



Church members in countries such as Peru, Chile, Argentina, and others in South America are building a rich heritage of faith and devotion to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The preservation of their vibrant history is vital to understanding the Church as a whole. (Courtesy of Corbis.com.)

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DOCUMENTING THE HISTORY OF
THE CHURCH IN SOUTH AMERICA:
RECOVERING THE PAST

WHEN I was studying history in graduate school, my professors said I would likely spend most of my research time in archives looking at historic documents and reading dusty, antique books. After thirty years of working on the history of the church in South America, I have modified my graduate school expectations of the research process. Though I have passed many hours in archives, I have spent significantly more time traveling on buses from city to city, staying in two-star hotels, sitting at kitchen tables looking at photographs and documents, and occasionally shedding tears while listening to members' reminiscences about the early years of the church in South America. From cafe bars or park food carts, I have purchased many late-night meals—often

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Argentine empanadas or Brazilian pastéis, with soft drinks being Quatro Pomelo or Guaraná Antarctica.

My experience as a historian is less like the description of my college professors and closer to the adventures of early church historian Andrew Jenson, who spent considerable time in the field interviewing and collecting documents. I have no complaints about this difference and consider my work to be one of the great spiritual blessings of my life.

Researching the history of the twentieth-century global church is no easy task. Although the Church History Library in Salt Lake City continues to collect important administrative records and has an active oral history program, access to interviews and records may be restricted by time or by content.¹ A second challenge is that the church's impressive document-collecting program has only recently been extended significantly outside the United States.²

Consequently, while the Church History Library contains many personal records relating to nineteenth-century Mormonism, few comparable records are available for the twentieth-century global church. This is also due to the fact that international members are not migrating to the United States as they did in the past. Without local church archives to collect personal records, the documents often remain in local ward or stake clerks' offices or in the possession of members. In almost every place I visit, I hear stories of bishops and stake presidents running out of space or moving to a new building and therefore discarding historical documents. Luckily, some members have saved those records, often retrieving them from garbage cans and keeping them in their possession.

Most local leaders appreciate the story of the church in their areas, but often they do not know what documents to collect and preserve. They also may feel overburdened with administrative

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tasks and may believe they do not have time to focus on history. As a result, unofficial approaches to collecting and disseminating global church history have evolved.

Latin America provides an interesting case study. There the work of preserving history has been influenced by personalities, geographical considerations, mixed support from local church leaders, and different levels of training. Local, often amateur, historians have great passion for the story of the church in their countries and are providing valuable service.

This paper will review and evaluate three approaches to collecting Latter-day Saint historical documents in Latin America and will conclude with general observations on the challenges involved in preserving the global history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

SEMINARY AND INSTITUTE INSTRUCTORS

The Seminaries and Institutes of Religion program has played an important role in the development of local historical preservation programs. The curriculum of institutes worldwide includes a class on the history of the church; the approved manual for the class focuses on the church in the United States, with some information on global expansion. Teachers may also discuss local history in these classes. In most cases no published local history of the church in Latin America is available, so teachers often collect information and develop lessons on their own. These lessons may result in a printed document that is distributed to students and occasionally sold to members. Most of the initial volumes of church history for individual countries have come from this type of activity.³ These lessons have in some cases resulted in the creation of regional historical volumes.

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Néstor Curbelo is one of the most prominent examples of an individual involved in this type of history collecting and publication.⁴ Néstor was born in San José, Uruguay, and joined the church as a teenager. After serving in the Argentina North Mission and marrying Rosalina Goitiño Ramirez, he moved to Buenos Aires to work as a photographer and planned to study at a university. After his daughter was born, he had to work long hours and abandon his goal. Unable to support his family as a photographer, he was employed as a custodian at the Belgrano Institute building in Buenos Aires. He began teaching classes there, and his teaching abilities were soon recognized. He moved into a full-time position as a teacher and later became director of the institute in Buenos Aires.⁵

Because he needed information on the history of the church in Argentina for his institute classes, Néstor began interviewing early members. He developed a passion for the history of the church in South America. The South American South Area Presidency eventually called him as the area historian, gave him an office, and provided some funding to collect documents and do interviews.

Néstor also served for ten years as a stake president, after which he was called as director of public affairs for the South America South Area. He was able to combine his history interests with public affairs responsibilities, and he traveled and interviewed church members all over southern South America. Eventually he expanded his institute lessons into a book on the history of the church in Argentina; the book is for sale at cost in the Church Distribution Center in Buenos Aires. It was translated into English and published in the United States in 2009.⁶

Néstor's collection of documents is housed in the area office in Buenos Aires. He recorded his initial interviews with audiotape but soon moved to video recording. His interviews are the most

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important component of what he has done, and his collection includes more than two hundred videos of early members and significant events such as temple dedications. He regularly donates copies of his interviews to Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library and to the Church History Department in Salt Lake City.

Néstor has collected more than one hundred thousand pages of documents and several significant church artifacts, and he also has a valuable collection of more than one hundred thousand historical photographs. He has been careful to do everything under the direction of the area presidency and has cultivated positive relationships with each area president. Most of what he acquired is owned by the church.

After retiring from the Seminaries and Institutes in 2007, Néstor began work as a private historian and filmmaker. He received a grant from a private donor to write, in Spanish, a set of small one-volume histories of the church throughout Latin America. He is also producing documentaries on the church in Latin America for BYU Television International. He admits that he is not a professionally trained historian, and he does not try to write using the historical method. His books are not traditional histories but combine chronology, stories of local pioneers, and numerous photographs. They serve wonderfully for the members but lack the depth and analysis typical of rigorous academic works.

What Néstor has done for the church is remarkable. He is single-handedly responsible for the collection, preservation, and dissemination of much of what we know about the history of the church in Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. He has unselfishly made all of his work available to the Church History Library and BYU. With financial help from the BYU Religious Studies Center, BYU has digitized most of the documents he has collected, and they are available to researchers at the Harold B. Lee Library.

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PRIVATE HISTORIANS AND COLLECTORS

Private historians and collectors also contribute to the preservation of local church history. Fernando R. Gómez Páez from Mexico is one such example. Fernando was born in Monterrey, Mexico; his grandmother Genoveva González Gómez was baptized in Pachuca, Hidalgo, Mexico, in April 1925. After serving a mission in his home country and graduating from BYU in 1967, Fernando worked in Mexico but eventually moved to the Philippines, where he bought an electronic components assembly company. Seven years later he sold the company, returned to the Americas, and established residencies in both Mexico and the United States. He has served the church in a variety of capacities, including regional representative; mission president in Merida, Mexico; president of the Missionary Training Center in Santiago, Chile; and president of the Merida Mexico Temple.⁷

Fernando's interest in family history evolved into a hobby of collecting documents relating to the early church in Mexico. He has been aggressive in locating, copying, and collecting historical resources principally by visiting with early members throughout the country. Not only does he own unpublished documents and photographs, but he also has collected early church publications.

Because he lacked the space to adequately house what he owned, Fernando purchased a building across the street from the Mexico City temple and opened the Museo de Historia del Mormonismo en México (Museum of Mormon History in Mexico). He hired a codirector, Sergio Pagaza Castillo, who cares for the materials and conducts tours. The museum maintains a permanent display as well as rotating exhibits that focus on different aspects of the church in Mexico.

Fernando recently purchased an additional building in Provo, Utah, where he plans to create similar exhibits. He conducts

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historical conferences and develops portable displays directed to church members in Mexico and Hispanic members in the United States. He regularly presents at Mormon History Association meetings and has published four volumes, including an important book on the first Latter-day Saint in Mexico and a book that includes his analysis of the Third Convention movement in Mexico. In 2009 he examined contacts between the church and the Mexican government before the establishment of the missions in the late 1800s.⁸

Fernando has a passion for the history of the church in Mexico. He has spent time and capital to preserve and defend the church throughout the country. He has been cordial and open to students and professionals, and he has been particularly receptive to non-Mormon academics. Though not formally trained, he has learned the historian's trade. Fernando has provided an invaluable service to the church through his collection, preservation, and dissemination of church history to members and historians in Mexico and in the United States. Our knowledge of the early history of the church in Mexico is significantly enhanced by his activities.

MISSIONARY HISTORIANS

Brazil, like Mexico, is home to more than a million Latter-day Saints. Many years ago area authority seventies recognized the need to make a record of the church's history in the country. Their solution was to call local members as missionary historians. The missionaries had a variety of qualifications, though the most important requirements were a willingness to serve and an availability of time.

Flavia Erbolato, an early member from Campinas, was significant in the preservation of foundational records of the church in Brazil. Shortly after her marriage in the late 1940s, she went to

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BYU with her husband, Oscar, and then returned to Brazil. She worked several years as a translator and eventually became director of the Church Translation Department in São Paulo. When historical documents were scheduled to be discarded, she saved thousands of pages and kept them in the Translation Department's library. Under her careful supervision, researchers, including myself, were allowed to use the documents.

In 1987 Oscar Erbolato was called as the first history missionary in Brazil and began to organize available records. He was able to collect additional documents as well as conduct a few interviews with early members of the church. Since then, seven missionaries have worked in this position: Elder Paulo Machado, Elder and Sister Demetrio Teixeira Fel and Marilucy Borges, Elder and Sister Roberto and Lucia Viveiros, and presently Elder and Sister Norberto and Rosângela Lopes. Under the direction of these various area historians, calls went out to church members in Brazil and the United States for documents and stories.

Elder and Sister Borges provided a monumental service by collecting and organizing the records geographically. Elder Borges wrote a chronological history of the church based on records collected from the members; the history has not been made available to the public.

Michael Landon of the Church History Department and I spent several years collecting and digitizing church documents in Brazil. In 2004 we went to the states of Santa Catarina and Paraná with two BYU students, and in 2006 I went to the state of São Paulo with three students. We conducted a total of 198 interviews and digitized 32,603 pages. BYU gave us an additional grant in 2008 for a similar project in the state of Rio Grande do Sul and central Brazil, principally Rio de Janeiro. Copies of all the materials we collected and the interviews we conducted are

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deposited at BYU, the Church History Library, and the Brazil Area Office. A website at the Harold B. Lee Library was established where many of the documents are available online.

OBSERVATIONS

These three different examples are important indicators of the need for some type of systematic approach to collecting the history of the church worldwide. We owe a great debt to faithful members throughout the world who have recognized the importance of local history and have worked to preserve valuable records. The lack of assistance and control by professional archivists and historians has resulted in mistakes but not serious errors. My concern is for the areas that do not have a Néstor Curbelo or Fernando Gómez.

I offer the following observations concerning the collection of historical materials worldwide:

1. In the past, church members were encouraged to send historical materials to Salt Lake City for preservation. As a result, the materials were not accessible to most members and researchers. Today the Church History Department is making efforts to keep records in local areas—an important and needed development.
2. The ability to digitize enables historians to collect documents that would not be available otherwise. Most members are willing to allow their documents to be digitized but are not ready to give them to an archive. I have had numerous experiences in which I was allowed to digitize documents as long as they never left the owner's home. The issue of obtaining proper permission to use the information is important, and a release agreement has to be signed.

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3. Digitizing also allows for parts of documents to be copied that are important to the history of the church, when the rest of the document contains personal and private information that should not be released. This is particularly true with missionary diaries. Many former missionaries do not want their personal expressions of weakness or immaturity to be exposed, while sections that describe the opening of a city or a special baptism can be copied.
4. The changing nature of official record keeping in the church is affecting how we will research the story of the church worldwide. For a time, official historical records of branches, districts, wards, and stakes that often contained rich descriptions of events and people were replaced by brief, often lifeless chronological histories of limited value, or by no record at all. More recent records have begun to include better histories. The practice of publishing letters, descriptions, and reports about regions of the church in church magazines does not occur much anymore. Consequently, the primary sources for the history of these areas will have to come from oral histories and missionary diaries.
5. Members outside the United States do keep personal documents related to the church. Almost without exception, when I go into the home of an early member, he or she brings out a box with documents, written histories, diaries, letters, photographs, handouts, notes taken at important meetings, manuals, old scriptures, blessings, and so on. President Spencer W. Kimball's advice many years ago to keep a journal was heeded by many. These personal histories are often as much a history of the local church as they are the story of a family. Descriptions of

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spiritual experiences are prominent in members' writings. And native local missionaries keep diaries just as their American companions do.

6. Serious scholars of recent global church history do not have the option of doing all their research in an archive. Going into the field, finding the early members, and copying documents are integral elements of the life of the global church historian.
7. The value of oral histories of both missionaries and early members is significant. Interviewing leaders is not enough. Local members need to be recorded. Though many of these interviews provide limited data on specific events, they often include descriptive stories, particularly of spiritual events. These oral histories have secondary but important functions beyond that of recording historical information. Often older members and missionaries feel they have been forgotten or left behind. The act of recording their history can be a validating experience for them, highlighting the sacrifice and work involved in accepting the gospel in trying times. The interviews may be emotional for them as well as for the interviewer. If the interviewer follows up by sending a transcript to the person interviewed, that document may become a meaningful treasure for the member and his or her family.
8. Returned missionaries may have valuable historical records that need to be collected. Missionaries keep diaries, take photographs, and collect documents such as flyers, lessons, and histories. These documents are important to the local members because in some cases they are the only documentation that exists. Copies of these materials need to somehow get back to the areas for use by the local members.

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CONCLUSION

What I have described is probably not significantly different from what has historically occurred in the church, regardless of time or place. Private collectors, church administrators, and missionaries have always been involved in the development of church collections. I also understand that history may be a low priority on the list of church challenges, goals, and responsibilities. But as I have spent the past thirty years eating empanadas and drinking Guaraná, I have learned that members all over the world have great interest in the history of the church.

Most of us want our story to be remembered, particularly when it relates to such important events in our lives as accepting the gospel. The stories of modern pioneers in Mexico, Brazil, or Croatia are as important to the church as the stories of nineteenth-century pioneers in Utah. As a historian, I am eternally grateful for Latter-day Saints such as Néstor Curbelo, Fernando R. Gómez Páez, and Flavia Erbolato who have a passion for local history and who understand the value of a written story, letter, or interview.

NOTES

1. Due to privacy issues, oral history interviews may be accessed a minimum of ten years after the date of the original interview. Access to some interviews and records may also be restricted due to sacred or otherwise confidential content.
2. The Church History Department has collected internationally for many years. However, recently it began decentralizing its operations and is now training local people to identify and collect important records.
3. The following are examples of these publications: Carlos Pedraja, *Historia de la Iglesia en Bolivia* (Cochabamba, Bolivia: Sistema Educativo de la Iglesia, 2001); *Historia de la Iglesia en Colombia: Suplemento para el Curso de Historia de la Iglesia* (Bogotá: Sistema Educativo de la Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Últimos Días, 1986); *Un Bosquejo de la Historia de la Iglesia en Venezuela, 1966 a 1986* (Caracas: Sistema Educativo de la Iglesia, La Iglesia

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- de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Días, 1986); Néstor Curbelo, *50 Años de la Iglesia en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Sistema Educativo de la Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Días, 1986); Néstor Curbelo, *50 Años de la Iglesia en Argentina: Cronología para el Estudiante de Seminario* (Buenos Aires: Sistema Educativo de la Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Días, 1986).
4. Though I will not focus on Chile, an important though somewhat different model occurred in Chile under the direction of Rodolfo Antonio Acevedo. His thesis at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile was published as *Los Mormones en Chile* (Santiago: Impresos y Publicaciones Cumora, 1990). He has finished two other unpublished histories on the Santiago Chile Temple and the Missionary Training Center in Chile.
 5. Biographical information comes from an interview with Néstor Curbelo by Mark L. Grover, July 2001, Montevideo, Uruguay.
 6. Néstor Curbelo, *Historia de los Mormones en Argentina: Relatos de Pioneros* (Buenos Aires: Néstor Curbelo, 2000); *The History of the Mormons in Argentina* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2009).
 7. Biographical information on Fernando R. Gómez Páez can be found in Brittany Karford Rogers, "A Historic Collection," *BYU Magazine*, Fall 2007, 62.
 8. Raymundo Gómez González and Sergio Pagaza Castillo, "*El Aguila Mormón o el Anarquista Cristiano*": Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty, *el Primer Mormón en México* (Mexico City: Museo de Historia del Mormonismo en México, 1997); Fernando Rogelio Gómez Páez, *Sixta Martínez: A Living Testimony* (Mexico City: Museo de Historia del Mormonismo en México, 2002); Fernando Rogelio Gómez Páez, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Lamanite Conventions: From Darkness to Light* (Mexico City: Museo de Historia del Mormonismo en México, 2004); Fernando Rogelio Gómez Páez and Sergio Pagaza Castillo, *Benito Juarez and the Mormon Connection of the 19th Century* (Mexico City: Museo de Historia del Mormonismo en México, 2007). The Third Convention was a group that broke away from the church in 1937 over issues of leadership. The group included about a third of the membership in Mexico. They functioned outside the church until 1946, when most returned.