

# Building Bridges



- 1937* Bay Area Genealogical Committee functioning
- 1961* Genealogy library established in new Interstake Center
- 1964* Temple dedicated, overflow in separate building for first time (Tuesday–Thursday, November 17–19)
- Visitors’ center opens (November)
- “And It Came to Pass” Pageant opens (December)
- 1965* Sunday lecture series inaugurated in Interstake Center
- 1967* Temple floodlighting praised by architects
- 1970* Pageant performances increased to twelve, moved to summer
- 1977* *Messiah* performances inaugurated at Interstake Center
- 1978* 50,000 Christmas lights attract attention
- 1979* Kieth Merrill upgrades pageant script, new costumes
- 1980* Genealogy name “extraction” program inaugurated
- 1992* New visitors’ center with genealogy library in basement dedicated (September 12)

- 1993* “Easter Miracle” performance and special display
- 1996* Ship *Brooklyn* monument next to visitors’ center dedicated
- 1998* Christmas lights increased to 500,000
- 2004* Visitors’ center remodeled to emphasize Christ and the Restoration
- 2014* Temple commemorates fiftieth anniversary (November 17)

The Oakland Temple and the Interstake Center are the two major buildings on Temple Hill. The temple focuses solely on religious activities, while the Interstake Center and other facilities serve additional purposes, such as a meeting place for congregations and for hosting activities that build community relations. These all bring growing numbers of people up close to the temple. Temple Hill is increasingly being recognized as a community asset. For example, in 1967 the temple received an award from a group of more than 200 Bay Area architects, engineers, and contractors for being the best example of floodlighting and night beautification.<sup>1</sup>

There are more than 1,000 events per year on Temple Hill—not counting the normal activities of the wards and stakes meeting there. Several groups have used these facilities extensively. One such example was a girls' chorus from San Francisco. This chorus held practices twice a week. The Interstake Center is also made available for numerous wedding receptions following temple sealings each year.<sup>2</sup> Many of these activities have more than one purpose, and masterful planning is required to fit them into the schedule.

"Gloria" (performed in 2007) was one of many events staged at the Interstake Center. Courtesy of Hugh Harline.

Along with the challenge of scheduling all these events, there was the need to address concerns for the safety of Temple Hill visitors



and to maintain and provide security for Temple Hill facilities.

Eventually, in order to develop and coordinate the use of the facilities on Temple Hill, Elder Quentin L. Cook, a General Authority and former president of the San Francisco Stake, formed and directed from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City the Temple Hill Public Affairs Council. In turn, this council asked Norvel “Bud” Alexander to develop a cultural arts council to be responsible for the scheduling, promoting, and staffing of all events. These outreach activities were covered in part by the Public Affairs Department at Church headquarters. However, major cultural arts events needed to be funded locally.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter examines those activities that are the most directly related to the Oakland Temple. Another book would be required to adequately report on all the events that take place on Temple Hill.

## Oakland Temple Visitors’ Center

The Church’s visitors’ centers at historic sites are patterned after the original “Bureau of Information,” which opened on Temple Square in Salt Lake City in 1902.<sup>4</sup> Only a few Latter-day Saint temples have visitors’ centers. For example, the San Diego Temple—located prominently next to a major freeway—does not have one. As had been the case in Los Angeles, however, Church leaders determined Oakland to be a significant site for a bureau of information, or visitors’ center. W. Paul Summerhays, a member of the Oakland-Berkeley Stake presidency and long-term employee of the Federal Communications Commission in San Francisco, became its first director.<sup>5</sup> The visitors’ center was originally located in one of the front wings of the Oakland Temple, adjacent to the gardens. Staffed by a core of volunteers, it offered Latter-day Saint literature and tours of the grounds. During this first year of operation, over 100,000 visitors took guided tours which included walking around the temple’s upper terrace; thousands of others who explored the gardens but did not take the formal tours were not included in this count.<sup>6</sup>

Displays in the Oakland Visitors’ Center depicted the relationship between ancient and latter-day temples. Specifically, the focus was on the Oakland Temple, particularly emphasizing the baptismal font

Next page: Oakland Temple (left) and Visitors’ Center. Courtesy of Hugh Harline.













Oakland Temple grounds, 2014.  
Courtesy of Brent R. Nordgren.

and sealing rooms and the sacred work done in them. The exhibits gave special attention to the temple service opportunities for families.<sup>7</sup>

When the Oakland Temple was closed for renovation from December 1988 to October 1990, construction began on a new 22,000-square-foot visitors' center on the west side of the temple parking lot. It was built by Stone-Cheney Construction of Modesto, California, a company that had been formed by two of O. Leslie Stone's sons, Thomas and Ronald "Bud," and D. Rick Cheney. The contract called for them to finish only the ground floor, but on their own they also finished the basement so it could be used as well; the basement became the new home for the Family History Library, which up to this time had been located in the Interstake Center. The contractors did not make any money on this job because, as Tom later reflected, "We just wanted to do everything right."<sup>8</sup>

The new facility was dedicated September 12, 1992, by Elder David B. Haight, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and former president of the Palo Alto Stake. He referred to the new facility as an "eternal university," as it contained the latest interactive electronic displays that answered basic questions about the Church and its teachings. Also participating in the dedicatory services was Oakland mayor Elihu Harris, who praised the Church and its



members: “I have been acquainted with and touched by members of the Mormon faith for a number of years. I have learned your membership demonstrates its beliefs by example. You espouse not only family values, but you also value the extended family. That’s what I admire about LDS people.” Elder L. Aldin Porter, a General Authority who was one of the seven Presidents of the Seventy, affirmed, “We hope people leave the new visitors’ center with a clear vision of who they are and how important their families are. We want to make a good impression for the Church, but we are also very anxious to bring to people the blessing of gospel covenants.”<sup>9</sup>

In his dedicatory prayer, Elder Haight stated, “We have met here this day—our Father—to present unto thee a newly finished facility. . . .Two vitally essential activities of thy Church—the missionary

LDS missionaries standing in front of the *Christus* statue at the Oakland Visitors’ Center. Courtesy of Bart and Barbara Christenson.



Opposite: The *Christus* statue in the Oakland Visitors' Center. Courtesy of Bart and Barbara Christenson.

work of proclaiming the gospel and the ever-expanding family history search for family linkage of ancestry—have joined together to make possible on this sacred plot of land, a gospel teaching and research facility, using the most modern teaching skills to declare and testify of the reestablishment of the Church of thy Son Jesus Christ in these latter days.”

By the 1990s, local volunteers were replaced by Church-called missionaries. Attractive historical commemorations and artwork were sought out by the directors—usually as temporary displays, but occasionally as part of the Center’s permanent displays. Visitors were invited to meet with missionaries upon return to their place of residence to discuss gospel principles, with the hope that the visitor would accept the message and be baptized into the Church.

A replica of a large statue of the Savior with outstretched hands was placed in the new Oakland Center, facing people as they came in. It became a visible witness that Mormons are Christians. A Danish sculptor, Bertil Thorvaldsen, had created this statue of Christ in 1821. It became known as the *Christus* and represents the love and faith that inspires all men to come to Him. The original is in the Vor Frue Kirke (Church of Our Lady) in Copenhagen. A replica statue was placed in the North Visitors’ Center in Salt Lake City’s Temple Square in 1965 as a gift to the Church from Stephen L. Richards, First Counselor to David O. McKay in the First Presidency.<sup>10</sup> Other replicas were subsequently placed in visitors’ centers around the world, and the *Christus* has become an image readily identified with Latter-day Saints.

The visitors’ center has played a role in the conversion of families to the restored gospel. When Andrea Hill was driving to the temple to arrange a visit for her Campfire Girls group, she got lost in the maze of streets in the neighborhood below. “Never have I seen so many winding, twisting, dead-end roads,” she complained with frustration. “Yet all the time, right there in front of me, huge and beautiful, was the temple.” Even though she couldn’t find her way out of the maze, she still felt as though she “was being pulled toward the temple.” When she finally reached the visitors’ center, she was so flustered she could hardly explain the reason for her visit. When the





missionaries asked if she was a Mormon, she “had a strange feeling sweep over her,” and she “burst into a flood of tears” as she admitted that she didn’t feel that she was good enough to be a Mormon. Comforting her, the missionaries asked if she would like to know more about the Church. She left with a handful of pamphlets and temple postcards for each of the girls in her group. At home that evening, she thought her husband would say she was “nutty” as she related what had happened. Much to her amazement, he listened, “and with tears in his eyes he said, ‘Oh sweetheart, I don’t know what happened, but I believe that it is right.’” The next day the missionaries stopped by and soon the Hills, including seven of their children, were baptized.<sup>11</sup>

Later, the three young sons of a family who lived just below the temple convinced their parents to go on a hike one evening up to that intriguing building that looked over the neighborhood. Although they weren’t sure they would be welcome on the Mormon property, they were impressed by its beauty and soon joined a tour conducted by a visitors’ center missionary. “By the end of the tour, when the guide asked who would like a free Book of Mormon, guess who were in the front row with their hands up,” they later recalled. After visiting with the missionaries, Stewart Branam, Myrna (his wife), and their two older sons were baptized. About a year later, the family was sealed in the Oakland Temple.<sup>12</sup>

On July 31, 1996, Elder Haight unveiled a brass plaque adjacent to the visitors’ center honoring the ship *Brooklyn* pioneers, who had arrived at Yerba Buena exactly 150 years earlier. It was placed on a terrace shaped to represent the bow of a sailing ship. This terrace offered a spectacular view of the bay. Elder Haight praised the *Brooklyn* pioneers for their unprecedented voyage in quest of religious freedom. Elder Loren C. Dunn, member of the Seventy and President of the Church’s North America West Area, spoke of the sacrifice these early Saints—especially the children—had made.<sup>13</sup> A new plaque on a granite base was dedicated in 2002.<sup>14</sup>

The visitors’ center was thoroughly remodeled in 2004, receiving new exhibits featuring the mission of Jesus Christ and the latter-day Restoration of His Church and gospel to earth. A new





mural behind the *Christus* statue represented the creations of the Lord throughout the universe.<sup>15</sup> In one of the new exhibits, “God’s Plan for His Family,” visitors were escorted through six “scene areas that teach the principles of the restoration of the gospel through prophets in the context of a family setting.” Other interactive exhibits featured “Teachings of Modern Prophets” and “The Savior of the World.”<sup>16</sup>

The visitors’ center has become a major attraction in the East Bay Area typically visited by tour bus groups. Until the terrorist attacks in 2001, tours included the temple terrace gardens. After the attacks, this area atop the temple’s first floor was closed to the public.<sup>17</sup> Since then, visitors can enjoy the panoramic view from the immediate area of the visitors’ center, whose large windows and adjoining terraces afford a 180-degree vista of the entire Bay Area. Interestingly, both Latter-day Saints and local residents of other faiths use the temple grounds as a backdrop for wedding pictures. The Oakland Temple grounds are one of the most beautiful and photogenic outdoor settings in the Bay Area.

Both the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges can be seen from Temple Hill. Courtesy of Bart and Barbara Christenson.







## The Family History Center

The Oakland Family History Center, another important means of outreach on Temple Hill, directly supports temple service by helping Latter-day Saints find and identify their ancestors so sacred ordinances can be performed for these family members. However, the family history center is equally helpful for those in the community who are merely interested in tracing their own genealogy. In fact, the ratio of attendance has been 20 percent member visits to 80 percent community visits. Staff members at the Oakland Family History Center were instructed not to proselyte but were encouraged to answer questions about Church beliefs if asked. A good relationship has developed between patrons and staff. Even people in the community have volunteered to help visitors at the library and have rendered a valuable service.

Some fifty years after Joseph Smith introduced ordinances for the dead, Church President Wilford Woodruff emphasized a principle that has governed temple work since that time. He declared, “We want the Latter-day Saints from this time to trace their genealogies as far as they can, and to be sealed to their fathers and mothers. Have children sealed to their parents, and run this chain through as far as you can. . . . This is the will of the Lord to his people, and I think when you come to reflect upon it you will find it to be true.”<sup>18</sup> To provide help to the Saints in accomplishing this task, the Genealogical Society of Utah was formed on November 13, 1894.

Genealogical activities in the Bay Area date back to the decades prior to the dedication of the Oakland Temple. By the 1930s, many local Church units had their own genealogy committees that promoted family history research. The excursions to the distant temples that they sponsored were important to Bay Area Saints in the days before they had their own temple. In 1937, the *Messenger* reported the formation of a stake genealogical committee in Oakland. In addition, individuals were making significant efforts to provide quality genealogical support for temple ordinance work. For example, Mary Lou Harline wrote a genealogical column in the *Messenger*, and Mrs. Gustave Schier wrote the substantial *Berkeley Stake Genealogical*

Opposite: The Oakland Temple grounds are one of the most beautiful and photogenic outdoor settings in the Bay Area. Courtesy of Marci Williams.

*Reference Book* in 1954. These years of effort resulted in the creation of a genealogy library on the Oakland Temple site.

William E. Evans made the first suggestion for a multi-stake genealogical library. His brief item, entitled “Let’s Build a Six Stake Genealogical Library this Year,” was published in the February 1955 *Oakland Stake Messenger*: “By combining the San Jose, Palo Alto, San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley and Santa Rosa Stakes we could pull our resources together and build a library that would be worthwhile. By having a six-stake library we could have microfilm machines and we could get duplicates of microfilms from Salt Lake. . . . The important thing is to put our money into books and films and not into buildings. The overhead can be cut to the bone. . . . Let’s build a great library.”<sup>19</sup>

The great library had to wait until the Interstake Center was completed five years later. The library was constructed in a storage room in the basement of the new Interstake Center and was ready for an open house on June 21, 1961. That same year the Hayward, Oakland-Berkeley, San Leandro, and Walnut Creek Stakes formally organized the Oakland Genealogical Research Library.<sup>20</sup> In 1963, the Oakland library became part of a growing Churchwide system of branch genealogy libraries. These libraries worked in close association with their respective temples to clear names for temple work.

By 1975 the number of stakes sponsoring the Oakland library had reached eleven. Its inventory included thirty-four microfilm readers, four microfiche readers, one reader-printer, three extra-wide carriage typewriters to fit legal-sized forms used by the Church, and two copy machines.

In the 1980s, branch genealogy libraries came to be known as family history centers. Thus the Oakland Genealogy Library officially became the Oakland Multiregional Family History Center. This title was later simplified to the Oakland Family Search Library.

The concluding decades of the twentieth century brought the advent of the computer. With millions of records being indexed by an army of volunteers worldwide, many family history databases became available to anyone with access to a computer. Hence genealogists needed to have computer skills. In the midst of this information explosion, researchers—more than ever—also needed to confirm the



accuracy of the sources they consulted. Clearly, there was still a place and need for the kind of training individuals could receive from the dedicated staff in the Oakland Family History Library.

The family history center moved to the basement of the new visitors' center when it opened in 1992. Major remodeling since that time has resulted in a library with computers for patrons, a training room, and dedicated connections to computer servers in Salt Lake City. Microfilm and books are still used, but with the advent of computers, the demand for these items has declined.

Patrons have reported some inspirational experiences. A visitor approached one of the volunteers at the reference desk and told her, "I really don't know why I am here. I don't know what I am going to work on." When she asked him what he knew about his ancestors, he replied, "Well, we have a family tradition that my second great-grandfather rode into a town on an old white plow horse at about age 10 and would never, never talk about where he came from." The volunteer was amazed and surprisingly reported, "We have a family tradition in our family, that when he was 10 years old, our second great-uncle took the old, white plow horse and was never seen again."

Family History Center. Courtesy of Bart and Barbara Christenson.



They proved to be cousins, and she was able to help him extend his line “considerably.”<sup>21</sup>

On another occasion, a lady entered the center and for a moment did not know which way to turn. One of the workers, Donald C. Murray, spotted her and offered his help. While working at the center, many of his ancestral lines had become “unstuck”—except one. Surprisingly, the visitor was working on that very line: “I have that line proven all the way to a colonel in Oliver Cromwell’s army in England.” Thus, in this case, it was a visitor who helped one of the workers. Murray reflected, “I pushed and pushed on the line for years never being able to move it. Here, it fell right into my lap.”<sup>22</sup>

Workers in the early days of the Oakland Family History Center would have thought recent achievements were impossible, but with vastly increased digital resources many new programs have become a reality. With many outreach efforts, member visits have climbed to 30 percent of the total, with anticipation that they will climb even higher following new interest in family history work.

## Organ Concerts and Discourses Series

Following the 1960 dedication of the East Bay Interstake Center, a series of Sunday afternoon organ concerts was established “to aid the Church missionary program.” The seventy-one-rank Swain and Kates organ had been designed in Oakland by a local firm and built in Germany by the Lochauf Organ Factory. Robert R. Douglas, who would direct the monthly concert series, actually had the opportunity to play the organ at the German factory before it was disassembled for shipment to Oakland. From the beginning, the plan was to include “the best organists of the Oakland–San Francisco musical world,” many of whom were not members of the Church. The series met with unusual success, with attendance beginning around 40 but soon growing to more than 1,800. Originally known as the “Interstake Concert Series,” the name was changed following the temple’s dedication to “Temple Hill Organ Concerts.”<sup>23</sup>

In the fall of 1965, the “Temple Hill Discourses” series was launched as another outreach effort. These Sunday afternoon

talks featured outstanding Latter-day Saints, including Delbert F. Wright, former vice president of General Mills and temple president; Albert P. Heiner, stake high councilor and vice president of Kaiser Steel; Glade L. Burgon and Claude A. West, LDS Institute of Religion directors in the East Bay area; and Thomas S. Ferguson, attorney and author on Book of Mormon archaeology and geography.<sup>24</sup> In later years, similar programs would continue to bring people to Temple Hill.

## The Temple Pageant

Even before the dedication of the Oakland Temple, the idea of a temple pageant evolved. It had a threefold purpose: to celebrate the

Robert Douglas at the Interstake Center organ. Photo by Ed Pyle, Oakland Stake Archives. Also in the *Messenger* in November 1960, 12. Courtesy of Robert Larsen.





dedication of the temple, to acquaint people with the story of the Church, and to encourage youth to participate in temple work.

The pageant had to be approved by stake president O. Leslie Stone. Overwhelmed by the work leading up to the temple's dedication, he initially questioned if such a pageant could be successful, but he relented. "And It Came to Pass" opened in the Interstake Center on December 3, 1964—just two weeks after the dedication of the temple.

Doyle West, a high school music teacher living in San Leandro, would become the pageant's first director. Whitney Groo and James Ira Young had written a pageant for the San Bruno Ward (across the bay on the peninsula) some ten years before. There had been three acts and three performances—each act presented on a successive night. When they were asked to produce a pageant to commemorate the Oakland Temple, they resolved to shorten their work to a trilogy in which three acts would be given in one performance. In a three-hour session, West, Groo, and Young worked out this consolidation. The three acts in the rewritten trilogy would feature the publishing of the Book of Mormon and the Restoration of the gospel, the trek westward and expansion of the Church out from Utah, and a contemporary view of the Church, culminating with the construction of the Oakland Temple. The producers then met with representatives from five stakes who were enthusiastic about the project and agreed to have each stake fund \$1,000.

Ralph Laycock of the Brigham Young University music faculty integrated the music from the three separate productions, added to it, and enhanced it. The musicians were the precursors of the Temple Hill Orchestra. "The score was on little scraps of paper, but we learned," Doyle West recalled. When he was asked to become the pageant's first producer, he was stunned. "I had some knowledge of music," he said, "but I knew not a thing about being a producer. I didn't even know what a producer was supposed to do." Doyle set out to do the best he could with the event and was able to find talented people to work as directors over drama, music, "voice choir" narrators, technical concerns, and choreography. "I worked with five

directors who were absolutely marvelous. The pageant is no longer mine, it is the Lord's," he affirmed.<sup>25</sup>

The main choir in the balcony was formed by 600 young people. Another group formed the voice choir on the stage. Some 100 actors and dancers performed. Thus narration, singing, and dancing were all used as mediums to deliver the message of the pageant.

Many early participants still remember Brigham Young's stirring affirmation "This is the place! drive on!" These words were his direction as the first company of Mormon pioneers entered the Great Salt Lake Valley. To the pageant's audience, though, "This is the place" may have seemed like a validation of the decision to build a temple in Oakland.

Then, Young's "drive on" reverberated through the auditorium as words of encouragement not only to the pioneers, but also to the pageant participants and audience. In the final scene, members of the balcony choir—some wearing ethnic costumes—carried flags of all nations down to the stage while the choir sang "Teach the Word to All the Nations."

Early versions of the pageant, just before the climaxing "Parade of Nations," featured a scene that focused on the importance of the temple. While a bride and groom stood in front of a silhouette of the temple, the cast on the balcony and stage sang "Man Must Have a Sacred, Holy Place."

Paul Summerhays, the visitors' center director,

Oakland Temple Pageant, "And It Came to Pass," in 2002. Courtesy of Hugh Harline.





Oakland Temple Pageant, "And It Came to Pass," in 2002. Courtesy of Hugh Harline.

gratefully acknowledged widespread interest in the pageant: "No single event other than the temple open house has aroused so much interest from nonmembers as this pageant." Originally, three performances were planned for the first year, but finding the following weekend open and a potential large audience, two more performances were added. About 15,000 people attended the five performances. So great was the interest that many even had to be turned away. One Friday there was such a long line that it stretched down the hill to the Greek Orthodox church. Eager entrepreneurs from that congregation set up a stand and sold sandwiches to the crowd.

At first, admission was on a first-come, first-served basis, but later tickets were issued

through the wards and at the visitors' center. This ensured a more even attendance for each performance and avoided the necessity of people standing in long lines with the possibility of being turned away. Howard Allen, president of the Northern California Mission, gratefully acknowledged, "Our missionaries report that as a result of the pageant, more doors have been opened to them."<sup>26</sup>

By 1968 the pageant increased to six performances on two weekends.<sup>27</sup> In 1970, the number of performances increased to twelve. The pageant was also moved from the winter to the summer,<sup>28</sup> and 18,000 persons viewed the pageant that year.<sup>29</sup> In 1976, the musicians in the orchestra, singers in the choir, and actors on the stage came



from eight stakes and sixty-one wards.<sup>30</sup> By 1984, twenty-two stakes were involved with the production; over 1,200 people participated in some capacity.<sup>31</sup> Even people of other faiths had key roles in the pageant. For example, one individual took part as stage chorus director, soloist, and actor.<sup>32</sup> Audiences viewing the pageant averaged from 22 to 25 percent nonmembers, as many Saints brought their friends of other faiths to the production.<sup>33</sup>

In 1979, well-known motion picture producer Kieth Merrill designed new sets and costumes and revised the script to place greater emphasis on bearing testimony to members of other faiths.<sup>34</sup> Sponsorship of the pageant had shifted from the Young Men's and

Oakland Temple Pageant, "And It Came to Pass," in 2002. Courtesy of Hugh Harline.



Young Women's Mutual Improvement Associations to the Northern California Mission, reflecting the increasing emphasis on reaching a broader audience.

Not only did the pageant share the gospel message with those who attended, but the participants themselves reported how it strengthened their own faith. In her Oakland Stake history, Evelyn Candland reported on several positive outcomes from these performances. Testimony meetings were held for the youth; many responded by telling of their increased understanding of the gospel through learning from the message of the pageant. In one of these meetings, a young woman declared that we fulfill the vision the prophets have seen of the future. Whitney Groo, who had helped write the original pageant, believed that it had achieved the objective of bringing many people to the Savior.<sup>35</sup>

Oakland Temple with Christmas lights. Courtesy of Bart and Barbara Christenson.





Nevertheless, as a number of new pageants in other parts of the country were developed, the Church began to consider their cost. As a result, Church officials discontinued the Oakland Temple pageant along with a number of others, and in November 2007, it was officially “retired.”<sup>36</sup> Still, some local people hoped that the pageant might be revived one day in some form or another.

## Holidays on Temple Hill

For a number of years special events on Temple Hill have filled the Christmas season, including tree lighting, a nativity scene, firesides, and a myriad of musical events. Before 1978, the modest display of lights had been enjoyed primarily by temple patrons, but that year’s

The lights at Christmastime. Courtesy of Matt Granz.





expansion to 50,000 colored lights attracted many more visitors. Church members donated funds or “many, many hours of time.” Even the fire department provided a ladder-truck to place the star atop a tall tree. In 1991, a Samoan choir sang at the ceremony in which Oakland mayor Elihu Harris flipped the switch to turn on the lights.<sup>37</sup> He returned in following years to deliver remarks and to turn on the display,<sup>38</sup> which by 1998 had grown to 500,000 lights that could be seen from as far as the San Francisco Bay.<sup>39</sup> The mission

The Nativity scene at the Oakland Temple during Christmastime. Courtesy of Matt Granz.



president acknowledged approvingly, “Members are bringing their non-member friends and a large percentage are staying to take the guided tour around the grounds and through the visitors’ center.” Some 1,163 of these visitors requested copies of the Book of Mormon embossed with their own names.<sup>40</sup> By 2006, 90 percent of those coming to see the lights were not Church members.<sup>41</sup>

Particularly close to the spirit of the Christmas season and to the purpose of the temple have been the performances of Handel’s

*Messiah*. It was not exclusively a Temple Hill event; it had been performed as early as 1957 in the Oakland–Berkeley Stake. Nico Snel Jr. first conducted the *Messiah* in 1977 at the Interstake Center, under the sponsorship of the Fremont, Hayward, Oakland–Berkeley, and Pleasanton Stakes. Later, a 300-voice Temple Hill Interfaith Choir was formed. As the *Messiah* became a sing-along musical affair, its popularity increased, and it became a traditional Christmas experience. In 1994, about 1,000 people attended each performance.<sup>42</sup>

The *Messiah* performance had been catapulted into prominence two years earlier in 1992, when the Russian Chaliapin Festival Choir was on tour. The performance also included some traditional Russian Christmas music. Doyle West conducted the Northern California *Messiah* Choir and Nuriya Dzhureyeva





conducted the Chaliapin Festival Choir. The *Church News* reported that “many of those who attended said the concert was charged with excitement.”<sup>43</sup>

In 1993, about 2,800 attended a special presentation entitled *Easter Miracle*. It featured music by the special Northern California Mormon-Interfaith Choir and Orchestra, which was directed by Steve Harris, who had also been music director of the Oakland Temple pageant. A narrated slide presentation of the Savior’s life was developed by Ed Wakefield, director of the temple pageant. It also included a display featuring paintings, drawings, sculptures, and needlework—all with an emphasis on the Savior’s Resurrection.<sup>44</sup>

A musical presentation, *The Lamb of God*, was presented at the Interstake Center at the Easter season beginning in 2011. Composed by Rob Gardner, it focused on the Savior’s life—particularly His Atonement and Resurrection. It featured an orchestra and choir. Soloists represent individuals who knew Jesus the best, including three of His Apostles (Peter, John, and Thomas) and four women (Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, and His mother, Mary). As Gardner viewed contemporary conditions, he affirmed, “I just wanted to be able to tell the world that even in the darkest moments there’s always hope. That hope comes through the Atonement and through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>45</sup>

## The Temple as a Symbol

A writer in the *Church News* referred to the temple as “the crowning edifice of Temple Hill.”<sup>46</sup> In anticipation of the temple’s fiftieth anniversary in November 2014, the waterfall into the central court was restored. This had been a feature of the temple when it was first built, but it was removed because water had leaked into the building’s interior.

Although visitors were no longer allowed entry to the temple terrace garden because of security concerns, a small observation post was added next to the pathway just south of the visitors’ center. On clear days, a magnificent view of the Bay Area appears from Mount Tamalpais and the Marin headlands in the north and east to the



Santa Cruz Mountains in the south. This view is symbolic of the temple's looking out upon and blessing the area and the people living there. Elder George Albert Smith was inspired to see the people of the Bay Area also looking back toward the temple as a guiding beacon of light. Although the temple may be a visible beacon to everyone living in the area, it has added significance for faithful Latter-day Saints. With the instruction and promises they receive in temple ordinances, Saints in the Bay Area can now gain intimations of their glorious future. Through worship, work, and learning, the honest in heart may prepare for their eternal destiny. Hence, for the faithful, the temple truly is a portal to eternity.

Construction on the waterfall in the central court for the fiftieth anniversary of the temple. Courtesy of Brent R. Nordgren.  
Next page: Oakland Temple and the Bay Area. Courtesy of Matt Granz.













## Notes

1. "The Church in Action: Temple Wins Lighting Award," *Church News*, March 18, 1967, 4; "The LDS Scene," *Improvement Era*, May 1967, 68.
2. Richard Finch, interview by Robert G. Larsen, July 26, 2011, in possession of interviewer.
3. Mission statement for the Media, Community Affairs, and Inter-faith Relations Unit, 1995, Oakland Stake Archives; President Gary Anderson and public affairs director Lorenzo Hoopes to all user groups, letter, Oakland Stake Archives. This letter discusses proposed changes in the management of the Oakland Interstake Center from the preventive maintenance group to the Oakland California Stake; 1995 mission statement for the operations and scheduling unit, Temple Hill Public Affairs Council, Oakland Stake Archives.
4. Edward H. Anderson, "The Bureau of Information," *Improvement Era*, December 1921, 136.
5. "New Bureau Director Named For Oakland," *Church News*, August 15, 1964, 3.
6. Nell Smith, "Oakland Temple Notes Anniversary," *Church News*, November 20, 1965, 13.
7. Henry A. Smith, "A New Way to Tell the Story of Mormonism," *Church News*, April 29, 1967, 5.
8. Thomas R. Stone, interview by Richard Cowan, November 12, 2010, in possession of interviewer.
9. "Visitors' Center Called 'Eternal University,'" *Church News*, September 19, 1992, 3-4.
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