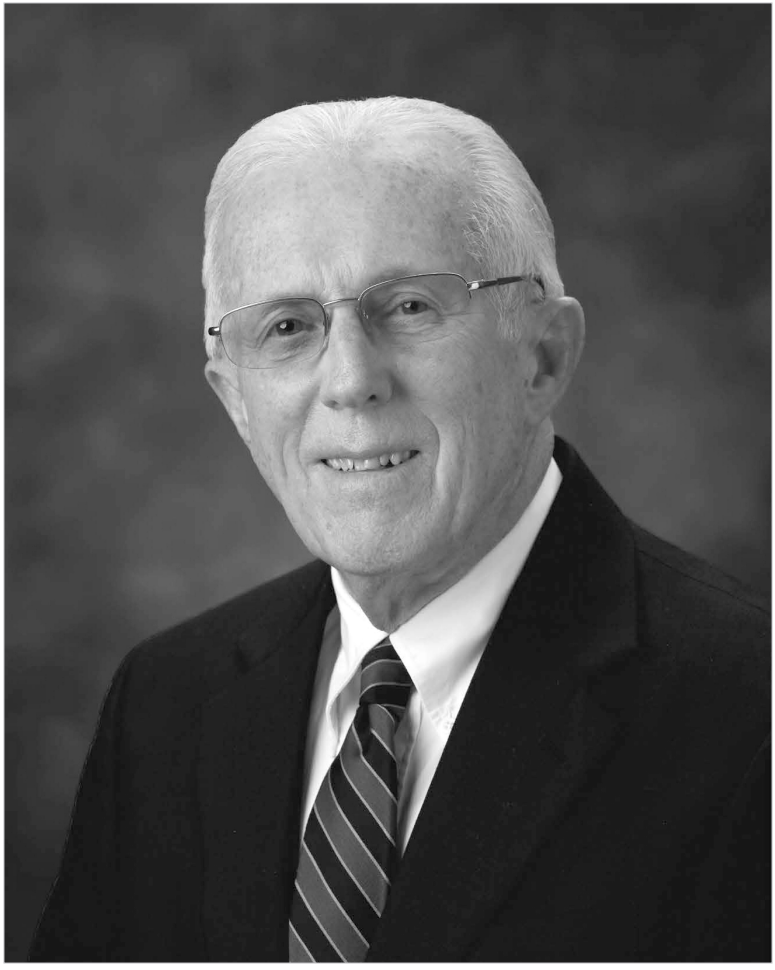

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INTERVIEW BY ROBIN SCOTT JENSEN

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THE INTERVIEW

JENSEN: Let's start by discussing your birth, family background, and upbringing.

JESSEE: I was born in Springville, Utah, in 1929, the same year Wall Street crashed and the Tabernacle Choir broadcasts began. I grew up during the Great Depression and World War II on a one-acre "farm" in the home where my father was born and raised. My mother, Minerva Boss, came from Garland, a little town in northern Utah. She was the oldest of twelve children raised on a twenty-acre farm. My father, Phillip Cornell Jessee, was a native of Springville. My parents met while serving missions in the northern states. They were married in 1928 in Logan and then settled in Springville. It was in Springville and on the Garland farm of my grandparents that I learned the fine arts of gardening, milking cows, hauling hay, thinning and topping sugar beets, irrigating, digging ditches, picking corn, shoveling manure, and fighting morning glory, all of which had the effect of increasing my appreciation for those whose lives are spent working the land.

I have been blessed by ancestry who joined the Church in foreign lands and paid a heavy price to come to Utah and lay the foundation upon which I am whiling away my days. My mother's parents were Ida Kunz and Peter Boss, whose roots were in the Alps above Interlaken, Switzerland. My father's parents were James Ogden Jessee and Adah Phillips. My dad never knew his father until later in

his life because his parents separated shortly after he was born. His father was connected to the Jessees of Virginia and his mother to the Phillips of Carmarthenshire, Wales. Grandfather Jonah Phillips was the only one in his family to join the Church. Shortly thereafter he came to America and crossed the plains with the Ellsworth handcart company in 1856. In Salt Lake City he helped haul stone from Little Cottonwood Canyon for the Salt Lake Temple and served with the Nauvoo Legion in the canyons east of the city during the Utah War. At the time of the move south he was attracted to Springville, where he met and married my great-grandmother Ann Thomas, another Welsh convert, and built the home where my father and I were born and raised.

My grandmother Ida Kunz grew up in a polygamous family. Her father, Christian Kunz, joined the Church in Switzerland and migrated to Utah in 1870. He married sisters Elizabeth and Caroline Buehler. My grandmother was the oldest daughter of fourteen children born to Christian and Caroline. Grandmother Ida talked of the fear that gripped her as a child living in southern Idaho during the government antipolygamy crusade of the 1880s. She had nightmares about her father being arrested and taken away. She told an interesting experience connected with this. She said the family was always on the lookout for federal marshals. Visitors could be seen approaching the house from some distance with the use of a spyglass. If a stranger approached, her father would conceal himself in an empty kitchen flour bin or slip out the back door to a place of safety in a large bush. Punishment under federal law for plural marriage was a fine of five hundred dollars or imprisonment for five years or both. Christian eventually became worn out from hiding from the deputies, and one day he decided to stop running. He went to the bank and got seventy-five dollars and waited for the deputies to visit him. A short time later he was out in the pasture digging postholes when he saw the federal deputy Shorty Watson, who was over six feet tall, coming down the Nounan road. Shorty rode up to Christian, and the conversation

went something like this: "Are you Chris Kunz?" Christian replied, "Yes, sir! Are you Shorty Watson?" "I sure am. Where have you been? I've been looking for you for a long time!" Shorty then added, "I have some papers for you." Christian responded, "So have I got some papers for you," whereupon he took the money from his pocket, handed it to Shorty, and with the wave of his arm said, "Now, Shorty, you just go on down the road and we will say nothing about it." The deputies never bothered him again.

My parents had eight children, six of whom grew to maturity. I was the oldest. At the time of his marriage my father was not able to acquire a home of his own, so he raised his family in the home where he grew up and where his mother (my grandmother Adah) still lived. During the depression, work was sporadic and my father was led in a number of directions to find it. Finally, when the Geneva Steel plant in Orem was completed in 1944, he worked in the rolling mill and as a crane operator until his retirement.

JENSEN: Share some reflections about your home life.

JESSEE: As a child growing up during the Depression, I was aware of what my parents went through raising a large family at that time. Every inch of the ground we lived on was utilized for a garden. In addition to a wide variety of vegetables, we had a large raspberry patch. There was always work to do in the house and in the yard as my parents struggled to support their family by raising most of our food. What we couldn't obtain from our own garden we supplemented from local farmers. We did a lot of canning. My parents were faithful, churchgoing people. They were hardworking and devoted to their family, and they did their best to teach us children to live right and be good people. In my case I'm sure they thought they had failed more than once.

One tradition we had in our home was a weekly family home evening. This was many years before the Church reintroduced the practice about 1965. I thought this was an enjoyable time; my sister

took minutes, and we all participated. Mother told me that when she was a child, President Joseph F. Smith had spoken at a Bear Lake Stake conference and urged parents to gather their families around them each week for singing, instruction, and other forms of bonding; and anything the Church authorities counseled was adopted 100 percent by her parents. Hence, home evenings were regularly held. They would meet to sing, recite, and do other things together. Mother said it was there she learned the Articles of Faith and Ten Commandments, which was a big help when she went on her mission. After her marriage she continued this tradition in our home. My dad had never heard of such a thing.

JENSEN: What were your interests growing up?

JESSEE: In my younger years I collected stamps and photographs of World War II airplanes. The stamp collection led me to study the countries of the world, and I did a lot of reading about the war. I also became interested in art at an early age when my mother would take me to the art gallery to study the paintings. And I spent a lot of time drawing. As a child I developed a love for classical music from my sixth-grade teacher, Howard Salisbury, who would invite students to his home to listen to the classics and play "concentration." His love for music was contagious. Music was an important part of our lives at home. My mother came from a musical family and was a talented musician herself; she played the violin and sang in church and community choral groups. She was convinced good music was essential for a well-rounded life. And even though money was tight, she found a way to involve us children in music. I took piano lessons and played the clarinet in the school band and orchestra, but I didn't amount to much in either one.

JENSEN: Did you do anything besides farm work in your younger years?

JESSEE: Over the length of my high school years, I engaged in a variety of work activities that combined to convince me that I had better get serious with school if I didn't want to spend my adult years in sheer drudgery. I delivered the evening newspaper, a job that included mortal combat with dogs and inclement weather. I worked in the fields picking corn and harvesting sugar beets. At one point during the war, German prisoners were trucked into town to help in the fields, which gave me some concern for my safety, after having been raised on a heavy dose of anti-German propaganda. In addition, I worked for a time gandy-dancing [laying and maintaining railroad tracks] on the Provo-to-Heber railroad line, cleaning goosenecks on the coke ovens at Geneva Steel, and working for a while one summer at the powder plant at the mouth of Spanish Fork Canyon. Shortly after I was laid off for being underage, a vat of nitroglycerin blew up that sent a shock through the valley. All in all, none of this appealed to me for a life's profession.

JENSEN: Talk about your schooling.

JESSEE: I attended school at Springville from elementary through high school. The high school was unique in that an art gallery of some renown was part of the campus. This added a cultural dimension not usually found in such a setting and had a profound influence upon me. The art gallery was conceived at the beginning of the twentieth century with artistic donations by two prominent local artists, Cyrus E. Dallin and John Hafen. Dallin is noted for his renditions of the angel Moroni on the Salt Lake Temple and sculpture of Paul Revere in Boston. John Hafen, a landscape painter of great sensitivity, painted some of the murals in the Salt Lake Temple. The townspeople had raised money during the Depression for construction of the beautiful Spanish colonial-style building. Both Springville junior and senior high schools were located immediately to the east of the art building, neither of which exists today. During my high school years, art and music classes were taught in

the building, and my interest in art developed there under the tutelage of a talented instructor, Glen Turner, who was also the curator of the collection. During my senior year, I had the opportunity to assist him in hanging the annual art exhibit. I also received an art scholarship that paid my first year's tuition at BYU. At that time I planned a career in art.

JENSEN: You served an LDS mission to Germany. What was your mission experience like?

JESSEE: I guess you could say that missionary service was part of my DNA. My grandparents on both sides were converted to the Church through the effort of missionaries in Wales and Switzerland, several uncles had served missions, and my parents met while serving in the Northern States Mission. My preparation was what a child at that time received growing up in an LDS home and participating in Church programs. I had attended BYU one year and part of another when I received my call in 1949 to the West German Mission, the first group to go there after the war.

The mission home was located just north of Brigham Young's Beehive House on State Street in Salt Lake City. When I arrived the place was filled, so a few of us were housed in the Carlton Hotel, which still stands on South Temple Street. After a couple of weeks of instruction we departed from the Union Pacific train station with a group of elders going to Europe. We embarked from New York City on the SS *Marine Flasher*, a converted troop ship that had transported Holocaust victims and other displaced persons after the war. The week we spent on board was marked by plenty of good food, much seasickness, a horrendous Atlantic storm, and some uninformed discussions with fellow travelers. Arriving at Le Havre, France, we continued on to Paris, where the German contingent met our mission president, Jean Wunderlich, and we were assigned our fields of labor. Being the first ones in Germany after the war, we had no senior companions to ease us into mission life. My companion, Elder Rex Smith,

and I were assigned to Saarbrücken, Germany, where we arrived on July 23, 1949, three weeks after leaving Salt Lake City.

Saarland, the westernmost of the sixteen German states, was a beautiful, heavily forested place. An industrial center, Saarbrücken had been 85 percent destroyed during the war. I was ill prepared for the scene of desolation that greeted me. Vast sections of the city were still uninhabited rubble. Through it all, the members were salt-of-the-earth, wonderful people. They had experienced untold suffering from the war, yet they treated us like their own children. Some had a father or husband still missing or detained in Russian POW camps. The Germans were a hardworking people, and with the help of the Marshall Plan, the country had begun to rise from the ashes.

When we arrived, Saarland was under French occupation, and the government had not given the Church the legal recognition necessary for proselytizing, so I spent the first part of my mission working with members. When the government recognition finally came, our method was to work through the housing districts of the city, leaving printed tracts with the people. We eventually received the discussion plan developed by my present Joseph Smith Papers Project colleague Richard L. Anderson, which proved to be very effective. Lack of success at first was no doubt due to our inexperience, the government restriction, our inadequate language skills, primitive meeting conditions, and disillusionment with religion by many people from war and suffering.

I spent more than half of my mission in Saarbrücken and then was transferred to Mannheim and given responsibility for the missionary work in the Karlsruhe district, which included Mannheim, Ludwigshafen, Karlsruhe, and Pforzheim. After some time in Mannheim, without much success, I inquired of our mission president, who by then was Edwin Q. Cannon, about trying our luck in Heidelberg, which was about fifteen miles down the road. The city was a renowned cultural center and had not been destroyed by the war. It was also the headquarters for the US military in Europe. A

short time later, President Cannon assigned Douglas Bischoff and me to go there. Missionaries had never worked in Heidelberg, and there were no German members to serve as a nucleus like in other cities. There was a different spirit among the people. We commenced work in June 1951, meeting in a rented hall on Helmholzstrasse. Sometime later we were joined by four other missionaries, and by the time I left the mission, a small branch of the Church had taken root. I returned from Europe on board the *Queen Mary* with our royal shipmates Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, who were en route to America to meet with President Truman.

JENSEN: Talk about your marriage and your family.

JESSEE: A short time after returning from my mission, I met June Wood. She was born in Grand Junction, Colorado. Her family had been engaged in a lumber business in British Columbia, Canada, and had returned for the winter and was living in my Springville ward, where we met. About a year later we were married. She is a wonderful wife, a sensitive person, and largely responsible for any success I achieve in life. We have been blessed in our marriage with nine children. Six boys and two girls grew to maturity, and we lost another boy at birth. In addition to caring for our family, June has been involved with music all her life, playing the piano and singing in church and community functions. She performed with the Jay Welch Chorale during the entire years of its existence and afterward continued with the organization after the name was changed. At one time she auditioned for the Tabernacle Choir and was accepted, but the requirements and demands on her time were such that she was never able to pursue her desire futher. She has been a mighty force in nurturing our children and teaching them to be the kind, service-oriented people that they are.

JENSEN: Did any of them follow in the historical footsteps of their father?

JESSEE: Our children have been very interested in history, and we have visited many Church and American history sites. They have been very interested in and supportive of what I have done and continue to benefit from the writings of others in the history profession, but they have opted for other avenues for their life's work.

JENSEN: After your mission, you went back to school?

JESSEE: Yes, upon returning I enrolled again at BYU, where I focused primarily on art and German in my undergraduate work, and later on Church history in my graduate program. I was able to continue in school and support my growing family primarily due to my art training. I was fortunate to study under Maynard Dixon Stewart, the gifted son of the renowned Utah artist LeConte Stewart, who was on the faculty when I enrolled. While in school I worked part-time at a local advertising agency and was art editor of the BYU yearbook one year. I also worked for a time in the art department of the JC Penney Company. At that time I anticipated a career in commercial art.

JENSEN: How did you come to turn from art to Church history?

JESSEE: I was interested in history at an early age primarily due to the war. I was twelve when Pearl Harbor was bombed and plainly recall the feelings of desperation and determination that gripped the nation at that time. I was very interested in the progress of the conflict—an eager observer of the madness and mayhem that it produced. My mission to Germany brought me face-to-face with the actual destruction and heightened my interest in the Church and its history. While there I read extensively in the Church literature and became convinced of the truth of its teachings. When I returned to the university I enrolled in some history courses and read B. H. Roberts's *Comprehensive History of the Church*. At that time there was considerable interest in polygamy issues due to the Fundamentalist

situation in Utah and the raid on Short Creek; there was also talk about Fawn Brodie's book on Joseph Smith, Juanita Brooks's book on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and other issues. As I sought to understand more about these issues I could see that my motivation and feelings about the Church would be shaped by the level of my understanding of it. So after obtaining a BA degree in German and art, I decided to focus on Church history in a master's program.

JENSEN: What was your thesis topic?

JESSEE: I chose to take a look at the Mormon Fundamentalist movement. My grandfather's half brother had joined the group early in his life, which was a topic of interest and concern in the family. There was always an air of mystery about him at family reunions. And he gave the impression he knew something the rest of us didn't. In the Fundamentalist literature I had noticed references to Harrison Sperry, a relative of Sidney B. Sperry, the dean of the BYU College of Religion. I mentioned this to Professor Sperry when I inquired about my thesis topic, and he thought it would be worth pursuing. Later, in talking to James R. Clark Jr. about my interest, he suggested I write to his uncle, J. Reuben Clark Jr., a member of the First Presidency, for information, since President Clark was connected to the Woolley family, and Lorin Woolley was one of the key figures in the Fundamentalist movement. I soon found that my writing to President Clark was a mistake.

I was contacted by the university administration and advised to submit each thesis chapter to Vice President William E. Berrett for his review. My approach was to compare and assess LDS and Fundamentalist views on matters of doctrine and history. I submitted the chapters as I wrote them, and President Berrett found them for the most part informative. His suggestions were minimal. Upon the completion of my thesis, because of the concern it initially raised, it was decided to send a copy to the Church Historian, Joseph Fielding Smith, as a precaution before it was submitted to the university. As the time

for graduation approached, no word had come from Salt Lake City, so I was awarded the degree with the understanding I would submit the thesis later. Somehow word spread that it contained some blockbusting issues and had been suppressed, which resulted in a clamor to see it. I had let a relative read it who worked in a printing shop and who was also acquainted with the family polygamist. Unknown to me he duplicated the thesis, and before long copies were everywhere.

JENSEN: How did this lead to your employment in the Historian's Office?

JESSEE: During work on my thesis I had spent considerable time in the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City, where I got a glimpse of the vast Church history resources. One day, a few years later, I was in the Historian's Office and decided to inquire about employment opportunities from one of the workers there. He told me he thought there was an opening and suggested I talk to his supervisor. So I introduced myself to Earl Olson, who was one of the Assistant Church Historians. He informed me that there was indeed an opening in the manuscript section and asked about my background. When I told him I had a master's degree in Church history from BYU, he told me I was probably overeducated for the job. But he decided to give me a try anyway and sent me to see Joseph Fielding Smith, the Church Historian at that time. Upon entering President Smith's office and making known my interest in the current position, he informed me there were no job openings in the Historian's Office. I explained that Earl Olson had sent me to apply for the opening in the manuscript section. He repeated there were no job openings. A short time later the misunderstanding was resolved, and I began work there in November 1964, the same day Lyndon B. Johnson was elected president of the United States to begin what he termed "The Great Society," and for me it truly was.

JENSEN: Where was the Historian's Office located at that time?

JESSEE: It was on the third floor of the Church Administration building at 47 East South Temple, where it had been since the building was constructed in 1917. In addition to the offices of the Church Historian and Assistant Historians, the office contained an auditorium, an area for patrons to work, shelving for the Church records, and work space for those employed. A large number of records were housed in the basement at 47 East and also in a storage facility on Redwood Road. For purposes of processing the records, the Historian's Office was divided into three sections: library, manuscript, and written records. The manuscript section where I worked was a large area separated from the library by a wall of heavy-gauge steel mesh with a door made of the same material that could be locked. Commonly referred to as "the cage," the area enclosed four or five rows of shelves containing Hollinger boxes filled with manuscripts and a few desks for those of us who worked there. At one end was an enclosed alcove containing the Andrew Jenson archive, which was later dismantled to make more work space.

JENSEN: Could you share a bit more about the Jenson archive and his role in LDS history?

JESSEE: Andrew Jenson was a Danish convert who was employed at the Historian's Office toward the end of the nineteenth century, a time when the first generation of Church members was dying off. He had a tenacious sense of record keeping. During his fifty-year tenure as an assistant historian, in addition to his compilation work on the Journal History of the Church, he collected materials for what became the manuscript histories of every branch, ward, stake, and mission in existence at that time. His tireless efforts resulted in hundreds of volumes of history and the field notes that produced them. For security reasons he had housed the records he collected in his fortress-like home, which he had named Rosenborg Villa, after the royal Danish archive. Then after the Administration Building at 47 East was built, he transferred his collection to the Historian's

Office, and the small room was created to honor him and to house the material he had collected. The room contained rows of shelves with boxes of his field notes. In time, the need for more space necessitated removing the Jenson material.

JENSEN: Describe your experience while working in the Historian's Office.

JESSEE: I regarded the opportunity to work there as a sacred privilege. I was impressed by the rich treasure of historical material that had been preserved by the Church during the early decades and the dedication of those who kept the records, even though many of them were not skilled writers. I remember how impressive it was when I first saw a document written by Joseph Smith and realized he had actually held that piece of paper and written upon it.

From our present viewpoint, the methods of organizing and caring for the Church records in the 1960s were archaic and the writing of the Church's history was practically nonexistent. In looking back on my experience in the Historian's Office I now see it as a time of transition. That is the best way to describe it. It was the ending of an era and beginning of another, a time when the procedures of record keeping and the writing of Church history were undergoing a vast transformation. I happened on the scene about the time those two tectonic plates—the old and the new—collided. There is much that could be said about the sparks that flew at the time of the collision, but as I reflect on it now, it is obvious to me that the problems and issues that cropped up in the 1960s and early '70s were part of the growing pains that would eventually blossom into the fine enterprise we see today with its professional archival organization and renaissance in the writing of Church history.

As I mentioned earlier, the Historian's Office was located in the Administration Building at 47 East and South Temple. It had been built for office use and was not a natural setting for the housing of records that required temperature and humidity requirements for

their proper care. When I arrived, the office was bulging at the seams for lack of adequate space, and the twenty-five or so employees were not sufficient to handle the work that needed to be done. Few, if any, were professionally trained, nor was I educated in archival procedures to start with. You can get a glimpse of where we were professionally from my first cataloging assignment in the manuscript section. I was given a large pile of library cards with instructions to type "Church, About" as a subject heading on each of the cards. Although I knew very little about library science it seemed to me the words I was typing could apply to almost every card in the library. So after some discussion, my assignment changed.

When I started, the prevailing philosophy was that the Historian's Office was a private, unique repository founded upon revelation; hence it was not necessary to follow procedures developed elsewhere. A corollary of this was that people could be hired without any professional background and trained in our own unique system. However, in practice the result was a revolving door of prospects coming and going. No sooner was someone hired than they left for a higher paying job elsewhere. During one twelve-month span I had trained a dozen people.

The organization and care of the material in the manuscript section was in its beginning stages when I was hired. Lorraine Arnell was the supervisor, and I worked with him in the cataloging of the materials. My training in Church history was an asset, but I was unfamiliar with the ways of the archivist. Lorraine introduced me to Schellenberg's bible on archival procedure, and over time we attended meetings of the Society of American Archivists and had contact with others in the profession. A major issue we faced had to do with the organizational structure of the Historian's Office itself. In our view, the division of materials filed in the office along the lines of library, manuscript, and written records violated the principle of provenance that ideally governed the handling of manuscript collections. Under the existing arrangement, a collection of records that came to the

office was split three ways, with printed material channeled to the library, handwritten material to the manuscript section, and minute books, ledgers, letter books, and financial records to the written records section. Under the principle of provenance, a collection of records would ideally be retained in the order of its creation to better preserve the history of the person or organization that produced it. Once a collection was broken up and filed in the different sections it was impossible to restore it to its original state. Furthermore, materials in the manuscript section had been originally filed by name and subject, and this further altered collections by removing incoming correspondence to separate files under the name of the correspondent rather than leaving the correspondence with the papers of the recipient.

JENSEN: Was there any progress toward change during the time you were in the archives?

JESSEE: Prospects for change were slow in coming. Proposals were made to correct the situation, but they would have required a complete reorganization of the Historian's Office, which did not materialize while I was there. But I knew we were headed in the right direction when Jeff Johnson and Max Evans were employed in the manuscript section. Both men were young and had professional training. I saw their arrival as a godsend. Through their efforts and others who came after, the groundwork was laid for the state-of-the-art enterprise we see today.

JENSEN: The Brigham Young papers is an example of a complex collection that has been restored.

JESSEE: Yes, that is a good example of the difficulty of restoring a collection to its original state. The Brigham Young collection is one of the most significant and extensive in the Church archives. I was no longer there when the task was undertaken to bring together again the scattered Brigham Young material from the various sections

of the Historian's Office. In the manuscript section alone, a large number of the files were letters and documents that at one time had been part of his papers. It took Ron Esplin, the prime mover in the restoration process, five years to accomplish the task, with help from Jeff Johnson and Max Evans. As a result of their work, and no doubt others afterward, the collection as it stands today provides a clear window through which scholars may now come to know who Brigham Young was and what he did. Other papers of the founding generation deserve the same treatment.

JENSEN: What were the most satisfying aspects of your involvement in the archives?

JESSEE: Of course, paramount was the opportunity to become familiar with manuscript records of the Church, organize them, and provide finding aids that would be helpful to those engaged in research. I also welcomed the chance to help patrons locate manuscript sources they needed. And I gained a greater appreciation for the library and archival profession: the people who skillfully organize and catalog the records and create the finding aids that are so helpful. I can't overemphasize the tremendous value of their work. The whole world of historical scholarship would crumble without them.

Another source of satisfaction was my association with some of the best people I have known. I was privileged to become acquainted with Joseph Fielding Smith, the Church Historian. People usually associated him with a rather stern demeanor. I got to see him in a different light—his singing duets with his wife, Jessie Evans Smith, an accomplished singer, and his sense of humor. One time I was copying some library cards on the copy machine and became aware of someone standing behind me. I turned to see President Smith staring at me with a pair of those protruding plastic eyeballs. With a smile he asked if I knew what I was doing.

One thing that has been a useful tool for me over the years has been the skill to identify handwriting. When I started in the archives

it was evident that some documents were not written by the persons whose names appeared on them. In order to more accurately determine authorship and date some of the manuscripts it was necessary to become familiar with the world of the clerks and scribes who wrote so diligently in the years before the typewriter. Handwriting identification became a useful tool in understanding such things as accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision, the Book of Mormon manuscript, Joseph Smith's revelation books, and the process by which his manuscript history of the Church was written. It has also helped in addressing issues that have arisen from time to time, such as the 1977 controversy of Solomon Spaulding's *Manuscript Found* and the authenticity of documents purported to have been written by Joseph Smith.

JENSEN: Share some thoughts on some of the articles you wrote while at the archives. What kind of feedback did you receive?

JESSEE: During the time I worked in the archives there were occasional requests for research and writing of a historical nature. Since I had some experience in history, Earl Olson channeled to me some of the requests covering a variety of topics. These included biographical sketches on David O. McKay and Joseph Fielding Smith, papers on the Mormon Battalion, the Mormon Pioneer Trail, the discovery of gold in California, Historian's Office sources for the study of Colorado River exploration and the coming of the railroad, the text for a marker at the Cane Creek massacre site in Tennessee, and an encyclopedia article on the Church.

I was also approached by *BYU Studies* to do a review of one of the volumes of James R. Clark's *Messages of the First Presidency*. In 1968 the Mormon Studies Center at BYU requested an article on the accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision for a study being planned to address issues pertaining to Mormon beginnings. In discussions with Earl Olson, he thought the office ought to be involved in more of that type of thing and urged me to go ahead, but on my own time. That article marked my entrance upon the stage of Joseph Smith's life. In the

process permission was granted to include photographs of the original vision accounts. After submitting the article I was surprised to get a letter of congratulation from Professor Leonard Arrington at Utah State University stating that he thought it was the first time a manuscript analysis of that kind had ever been done in the Church. This was typical of Leonard's thoughtfulness. As *BYU Studies* special issues continued in the following years, I submitted articles on the Book of Mormon manuscript, an edited segment of Wilford Woodruff's diary covering his Kirtland years, and a study of the writing of Joseph Smith's manuscript history of the Church, which received the MHA Best Article Award the year it was published.

JENSEN: I'm wondering when it occurred to you that transcribing and publishing documents was something you wanted to do, something that was valuable for other historians. Did you begin your career thinking you would engage in documentary editing?

JESSEE: As I said, I had published accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision and a segment of Wilford Woodruff's diary during the time I was working in the archives, but I had no expectation at that time that I would make it a major focus of my life. It was not until Leonard Arrington was appointed Church Historian and I switched from the archives to the History Division that I became involved with editing documents more extensively.

JENSEN: How did that transition from archives to history come about?

JESSEE: It started on January 14, 1972, when Earl Olson announced a meeting for the Historian's Office personnel to be held in the third floor assembly room that morning. The appointment of a new historian had been anticipated for a long time, and Leonard Arrington, who had been a frequent user of the archives, had told me some time previous that he had been interviewed for the job. So I knew what was coming. Yet it was still a stirring experience for

me when he and his wife walked into the room with President N. Eldon Tanner, Elder Howard W. Hunter, Elder Alvin R. Dyer, Earl Olson, and their wives. President Tanner announced that Leonard Arrington had been appointed Church Historian, and Earl Olson had been appointed Church Archivist. That was the beginning of a new era for the care and preservation of Church records and the writing of its history; it was also a defining moment in my life.

A few days later, at Leonard's request, I was invited to switch assignments from the archives to the History Division, for me a dream come true. That same day, Leonard reviewed with me his plans for the new division. In the months that followed, he gathered around him a staff of talented historians and editors and laid the foundation for an ambitious history-writing adventure. James B. Allen and Davis Bitton were chosen as Assistant Church Historians. The staff included me, Ron Esplin, Richard Jensen, William Hartley, Gordon Irving, Bruce Blummel, Michael Quinn, Gene Sessions, Ron Walker, Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Glen Leonard, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. Very little had been written by way of Church history since the time of B. H. Roberts. In this respect, Leonard's appointment was a major shift. Immediately and energetically, Leonard began laying the building blocks for the edifice that followed.

The day I joined him in the History Division, Leonard reviewed initiatives for the work ahead. He expected those of us who worked with him to mine the rich historical resources for a fresh understanding of the Church's past. One of the initiatives he envisioned was the publication of documents from the holdings of the archives. When he asked for suggestions to begin a series of publications, the Joseph Smith 1832 journal, which contained a substantial amount of Joseph Smith's own handwriting, came to mind. Since documents actually written by the Prophet seemed to be very scarce, it was decided to begin the series with a volume of Joseph Smith's personal writings. When Leonard asked if I would like to undertake such a work, I told him I would like to try. This was my entrance into the world

of documentary editing on more than a casual basis. I immediately began collecting the holograph writings, most of which were in the Church's possession, but the RLDS church (now known as the Community of Christ) had additional important materials, as did other repositories and collectors around the country.

Leonard also solicited suggestions for other volumes for consideration in what came to be known as the Heritage series. During the early stages of collecting and transcribing Joseph Smith holographs, I had written for the *Western Historical Quarterly* an article on Brigham Young's personal writings. In the process of working through the Brigham Young material I noted three other possibilities for the Heritage series. The periodic letters he wrote to his sons who were away from home on missions, in military service, or at school seemed to be rich sources of fatherly advice and counsel for young people of our own time. In addition, it was apparent that, like Joseph Smith, Brigham Young wrote very little himself compared to the vast amount of his papers, so this suggested another collection of holograph writings. Furthermore, since Brigham Young was a prime colonizer of the West and Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the territory of Utah, there was extensive correspondence dealing with the Indians. His letters to Indian chiefs and others dealing with Indian affairs suggested yet another topic. Over time I collected material for all three.

JENSEN: If your primary assignment was Joseph Smith's writings, why did you get involved with publishing letters of Brigham Young?

JESSEE: In the process of establishing rules to govern how we would present the text of Joseph Smith's writings, I used as a model the professional work then under way on the papers of our country's founding fathers. This required preserving Joseph Smith's prose exactly as written without correcting punctuation and spelling. Since most Church members were not familiar with the Prophet's handwritten prose, Leonard suggested we go slow on the publication

of his writings until we could provide some background on nineteenth-century handwriting. Consequently the personal writings project was put on the back burner for a while, and I focused on Brigham Young's letters to his sons.

JENSEN: You mention that Leonard suggested delaying work on the personal writings of Joseph Smith until the issue of nineteenth-century spelling and punctuation could be addressed. How did that come about?

JESSEE: We invited Elinore H. Partridge, a talented scholar of writing style, to address the issue, which she did in an article that was published in the *Ensign*. In addition to her study of the punctuation and spelling, she also did a careful assessment of Joseph Smith's writing style that later proved very useful in identifying his dictated material.

JENSEN: How did the work on the personal writings lead to the Joseph Smith Papers Project?

JESSEE: While collecting Joseph Smith's personal writings, I envisioned expanding the scope of the work to eventually include all of Joseph Smith's papers, but at the time I had no idea how much that would entail because his papers had never been entirely identified. So a short time after the *Personal Writings* was completed and published, a request was made to that end. By that time, Ron Esplin had been appointed director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, and through his effort authorization was given to publish the Joseph Smith journals with the possibility of further expansion upon their completion. With this possibility in mind, I began systematically collecting everything I thought would be part of such a collection and obtained some student assistance in helping to make preliminary transcriptions of each item. During the next fifteen years, three volumes containing Joseph Smith's journal and some of his historical writings were completed, two of which were published.

JENSEN: So you started work on the papers of Joseph Smith in the 1980s. What were the circumstances that shifted the focus to what it is today?

JESSEE: As the end of the twentieth century approached, it had been almost thirty years since I had started work on Joseph Smith's writings. The work had continued in fits and starts; it often seemed like years the locusts had nibbled on due to the glacial pace. Various things had come into play to slow progress. Among these were problems of access to material, the transition from the age of typewriters to computers, construction and remodeling of buildings that housed documents, transfer of the project to BYU, problems of collecting and transcribing documents, issues regarding perceived sensitive material, the development of editorial procedures, turnover in student help, authorization delays, and responsibilities not connected with the project.

As the new millennium began to dawn, and with the bicentennial of Joseph Smith's birth looming, a series of events took place that seemed to twist the long arm of coincidence all out of shape. It was as if the planets all lined up to infuse the project with new life and a higher level of credibility. Richard Bushman retired from his position at Columbia University and focused his skills upon the *Papers*. Ron Esplin, who had shepherded the *Papers* since the retirement of Leonard Arrington, was released as director of the Smith Institute at BYU, which freed him to take a more active role in the project. A plan was conceived to increase the number of volumes being worked on at a time by appointing multiple editors, and the project was transferred from BYU back to the Historical Department in Salt Lake City. Additionally, the Larry H. Miller family came on the scene and provided significant funding, Elder Marlin Jensen's appointment as Church Historian immensely facilitated progress, the new Church History Library was built with substantial space for an expanded Joseph Smith Papers Project, proximity and access to the documentary sources were increased, and with the additional funding, the way

opened to bring an array of very talented editors and historians on board. Ron Esplin accepted the reins as managing editor of the project, and the revitalized project received official sanction and the blessing of the Church leadership. The shift from a more or less one-man project to a corporate project was the dawning of a new day.

JENSEN: After all the years of frustration and delay, what has been your reaction to all this?

JESSEE: As the restructuring began to unfold, I came to see all those years of plodding along and frustration in an entirely different light. Although those years provided valuable insight and experience, I came to see it as a blessing in disguise that the whole thing had worked out the way it had. I came to understand that had the project continued as originally conceived, it would have been an injustice to Joseph Smith and the Church in two respects: In the first place, the project would have been incomplete. In the beginning I had defined the papers of Joseph Smith too narrowly. I thought the project could be completed in about ten volumes. The shift in vision came about as the restructuring got underway and questions arose about the inclusion of instructions given by Joseph Smith in minutes of meetings. Under the old definition, no provision had been made to include the Prophet's minute books. In considering this issue, it suddenly dawned upon me that the earlier definition of what constituted Joseph Smith's papers was incomplete. I had failed to include essential records created under his immediate direction as the organizational structure of the Church had developed—records created by Joseph in his capacity as Church administrator and historian. Organizations such as the Relief Society and Church councils produced minutes containing important instruction and administrative involvement by Joseph Smith that had been entirely overlooked. As it turned out, the redefinition more than doubled the size of the project.

A second benefit that derived from the restructuring has been the increased quality of the volumes in terms of content, accuracy,

appearance, and workmanship. The change of direction, along with the increase of resources, both monetary and human, has added a dimension to the published volumes that in my estimation finally rises to the level Joseph Smith deserves.

I should also add that any difficult birth requires a good midwife. A key element in the Joseph Smith Papers Project has been a patient, dedicated, talented managing editor with administrative skills capable of riding herd on a group of headstrong historians and editors. The project would not be where it is were it not for Ron Esplin, who bore the administrative burden during the labor pains of the lean years and has continued to this day. It has taken a person whose personality is a blend of William F. Buckley, John Wayne, and Yoshihiko Kikuchi to accomplish this.

JENSEN: What's been your favorite "discovery" (either document or insight into a document) during your career?

JESSEE: There have been a number of interesting things. One of the most spectacular occurred when I was working in the archives in the 1960s looking through the microfilm containing Joseph Smith's manuscript history of the Church. I noticed in the back of the book that an earlier history had been written containing material that touched upon the period of Joseph Smith's life between 1834 and 1836. This earlier history was made up of several elements, the last of which seemed to be a Joseph Smith journal written in third person. In scanning through it to identify the handwriting, I noticed the November 9, 1835, entry in which the Prophet related his First Vision to a visitor who introduced himself as Joshua, a Jewish minister. When I read it I could hardly believe my eyes. It was different from anything I had seen before. In checking the manuscript history under that date I found that Willard Richards, who was compiling the history at that time, had left it out with a notation saying merely that Joseph had related his vision as recorded at the beginning of the history. Also, Paul Cheesman had recently completed a thesis that

analyzed the accounts of the First Vision but had not included this one. At that time, if I remember correctly, few knew about or had seen Joseph Smith's 1835 journal from which the 1834–36 history account was taken.

In addition to this, I found very informative the process by which the manuscript history of the Church had been produced beginning in 1838, when Joseph began dictating the history in Missouri, and finally finished in Utah twelve years after his death.

JENSEN: What were your thoughts at the creation of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History and your leaving the archives?

JESSEE: Some time prior to the creation of the Smith Institute, Elder G. Homer Durham, the managing director of the Historical Department, had informed us that the writing of history would no longer be a function of the Historical Department. It was evidently felt that the kind of work we did under Leonard Arrington would fit better in an academic setting. At that time I was given the option of remaining in the Historical Department in another capacity or joining in the move south. I decided for the move. Under the conditions that existed I thought the move was well conceived. For me, the main disadvantages were the travel time to and from Provo, the inconvenience of access to sources, and the slowing of progress on the Joseph Smith project, but this ultimately proved to be a benefit the way things worked out, as I said earlier. At BYU, the Smith Institute was attached to the College of Family Home and Social Sciences and required some teaching. During my time there, in addition to work on the papers of Joseph Smith and other things, I taught classes on LDS Church history during the Joseph Smith era and on documents of early Mormon history, which I enjoyed very much.

JENSEN: What has driven you to stick with publishing Joseph Smith documents? How have you seen scholarship change because of your work?

JESSEE: My interest in Joseph Smith has been paramount because of the part he has played in the scheme of things. Since his life and the Church he founded have been the focus of so much misunderstanding and criticism over the years, I think it is essential to see him in total context of the records he produced. The more I have seen of this material, the more convinced I am of his veracity. With respect to your second question, I think our work on *The Joseph Smith Papers* has helped set a high standard for those engaged in documentary editing, and it has also helped strengthen confidence in the way the Church has handled its history.

JENSEN: After more than two decades, what are your thoughts about Mark Hofmann's influence upon the study of Mormon history?

JESSEE: For one thing, it has helped increase awareness of the possibility of forgery in the world of historical documents. Charles Hamilton, the New York autograph dealer and handwriting guru who regarded Hofmann as America's best-ever forger, was asked shortly after Hofmann was convicted if his known forgeries, which at that time numbered a hundred or so, were about the extent of his deceptive work. Hamilton's response was he thought the number could eventually run into the hundreds. So there are probably other forgeries still out there, and there are no doubt other individuals who have followed the same craft. One thing the Hofmann case has done for the historical editing community has been to emphasize the importance of checking the provenance of documents. As you know, the Joseph Smith Papers Project takes great care to do this. I learned this lesson the hard way after including six forgeries in the first edition of *Personal Writings*.

Another lesson the Hofmann case teaches is the fallacy of overreacting to new historical finds. When something comes along that seems to violate our worldview or shake the foundation of our faith, it is important to let the issue play out before drawing conclusions. In some instances it may take weeks, months, or even years. Patience is

especially important if the new find portends drastic consequences for a person's life and family.

JENSEN: As a Latter-day Saint, why is the study of history so important to you personally and to the collective body of Mormonism?

JESSEE: A *Church News* editorial many years ago asked the question, "Can we be converted to our Church if we don't know its history?" The same question could be asked about our nation or family. I think the study of history is important because our past is our memory; it is the motivating force of our lives. Whether or not we are interested in history as a subject in school, we nevertheless are motivated by the history we carry around in our heads, however accurate or distorted it might be. As I see it, our past, our story, is the source of our strength and direction in life. I agree with a statement by David McCullough that says something to the effect that if we don't know our history, we are bound to suffer the detrimental effects of amnesia. We won't know who we are or where we are going.

Another reason I think the study of history is important for us as Church members is that the foundation of the Church rests upon events we regard as both miraculous and historical—events that many in our scientific world see as ridiculous on historical grounds. Consequently, the historical sources dealing with these events, and with Joseph Smith himself, have been the focus of intense scrutiny and criticism. For that reason I think it is important to learn all we can about our history and the process by which the past is made known—its strengths, weaknesses, and reliability as a source of truth.