there with more hours of religion than any other institute student at that time. In fact, I did a lot better at the institute than I did at the college—not something to brag about, but in the long run it proved to be the lodestar that defined my career and, more important, shaped my thinking about the faith upon which I rely and in which I believe.

From Weber State my wife and I moved to Logan, where I began to work on a master's degree at Utah State University, ostensibly in American history. But outside my rudimentary study of historical methodology and historiography, I admit that Mormon history consumed the remainder of my attention and affection. In the small orbit in which I lived at the time, there was a palpable excitement about the study of Mormon history and its inextricable partners, Utah and western regional history.

I spent my wonderful first year at Utah State among a group of bright, enthusiastic students, though only a couple of them were interested in Mormonism. Especially significant for me was what I learned about historiography and historical inquiry as it applied to the study of Mormonism and to Latter-day Saint history. But perhaps the most important thing I experienced at the

university, where S. George Ellsworth and Charles S. Peterson were my primary instructors, was the encouragement to understand the literature of Mormon history and those who produced that literature.

It started this way. Besides his duty as professor of history at Utah State University, George Ellsworth was also the editor of the *Western Historical Quarterly*, even back then a substantial historical journal. Professor Ellsworth had been teaching at USU since the 1950s, after receiving his PhD in the late 1940s from the University of California–Berkeley, earned, in part, from his doctoral dissertation on early Mormon missionary work.

During my second year at USU I received an assistantship wherein I worked as what is now called the Graduate Editorial Fellow—I was a member of the small editorial staff of the *Quarterly*. I screened submitted manuscripts and compiled the titles of recently published articles for publication in the journal.

One day Professor Ellsworth handed me something somewhat unrelated to my job: a stack of papers that he said were the returns from a survey he had solicited in 1976 from members of the Mormon History Association (MHA), then an organization about a dozen years old. He had asked over a hundred members of the MHA, the majority of the leading academic scholars and students of the history of Mormonism at the time, to identify and then rank the top ten books and articles ever written about Mormon history, Utah history, or both. He received a healthy number of responses and asked me to compile the data—something he could have easily done, but he forced the exercise on me.

That duty became a turning point for me, I suppose. I became exposed to the thinking of many of the most prominent Mormon scholars of that generation, many of whom explained in the questionnaire why they had made the choices they did. I determined

to read those publications. My entire career thereafter has been based upon that platform of historical writing.

While I intended to work only a couple of years for the church before reapplying to school, I never did receive my terminal degree, though several times I tried to leave church employment and return to school. Instead, my dreams of academia fading as the years passed, I became an archivist with on-the-job-training in the Church Archives. At the time the most visible face of institutional church history was the History Division, led by Leonard J. Arrington and a fresh generation of professionally trained historians. They were making an impact on Mormon studies in an unprecedented manner.

2. ADVANCES IN CHURCH HISTORY

While the History Division was producing history, ultimately leading to its transfer to Brigham Young University as the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, there was also a Library-Archives Division maturing into professional competence. This latter group was composed primarily of people with advanced degrees in history and library training. And in the popularization of an expanding archival discipline in America, training in strategies, techniques, and procedures provided our people with many of the skills and training to elevate our competence to a professional level. Over the years I found that this group of skilled and committed folks, my colleagues, gained unusual insight into the history of Mormonism.

Almost by definition, the people who gather and collect the documentation, who arrange and describe the materials, who catalog and create finding aids of the historical records that they process, become competent in understanding the records for which they care. By virtue of the very process of carefully preparing a

document or collection for public or institutional access, the archivist becomes an authority on sources—sometimes the most informed authority on the records. Good history requires perspectives and expertise from both historians and archivists; indeed, it requires a combination of those who gather and prepare the sources for consumption and those who provide context and interpret the records through their writing.

The archival side of the equation generally receives less attention, but we cannot overstate the importance of the archivists' contribution in cultivating the ground for the history to blossom. I credit the leaders of the Church History Department and what was once identified as the Church Archives Division for seminal innovations that may appear routine today but that are hardly so.

In particular I want to note the contributions to church history of the late director of the Church Archives, Steven R. Sorensen, with whom I worked for thirty years. (Steve died in May 2009 of pulmonary fibrosis after a long and enervating ordeal.) As part of his training while obtaining history and library science degrees from Brigham Young University in the 1970s, he learned the rudiments of archival practice and administration at the Harold B. Lee Library's Special Collections. Soon after he joined the staff at the Church Archives in 1980, he envisioned what was required to improve the manner in which the church gathered and cared for its historical records. His initial assignment in the Church Historical Department, which may have seemed mundane, proved to be of great consequence to the church's archival future.

It was an exciting time. Regularly released documentary discoveries of a remarkable nature rose above water-cooler chatter in the archives to capture newspaper and magazine headlines. Mormon history had never received so much widespread attention and scrutiny.

But there were side effects from this elevation of attention to the Mormon past. What could be termed "tabloid history" often substituted for traditional historical procedures in the 1980s. This was a time when there existed unprecedented access to the church's archival collections, which, along with fantastic finds from private dealers and collectors, created an undisciplined frenzy as otherwise unknown history wonks debated the legitimacy of Mormonism in symposia, conferences, and periodicals. Of course, a few seasoned scholars offered balance and urged caution in the atmosphere of uncertainty, but the movement acquired such proportion that the most reasonable voices were often the faintest to be heard. It took the murders of two people in Salt Lake City in October 1985 to downshift the media's and the Mormon historical community's accelerating momentum to more reasonable stasis. The fallout from this era lingered for years.

In the early years of this period, absent the glare of attention and notoriety, Steve Sorensen and his colleagues cataloged the church's local unit records—the minutes and other documentation created by the branches and wards, the districts and stakes, and the missions—equipping him with the foundation of what became his almost unprecedented understanding of the church's archival collections. Now, I do not want to give the impression that the advancements within the Church Archives were all of Steve's making. That simply was not true. Some very good people for a very long time had accomplished many things upon which church archivists built thereafter. Steve entered an arena where others had performed nobly for several generations.

After four years of cataloging church-owned records—in other words, arranging and describing the church's enormous manuscript archival collection—Steve supervised the church's archival cataloging division for two years before becoming the

supervisor of archives research in 1986. His domain was the department's archives search room, the point of entry for patrons who accessed the church's collections. The reading room was on the second floor of the Church Office Building's east wing. There, in a glass-enclosed office in the center of the search room, Steve interviewed the scholars and other researchers who applied to use the Church Archives.

He had a two-tiered purpose while conducting the interviews. First, he recognized his responsibility to ensure that church-produced and church-owned records were made accessible in a proper manner by qualifying those who used the archives. And second, his business was to help the scholars and patrons understand the broad scope of what was available to qualified researchers. What followed was the creation of an environment of professionalism where finding aids and the archives catalog actually fostered research, be it scholarly or genealogical, for those who applied to use the church's collection. Having researched records in dozens of repositories from the East to West coasts, many of them with Steve, I can confidently say there were few parallels in the other repositories—government, university, or private—to the proficient manner in which Steve supervised our research facility.

Steve was appointed director of the Church Archives in 1989, and over the course of the next sixteen years he implemented a number of innovative strategies and procedures that advanced Church History Department objectives for the future. For example, he fostered a collection development plan to acquire records in several regions of the world, including Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. Though other Historical Department employees had earlier initiated numerous ground-breaking efforts to gather Mormon history worldwide, such a calculated strategy had not been enacted by the church since the days of Andrew

Jenson. These church ventures have blossomed into an enlarged global vision that will significantly impact the history of Mormonism in the future.

Other measures of consequential magnitude were simultaneously applied. The couple of items I am going to mention may not seem like much, even to academic folks. There is little glamour in what I am going to describe. And in light of the several other successes achieved by church archivists through the years, these developments lack the spotlight-quality of highest achievement. But it is just for that reason that I am going to note them. To me they seem especially important because they helped fashion the future of church history, and because they will help the church manage its remarkable collection for succeeding generations.

A new cataloging system. We in the Church History Department have had difficulty in helping patrons understand that the purpose of the Family History Library is different from that of the Church History Library. Unlike the Family History Library, which seeks to make its records as widely available as possible, our intent is, first, to ensure the proper management of the church's collection, and second, to create an environment where the church's records will foster the study of Latter-day Saint history and heritage. I state this to give context to two Church History Department achievements I wish to note: the advance from paper-based finding aids and cataloging procedures to a new electronic cataloging system and the improved management of church records. I address these matters because I perceive a widespread misunderstanding of how the church administers its records. Plainly stated, the church has been accused of archival tactics rooted in deceit and intrigue because it carefully administers access to the records in its keeping.

Just a few years into my employment, department leaders enacted an initiative to stride forward in the administration of the church's records. In the early 1980s, most American record repositories still administered the cataloging and accessibility to their collections, including their finding aids, the same way they did in the previous generation. Since then the archival tool kit has expanded considerably, allowing repositories to manage their records in ways that previously were not possible. The leaders of the Church History Department seized the opportunity. The size of the church's considerable collection, described by some as huge and unwieldy, precluded the intellectual control required to properly administer the records. How could an organization, in light of public demand, properly administer access to its records when the vast scope of the documents prevented the institution from knowing the content of its own collection?

Church archivists, assisted by technological tools, thereafter implemented a program and process to obtain the previously elusive intellectual control of the church's records that included these features: an overall description of each collection with an accession and cataloging number to track the collection, the provenance of the record's origin, the scope of its content, and its size and physical condition. The new catalog entry for each collection also included information, such as the names and locations of people and events, to make the content of the collection more useful for church purposes and more accessible to research.

Some of this work, of course, had been performed in rudimentary fashion in years past. But the limitations of a paper-based cataloging system severely hampered the management of such an enormous collection. Once this advancement in strategy and technology was implemented, information about a collection could be searched electronically at any given moment. It was, I believe, an

exciting advance in church history, allowing the church to move forward with confidence in administering its records.

But even with the advances in technology, the work required to do this was enormous. Much imagination, experimentation, and deliberation were required to determine how to best manage the limited resources available in money and personnel to efficiently handle the daunting task. But through all of this effort, our capable staff developed procedures to process the church's archival records from the time of their acquisition to the completion of cataloging and intellectual control to their eventual housing in the archives. Simultaneously, the records held by the church for generations—the dreaded backlog of unprocessed material—were finally brought under control through the new system. It was a watershed achievement for the church's archival staff. Because of this initiative, every archival collection now acquired by the Church History Department receives initial cataloging markers that track the document through the whole cataloging process. While no one on our staff would argue that we are omniscient about the church's archival collection today, because of this significant, lengthy, and labor-intensive effort the church has a good understanding of what it has and how to administer it.

Management of church records. This leads to a discussion of another milestone: the improved management of church records. The church has taken a lot of heat through the years regarding the administration of its archives. Because the church restricts access to some records, it has been accused of fearing its history, hiding its past, and covering up misdeeds. I remember well the uproar in the early 1980s when a distinguished local history professor claimed in a public forum that he had received insider information indicating that the Church Archives was closed. One of the local newspapers picked up the story, and in no time at all the

rumor spread. The church, the account revealed, had closed its archives because it feared its own past, suggesting it couldn't handle historical scrutiny. (A quarter of a century later, perhaps a residual sentiment of this erroneous perception remains.)

Later, one of my colleagues told me he was likely the one who triggered the story because of a remark he made to the professor, though what he said, he told me, was not at all what the professor reported. My colleague had divulged that the History Department was implementing a new process for defining what records could be made public and what materials the church was not obliged to release.

Indeed, such a process was devised to clarify the archivists' understanding of the church's records. This was not a covert operation. Most other reputable repositories in the United States, public and private, have devised classification systems to assist them in managing their holdings.

Church History Department leaders and staff settled upon an intuitive, understandable, and defensible method of classifying church records and accessibility. This gave the department the ability to administer church records with confidence based upon knowledge rather than hesitancy resulting from a lack of information. As a result of the process, many records became more accessible, while others, primarily created for administrative use on a local or general church level, were restricted from public access.

Three types of records are restricted: (1) Records containing private information—for example, documentation about a living person, such as a church membership record, an application for missionary service, or a record of a financial donation to the church. Privacy matters are of concern in the modern world, and all responsible repositories try to respond accordingly. (2) Records containing sacred information, such as specifics regarding

the church's temple ceremonies or other particulars relating to temples. (3) Records containing confidential information—that is, information generated in confidential settings, or records intended to be conveyed only in confidential circumstances. This includes church headquarters department records, material about local unit disciplinary matters or other priest-penitent-type documentation, and security matters relating to church members or facilities. The church makes no apology for restricting access to these records.

A significant portion of the church-owned records in the Church History Library is accessible to the public. The records that generally fit this status include not only several hundred thousand photographs and audio and visual records but also many diaries, journals, letters, reminiscences, memoirs, and local unit records of public meetings that contain no private, sacred, or confidential information.

In my judgment, it is important to understand one last thing about the church archival collection and how the church does business with its records. The public must recognize that in several ways the Church History Library is unlike many other academic repositories, especially institutions like university libraries. Most university libraries, for example, divide their collection of printed books, periodicals, and other printed materials from the manuscript or non-published collections they administer. The latter grouping, usually called the university special collections, involves the library function that houses and administers the manuscript collections determined by the university to fit its specialization or emphasis, such as the American Indian or Western Americana materials at a university in Western America. Here one may find diaries, photographs, correspondence, and other similar types of documentary records, and sometimes rare printed materials.

Still another collection of materials in the university library may be described as the archives, where the university's own institutional records are housed. Here one might expect to find university council and committee records, presidential papers, and the like. Often these institutional materials, because they were created in confidential, nonpublic settings, are not open to the public. The public generally expects that the manuscripts and rare books in a university's special collections will be accessible, while recognizing that the university's institutional materials are kept from public scrutiny for understandable reasons. Many business organizations operate in the same manner—their institutional records are kept confidential.

The Church History Department has large collections of all three types of records described above: a print collection, a manuscript collection, and an archival collection. The reference desk in the new Church History Library is the point of entry for all of them. The archival collection—in other words, the church-produced records that contain private, confidential, and sacred information—will generally not be accessible to the public. Thus, when the church's institutional records are restricted from access, even though the vast majority of the special-collections-type records are readily available, an unwarranted reputation of restriction and closure may be applied to the Church Archives. My personal experience over the past generation is that the staff try to make most of the special-collections-type material as accessible as possible.

A new era in church history. In closing, I want to say something about changes in the department that encourage me very much. I see these changes as an eyewitness, and they are worth noting. Because they are unfolding gradually, far too gradually for some people in our anxious and hurried times, I perceive that

people do not realize the revolutionary nature of what is happening in the Church History Department.

The church historian and recorder, Elder Marlin K. Jensen, and the assistant church historian and recorder, Richard E. Turley Jr., have created and direct, with hands-on involvement, an unprecedented publication program to present church history to the church and to the world. Some of these efforts are well known. The Mountain Meadows Massacre project, which has been so well received; the Joseph Smith Papers Project, the rollout of which is just beginning but which portends a paradigm-changing impact upon the study of the Prophet Joseph and the early church; and the creation of the Church Historian's Press, abundantly pregnant with possibilities, are just the most visible evidences of what I believe will be a remarkable advance. It is also the case that, while outside my area of direct observation and participation, the church's other historical properties—including the Church History Museum and the church historic sites—will illustrate the commitment of the church to preserving and presenting its remarkable heritage to church members and to the world. These advances—combined with a new state-of-the-art Church History Library building; the management of the church's records by a competent, well-trained staff; and a growing recognition that our remarkable heritage and legacy are born of our memory of the past—foster the optimism that I envision for church history's future.

NOTE

1. Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967).