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INTERVIEW BY KYLE R. WALKER



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therapy from Brigham Young University. His doctoral dissertation focuses on the family dynamics of the Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith family. He also is the editor of *United by Faith: The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family*.

THE INTERVIEW

**WALKER:** Maybe we ought to start at the beginning by having you tell us about your childhood—where you grew up and a little about your upbringing.

**PORTER:** I am the son of Wilford Dowdle Porter and Thomasa (Tess) Blondel Cardon Porter, born at Logan, Utah, January 7, 1933, in the Cache Valley Hospital. I arrived at the height of the Great Depression, and my mother always told me that I brought on that depression. Two siblings in the family preceded me—my sister Genevieve and my brother Bill—plus a cat named Fenwog and a dog named Heimer. Father and mother were both graduates of Brigham Young College (BYC), a Church-owned high school in Logan. Father graduated from Utah State Agricultural College (USAC) and then went on to get a master of science degree in journalism from the University of Wisconsin at Madison (1935). My father became a professor of journalism at USAC. Father and mother enjoyed reading poetry and loved to compose their own. They took a seminar together from the poet Robert Frost one summer at the AC. I remember them reciting verse to us as children, and some of my father's poems were printed in *Utah Sings*, the *Improvement Era*, and in professional publications of the day. He was an editor of *Student Life* at Utah State and wrote numerous articles on agriculture in the *Deseret News*, the *Salt Lake Tribune*, and the *Herald Journal* published in Logan. He was also a regular participant in presenting 4-H and other agricultural programs originating from KSL Radio. My father died too early—in 1944, at age forty-four. Mother continued to recite poetry to me and to read good books with me. She was a member of the Book of the Month

Club, and we read each volume together. Those moments are among my most pleasant memories. She went to Denver and was trained as a librarian. Joining the staff at Utah State, she was appointed librarian at the School of Forestry. I spent many profitable hours back in the stacks reading *Wild Animals I Have Known* and *Morning Flight*.

My sister Gen was an exceptional pianist and organist, taking lessons early and making music a life pursuit. She was also a graduate of Utah State in music. Gen took me by the hand when I was young and saw to it that I was in the congregation at the old Logan Fifth Ward Sunday School every Sabbath morning. My brother Bill played football at Logan High, and he was an excellent skier. He taught me to ski and bought me my first boards and poles. Bill packed me in the rumble seat of “Shasta,” his Model-A Ford, for the ride to the slopes to ski at the “Sinks” up Logan Canyon before Beaver Mountain days. He was killed in an auto accident in Logan Canyon in 1941, at the age of eighteen. Bill was my best friend.

Gen married the ROTC cadet colonel at Utah State in 1940. Upon graduation they went to her husband Ralph’s first duty assignment in the Army Air Corps at Geiger Field near Spokane, Washington. The next year on Sunday, December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. The family drove the old Studebaker up to Spokane to spend that Christmas with them. I remember the barbed wire that was stretched everywhere around Geiger Field. There were many anti-aircraft gun emplacements and sandbagged machine gun nests surrounding the base as a precaution. It was an interesting time since no one knew what was going to happen. There were even rumors of an enemy invasion of the West Coast, an immediate concern. Many vessels in the Pacific Fleet had either been destroyed or badly damaged at Pearl Harbor. Our armed forces were on strategic alert to defend the homeland.

**WALKER:** It sounds as if your mother must have had a great influence on you.

**P O R T E R :** Mother most certainly had a tremendous influence on me and is well remembered as a loving and caring parent. As I said, we were left without a husband and father in 1944, and we didn't have a lot of substance in the years following the Depression. Mother was hired on the library staff at Utah State and sent to Denver, Colorado, for training as a librarian. When she returned, she was the librarian for the School of Forestry, where she worked under Dean Lewis M. Turner. The forestry faculty were a wonderful and generous set of men who helped Mother raise her boy. Dr. George H. Kelker would take me on the winter woodcraft camps right along with the forestry students. I learned to construct a pine bough lean-to, where I could be comfortable on a cold winter's night in my arctic mummy bag. I also worked for a summer at the forestry school's Tony Grove Training Camp under the direction of two master's candidates who were measuring the effect of "competition between deer and sheep on the range." It was a great educational experience. I learned the names of a goodly number of plants, shrubs, and trees growing in the Cache National Forest as we sampled the plots and bagged the evidence. Through the years, Mother was always solicitous of my welfare and saw to it that I was happy, well fed, clothed, and educated.

**W A L K E R :** Will you share with us a little about your service as a missionary?

**P O R T E R :** The young men my age in the Logan Fifth Ward wanted to go into the mission field, but the Korean and post-Korean War periods left a very active draft board with quotas to fill. As I reached my junior year at Utah State, it appeared that there would be no chance of serving a mission at that time. However, a sudden change of policy in the conscription laws allowed one A-1 person to go from each LDS ward every six months. Though my bishop, William E. Mortimer, had two sons who could have preceded me, he perceived my need and extended the call. I was thrilled with the unexpected prospect. Elder Marion G. Romney of the Quorum of the

Twelve conducted the interview, and Elder LeGrand Richards set me apart. Mother, with the help of my stepfather, Albert E. Smith, supplied the necessary funds. The call was issued to the Northern States Mission (1953–55), which included all of Wisconsin, all of Illinois, all of Iowa, and part of Nebraska from Omaha to a point forty miles west of Lincoln. It was one of the large missions of that day. The mission president was Isaac A. Smoot, and the mission mother was Nettie Parkinson Smoot. President Smoot had been the postmaster of Salt Lake City and past president of the Postmasters Association of America. How I loved that grand couple. Many missionaries with whom I worked were former marines, infantrymen, sailors, and airmen from the Korean conflict. I served in Manitowoc and Sheboygan in Wisconsin and Peoria, Champaign-Urbana, and Joliet in Illinois. President Smoot called me into the Chicago office as the mission secretary and shortly thereafter set me apart as second counselor in the mission presidency. The first counselor was always a local man, Lyle Cahoon, manager of Sears and Roebuck in Des Moines, Iowa. We had a marvelous working relationship.

Before coming out to Chicago, President Smoot had been approached by his friend Elder LeGrand Richards to take with him manuscript copies of his forthcoming book, *Israel! Do You Know?* Elder Richards was very interested in proselytizing among the Jewish community. He invited President Smoot to go to the principal synagogues in the Chicago area and visit with the rabbis. He was to leave a copy of his manuscript with them and then return at an appropriate time and discuss it with them. President Smoot invited me to go along with him on these visits. I had a unique missionary experience among certain of the rabbis in Chicago. On Friday evenings we would often walk down to the nearby synagogue on Sheridan Road and attend the services. President Smoot was well acquainted with the rabbis there.

As a sidebar to this missionary effort among the greater Jewish community, Rose Marie Reid, of swimsuit-manufacturing fame, was also very interested in an extension of missionary work with the Jewish

populace. With Elder LeGrand Richards, she was among those who were most actively trying to find ways to approach them. Because of that, President Smoot invited her to come out and address an all-mission conference held at Nauvoo. She flew into St. Louis and drove up to Nauvoo, where she spoke to the missionaries on the subject. She was inspiring, and we were greatly moved by her experiences. However, that whole program of actively working among the Jews was discontinued, or appreciably modified, by the Brethren not long after that. We did register one note of success during the endeavor. A Jewish businessman in Chicago came to the mission home and asked that we teach him. He would come over to the home, and the elders on the mission staff would teach him the gospel from the Aston plan. This astute brother willingly accepted our lessons and was baptized in Lake Michigan, right behind the mission home.

As a counselor in the presidency I was directed to tour the entire mission once a month in my 1950 Ford. I was to meet with the presiding elders and missionaries in each of the communities and report their progress to the president. President Smoot often congregated large numbers of missionaries in key cities. For instance, in Des Moines, Iowa, we had twenty missionaries serving at one time. They would systematically tract the entire community. When it looked like the street map was nearing completion, most of the elders and sisters would be transferred to a new location, while a core crew remained to follow up on contacts and finish knocking on doors. My assignment required that I go through the respective states and determine the status of each group of missionaries. I kept my little portable typewriter busy and would mail a continual series of reports to President Smoot. Then he and I would get together and talk about our joint awareness of the transfers and things that needed attention. The president would make decisions on the transfers and new communities that needed to be opened. He was an exceptional organizer. I'm forever indebted for his instruction and personal caring for each missionary. President Smoot, one of the older mission presidents serving

the Church, died in office at the age of seventy-five, shortly after I left the field. I had the privilege of attending his funeral in the Assembly Hall on Temple Square.

**WALKER:** Did your interest in Mormonism's many historic sites within those states begin when you were a missionary?

**PORTER:** Yes, I was in just the right place to receive a mind-bending dose of historic Mormonism. The mission embraced a wide array of sites associated with the early Mormon experience, and every state was loaded with such locations. My appreciation for those places was greatly enhanced as I traveled through that region and worked in some of the communities involved. I might briefly share one very special experience. President Smoot asked me to take some elders and tract Nauvoo and Carthage in preparation for an all-mission conference in the City of Joseph. I stayed in the John Taylor home. Dr. J. LeRoy Kimball was busy in Nauvoo at that very moment; he had recently (in 1954) purchased the ancestral home of the Heber C. Kimball family and was overseeing its restoration. Dr. Kimball was just at the outset of a pioneering era from which would emerge the entity known as Nauvoo Restoration Inc., later organized under the auspices of the Church in 1962. Wilford C. Wood was also in town, working on his acquisition of the *Times and Seasons* building. He had a beautiful replica of the Nauvoo Temple built and a white casting made of the temple baptismal font, which he placed on display in that building. Visitors were attracted to the site with regularity. While tracting in Nauvoo, I had the pleasant experience of being interviewed by Ida K. Blum, Nauvoo historian and a writer for the local newspaper, who wrote a very favorable article with pictures of the missionaries who were there. I remember her stating, "These young men don't mind being called Mormons any more than Christians mind being called Christians." A little bit of irony there, but we had a delightful exchange and enjoyed her friendship.



**WALKER:** How did you get involved with the Church Educational System?

**PORTER:** While completing the bachelor of science degree in history at Utah State, I picked up a secondary teaching certificate and did my student teaching at Logan High School. While I was there, one of the instructors at the LDS seminary adjacent to the high school became ill and was out for a couple of months. The seminary principal, Harold Nelson, asked me to teach in his place. Ernest Eberhard Jr., the district coordinator, came on a visit and sat in on my class. Apparently liking what I was doing, he told me, “When you get out of the military, keep in touch with us. We would like to talk with you.” When the clock ran down on my two-year active duty commitment, I was on temporary duty and serving as “an atomic flash warning systems evaluator” on the staff of Colonel J. A. Cook from Fort Ord, California, at “Exercise Dry Hills,” Yakima Firing Center in the state of Washington. I notified Brother Eberhard that my time was nearly ended, and he put me in touch with Boyd K. Packer, then an assistant administrator of Seminaries and Institutes under vice president William E. Berrett at Brigham Young University. Brother Packer arranged for me to have an interview with Elder Mark E. Petersen of the Twelve. I drove over to Moses Lake, Washington, where Elder Petersen was meeting with a stake presidency prior to their conference. When I arrived, he dropped everything and spent an intense session interviewing me. He asked if the Flood was universal, and I said, “Yes.” He said, “That’s right. It wasn’t just a local deluge between two rivers—the Tigris and Euphrates.” He then asked me if Jonah was swallowed by a whale, and I said, “Yes.” His comment was interesting. He said, “Jonah had an experience with a fish, and we don’t know exactly what the nature of that experience was.” So the interview went, lasting a whole hour. My responses were apparently acceptable, and in August 1959 I was assigned to the Weber District, under Kenneth H. Sheffield, as an instructor in the Kaysville Seminary, adjacent to the Davis Senior High School.

The next three years I served as principal of Ben Lomond Seminary in Ogden, Utah. Then Dale T. Tingey, an assistant administrator, directed me to Northridge, California, where I acted as coordinator of seminaries for the San Fernando District. In that day CES had a sabbatical leave program, and I was eligible for it. I came to BYU for my sabbatical, having just finished a master's degree in 1966. Fortunately the university was then instituting a brand new PhD program centered in the history of religion with an emphasis on LDS Church history. Some fifteen of us, seeing the value of such a curriculum, enrolled. It was a great learning experience with fellow students such as Max H Parkin, Leland H. Gentry, Kenneth W. Godfrey, and others who were dedicated to searching the reaches of ancient and modern religious history. We collectively thought we could not have had a more balanced classroom exposure than that experienced at the hands of professors Sidney B. Sperry, Hugh W. Nibley, Daniel H. Ludlow, Roy W. Doxey, Richard L. Anderson, A. Burt Horsley, Hyrum L. Andrus, Milton V. Backman Jr., LaMar C. Berrett, Richard O. Cowan, and Gustive O. Larson. The degree has proved invaluable to us in the Church Education System.

**WALKER:** As part of your doctoral program, I understand that you went out to New York and Pennsylvania to do on-site research. Is that right?

**PORTER:** At that time Truman G. Madsen occupied the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding and was also director of the Institute of Mormon Studies at BYU. He had a particular project that he was anxious to pursue involving the life of the Joseph Smith during the Restoration period. Truman knew of my interests in sounding the origins of Mormonism and the Prophet's experience in New York and Pennsylvania as a dissertation topic. In 1968 he invited a number of individuals with like interests to go to the East and search out the documents and sources to be found in the various repositories. Dr. Milton V. Backman Jr. directed his particular

attention to the counties of Monroe, Wayne, Ontario, and Seneca in New York. Dr. Marvin S. Hill visited the New York state archives at Albany. I was instructed to go into northeastern Pennsylvania and the southern tier of New York and gather any items, pro or con, on the life of Joseph Smith and the rise of Mormonism. En route to the East, Paul C. Richards, who was working on the Mormon redress petitions from the Missouri persecutions, and I drove out to Washington, DC, together. After a preliminary search of some specific items in the National Archives and Library of Congress, I drove north to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and worked with materials in the Pennsylvania State Archives.

At Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, I spent some time in the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society with the director, Ralph Hazeltine. While there I had an opportunity to follow up on an investigation of Reverend George Lane, whose activities relative to the 1820 revivals involving Joseph Smith had become the focus of some recent anti-Mormon publications. I was directed to the Wyoming Seminary across the Susquehanna River at Kingston, Pennsylvania, which seminary had been the training ground for many Methodist Episcopal preachers in the Genesee Conference. I talked to the librarian and asked to see the Genesee Conference Minute Book and documents related to the old seminary and its past. He said, "You need to go over to the cafeteria and see the food services administrator." Thinking he must have misunderstood me, I explained again. He said, "Go to the cafeteria." There I talked to the administrator, Miss Marion Disque. She took me down a dark hallway, got out her ring of keys, and opened a door. As I stepped into the room it was as though I had experienced a time warp. It was a museum for the Methodist Episcopal ministers of the nineteenth-century Genesee Conference. There were the hats and coats of the old circuit riders, their saddles, and saddlebags. A handwritten copy of the Genesee Conference Minute Book was there, along with other manuscripts, writings, and published records. I couldn't believe my eyes. I stayed there all day

without looking up. At the end of the day the food services administrator came by and said, "Have you found something of interest?" Sensing how excited I was about the find, she said, "If there are any items that you wish to examine further, you are welcome to take them to your hotel room and bring them back tomorrow." Then she added, "If there is anything there you want to copy, the Osterhout Free Library in Wilkes-Barre has an excellent Xerox machine." So I busted the machine at the library that evening.

I must make the observation that in those days people trusted people. I have marveled at the implicit trust of curators, librarians, and private collectors in allowing me unlimited access to priceless documents of interest. I also learned a grand lesson concerning Reverend George Lane. He and other ministers of like disposition were devoted followers of Jesus Christ. They ate, slept, and drank in the saddle, riding their circuits at great personal sacrifice to bring religion and morality to the frontier. As a circuit rider in the Holland Purchase Mission, he was often compelled to ride thirty to forty miles in a day without seeing a house and frequently suffered from cold and hunger. The circuit riders were great men in their own right. I can't express how much I enjoyed that moment at the Wyoming Seminary, enveloped in the aura of a nineteenth-century ministry. During the extensive flooding of the Susquehanna in 1972 that basement repository was one of the places severely damaged when the river overflowed its banks.

**WALKER:** So your timing in finding these records was providential.

**PORTER:** The timing was providential relative to certain key items that I was able to extract—but much was nevertheless lost. I next went to Scranton, Pennsylvania, and then on to Montrose, the county seat of Susquehanna County. There I found the courthouse loaded with all kinds of period records pertaining to the Isaac Hale family, the Joseph Smith Jr. family, and their neighbors. Today the

staff have made a herculean effort to carefully catalog many of their historical documents, which are supervised by a courthouse librarian who knows what she has under her wing. At the nearby Susquehanna County Historical Society and Free Library Association, I found a marvelous collection of Mormon materials supervised by the very capable Mrs. Mabel Lyons. She and her staff were well versed and extremely helpful, going out of their way to assist the researcher. I visited other places and institutions in the county and also conducted numerous interviews, which have been extremely helpful. At Binghamton, New York, the county seat of Broome County, I found a wealth of material in both the courthouse proper and the Broome County historian's office. The Broome County Historical Society, housed in the Roberson Center, also had invaluable collections of period materials. A very knowledgeable town historian from Windsor, New York, Mrs. Marjory B. Hinman, was quick to point out the Mormon sources applicable to her area.

I likewise worked the various village libraries of Broome and Chenango counties, no matter how small. I recall going into a library with very limited facilities and asking, "Do you have any documents or items relating to Mormonism?" The librarian said, "Oh, yes, we have a Book of Mormon." I remember thinking, "Yes, a missionary has left a fifty-cent or dollar copy of the Book of Mormon with them." I guess I managed to look excited as I went over to the shelf with her. But there it was, an 1830 edition still circulating! Inside the front cover was an inscription signed by Joseph Smith to a friend with whom he had gone to school. I explained to the librarian how valuable it was and that it really should be put in a locked case and not placed out for the general use of the public unless the librarians knew where it was going. I noticed that she took it behind the curtain when I left. I encountered no librarians who were not extremely helpful and attentive to my inquiries. Private citizens who knew local history were also very helpful in supplying information through personal interviews.

New York has an interesting system of historical preservation that includes county, village, and town historians. These are paid positions—not paid a great deal—but they are paid. When you get someone who may have been in office for a long time and takes his or her charge seriously, you discover an individual who has gone out of the way to find the facets of history and has built files of incalculable worth. These individuals are very knowledgeable about local history and have become indispensable contacts for the investigator. I have found them to be very interested in the historical aspects of Mormonism as it has affected them locally. For instance, in Colesville Township, Broome County, there has been a good deal of folklore, fact and fiction, generated about Joseph Smith and his tenure there. I have been taken to sites where Joseph has been reported to have dug for buried treasure, or where Smith unearthed a salt mine, or where he is said to have walked on water. The early arrests and trials of the Prophet in 1826 and 1830 are known events. There is also a local awareness of the departure of some sixty-eight Mormons from various families who left Broome and Chenango Counties in covered wagons and rendezvoused at Ithaca, New York. There they commenced a series of water passages, beginning with Cayuga Lake, bound for Kirtland, Ohio. A lot of factual history, as well as the accompanying rudiments of mythology, are there for the historians to sift and sort through.

**WALKER:** I know that the research conducted in the East under the auspices of the Institute of Mormon Studies created a lot of interest in getting something in print on Joseph Smith and the New York period. What was the result?

**PORTER:** In September 1968, Truman G. Madsen was asked by *BYU Studies* to be guest editor on a volume featuring recent studies being carried out on the history of the Church in New York. He sent out a memorandum to those who had participated in the eastern research and others with the same interests. His memo said, “In preparation for

the issue of *BYU Studies*, brethren, we need to get together to pool the basic findings of our summer's efforts and discuss the rough outlines of the proposed *BYU Studies* issue which we are to take over this winter." As field representatives in New York, we had been on the watch for resource materials that could be shared with others. Each of us seemed to have garnered something during the course of the summer. Preparations were made for a publication that winter, but the actual volume did not issue from the press until spring 1969. The contributors were Truman G. Madsen (guest editor and prologue), James B. Allen, Leonard J. Arrington, Dean C. Jessee, Milton V. Backman Jr., T. Edgar Lyon, Marvin S. Hill, Richard L. Anderson, and me. Each submitted articles for the publication. A companion volume centered in New York followed in the spring of 1970. I felt then, and have realized since, that it was a good thing to have been a part of that landmark study.

**WALKER:** Your contribution to that particular journal was on Reverend George Lane, was it not?

**PORTER:** My article was titled "Reverend George Lane—Good 'Gifts,' Much 'Grace,' and Marked 'Usefulness.'" I became thoroughly acquainted with Reverend Lane at the outset of my eastern research, visiting his gravesite in the Hollenback Cemetery at Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, and following his footsteps from the Susquehanna District of the Methodist Episcopal Church to his discourses in the Palmyra revivals by which "our brother's [Joseph Smith's] mind became awakened." I had the opportunity of dining with Harrison Harvey Smith, editor of the *Wilkes-Barre Record*, a descendant of the family of Lane's first wife, Sarah Harvey. I have been imbued with the life of Rev. Lane, a grand Christian gentleman, ever since. Someday we'll find his personal journals, which we know were still in the Lane family in 1860.

**WALKER:** I'm informed that Richard L. Anderson and Elder Marion D. Hanks played a significant role in the continuation of your New York research experience in 1969–70.

PORTER: My doctoral committee had approved my dissertation prospectus, “A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania, 1816–1831,” and I was preparing to continue my original research on the subject in the East. At that time, Elder Marion D. Hanks of the Seventy was very interested in identifying certain sites in New York that could be documented, especially the precise location of the Peter Whitmer Sr. log home at Fayette, where the Church was organized on April 6, 1830. He was looking down the line very early at the future development of that visitors’ center. Elder Hanks had contacted Richard L. Anderson and had commissioned him to do a historical background check on the site in an effort to find the exact spot—not just the near proximity. Dr. Anderson mentioned to Elder Hanks that I was going out to New York and requested that I be included in the survey team to work with him both at BYU and then on the ground in New York. Elder Hanks readily agreed, and I became part of that project. Richard was the Religious Education representative for the Daniel C. Jackling Endowment Fund at the Harold B. Lee Library and arranged through A. Dean Larsen to underwrite my stay for a year in New York. Arrangements were also made for me to be trained in microfilming at the Granite Mountain Vault in Little Cottonwood Canyon so that I had the capability of filming selected books, newspapers, court records, and documents for the Harold B. Lee Library. The Church Historical Department and the Genealogical Society were also to be recipients. The films would be processed and distributed by the Granite Mountain facility and copies also sent to the eastern donors as backups for their collections. Elder Hanks likewise made it possible for me and my family to be housed at the Martin Harris Farm in Palmyra. We were to live in the existing two-story cobblestone house on the farm. The cobblestone was a replacement for the two-and-one-half-story white frame house that Martin Harris had built. Just as William Chapman and his wife, Christina Graves Grainger, were about to move into the old Harris



home, it burned down in 1849. They lived in a corn crib while their new house was constructed. It was a privilege to live on the Martin Harris Farm. I felt very close to Martin, Lucy, and the children and developed a special affinity for that family. An interest was also kindled in the extended Harris family that had lived in that vicinity.

Before heading for New York, Richard involved me in the continued research he had already begun on the Whitmers and their farm. In conducting the background search we found a number of excellent items pertaining to the probable location of the log home. Richard also enlisted my assistance in helping him conduct live interviews with any persons who had lived at the Whitmer farm as tenant farmers, missionaries, visitors, or neighbors who possessed valuable insights. We were able to contact and talk to a surprising number in Utah before my departure. I then drove to the town of Palmyra and set up my end of the operation at the Martin Harris Farm.

**WALKER:** Exactly what role did those interviews play in identifying the actual site of the Whitmer log home?

**PORTER:** Richard Anderson had traced a brother by the name of William Lee Powell of Layton, Utah, who had been the tenant farmer at the Whitmers' from May 1, 1946, to November 1, 1952. He had indispensable information to share, and arrangements were made to fly him out to New York. Dale L. Berge of the BYU Anthropology Department and I met with Brother Powell at the farm on September 2, 1969. He described to us a most interesting sequence. He said that during the haying season he and his family would use bull rakes to push the hay from the north field down the lane on the west side of the large barn and through the double doors for storage in the barn. The heavy loads moved the loose dirt directly out from the doors, and they began to uncover an old laid-rock foundation. By the end of the next haying season they had uncovered the entire foundation of the Whitmer log home. He excitedly tried to convey news of his discovery to Church officials in Salt Lake but got no satisfactory response.

However, he did have the presence of mind to take his tape measure and obtain a precise reading of the foundation's location, which he recorded. After experiencing a continued lack of interest from Utah Church officials, he decided to gather up the visible stones and pile them to one side so that the greater area could be farmed.

When Dale Berge and I stood on the site with William, that stone pile had been scattered and plowed under by subsequent farming. Although the barn had been torn down in the interim, the foundation of the old silo was still intact on the north end of where the barn had been. So William got out his tape measure, and from the silo he was able to ascertain the location of the barn doors. From that point he then measured out thirty-two feet into the west field, where he had originally uncovered the foundation. Dale, having brought his archaeological crew, John Call and Bill Johnson, with him from a dig at Nauvoo, Illinois, immediately set his base point, laid out his grid, and systematically dug the plots he had staked out at the site. The excavation uncovered numerous foundation stones, the outline of the twenty-by-thirty-foot foundation, and accompanying artifacts. An adjacent root cellar and outbuilding were also found. When Dale concluded his work, the site was filled in. Not wanting the location to disappear again, we took steps to mark it. A Church construction foreman named Clyde Larson was then on the farm working on the installation of an east wing to the old John Deshler Greek-revival home in which to place a diorama of the organization of the Church. We invited Clyde to mark the site. He dug four holes, filled them with cement, and sank into the mix four two-and-one-half-inch metal pipes five feet in length. The pipes were then painted red.

Another important interview, conducted at the farm the following year (1970), confirmed the site identified by William Lee Powell as the precise location of the Whitmer log house. It was unique in that it demonstrated how a succession of oral history interviews can be strung together and literally span decades to establish the exact position of a particular physical feature. In his quest for individuals

who knew something of the farm, Richard Anderson made contact with a man named Samuel J. Ferguson of Shiprock, New Mexico. Brother Ferguson, past president of the Palmyra New York Branch, possessed important information on the whereabouts of the Whitmer log home. I requested that he come to New York to meet me at the Whitmer farm, which he did on April 20, 1970. We drove out to the farm from Palmyra, and he pointed out to me the precise site of the log home. He then explained that on February 12, 1928, he and Andrew Jenson had gone to the farm together with Willard W. Bean. There Jenson had walked out with them and designated the exact spot where the log home had stood. On that occasion Jenson explained to them that in 1888 he had met a man, Chester Reed, at the Whitmer farm who had shown him the same site and told him that the few log remnants still visible were all that remained of the home where the Mormon Church was organized. So, on February 12, 1928, Andrew Jenson had met with Samuel Ferguson on the same site and had told him that this is where the home was situated. Now on April 20, 1970, Samuel Ferguson stood on the spot with me and said, "This is the right location." The place was the very same as that identified by William Lee Powell and the archaeological excavation of Dale Berge. In 1979–80, a decade later, the Church built a reconstruction of the Peter Whitmer Sr. log home on that exact site in anticipation of celebrating the sesquicentennial anniversary of the organization of the Church, April 6, 1830–April 6, 1980.

**WALKER:** You must have had some special feelings when President Spencer W. Kimball opened the 150th Annual General Conference of the Church via satellite from the Peter Whitmer home on April 6, 1980.

**PORTER:** I watched the telecast very closely as President Kimball met in the log home to open the conference. Descendants of the Joseph Smith Sr. family were there in honor of the grand occasion—Lorena Horner Normandeau, a great-granddaughter of Joseph

Smith Jr.; Eldred Gee Smith, patriarch emeritus to the Church and a second great-grandson of Hyrum Smith; and Melvin Thomas Smith, a great-grandson of Samuel Harrison Smith. Had you looked closely at the pulpit on the table in the log home you would have recognized that it was the box belonging to Hyrum Smith (originally “Alvin’s Box”). It had been carried on the plane out to New York by Patriarch Eldred G. Smith. Following remarks in the log home, President Kimball moved the company to the adjoining chapel and visitors’ center, where he dedicated the respective buildings on the farm. I couldn’t have been more pleased with the proceedings of the day.

**WALKER:** I understand that while in New York you were also involved in identifying the site of the Joseph Smith Sr. log home in Palmyra Township?

**PORTER:** Before Dale Berge left, following the excavation of the Whitmer site, I took him over to what I supposed to be the site of the Joseph Smith Sr. log home in Palmyra Township. The Smiths had lived on Stafford Road, and their log home was situated just inside Palmyra Township. The exact location was not known at the time, and its placement was important to solidifying a number of key historical events. I indicated to Dale that I had been reading in the Palmyra Town Record Book of two highway commissioners, armed with the “Old Town Compass,” coming down from main street Palmyra to the south township line on the Stafford Street Road (Township 12) while laying out a highway on June 13, 1820. After setting a marker in the middle of the road on the township line, the commissioners determined that point to be “three rods fourteen links southeast of Joseph Smith’s dwelling house.” I then mentioned to Dale that a reverse reading from southeast to northwest could conceivably place one in the near proximity of the site of the old Smith log home. We walked out on the site and looked for any surface material. Finding a few telltale signs of habitation, we became very interested in the future prospects of an archaeological dig.

In 1982, LaMar C. Berrett, director of the Church history area of the BYU Religious Studies Center, was made aware of the situation and got the necessary funds to underwrite an excavation. Dale Berge went out with his crew and dug the site. They uncovered the foundation and related artifacts right where they were supposed to be. LaMar and I had the opportunity to assist with the dig only briefly, but it was a satisfying moment nonetheless. Years later, between August 8 and 23, 1997, T. Michael Smith, assisted by Donald L. Enders of the Church Historical Department (both of whom were on the original dig in 1982 with Dale), conducted a follow-up excavation of the Smith log home site and were among those most instrumental in the subsequent erection of a reconstructed log home at that location. When President Gordon B. Hinckley went to Palmyra on March 26, 1998, to dedicate the Egbert B. Grandin Bookstore and Printing Office on the occasion of the 168th anniversary of the release of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, I was privileged to be in the Palmyra Ward chapel for the dedicatory ceremony that evening. The next morning, March 27, President Hinckley dedicated the Joseph Smith Sr. log home in services right at that site. The known location of “Joseph Smith’s dwelling house” had gone full round, thanks to two early highway commissioners and “the old town compass.” I would be remiss if I did not mention one other structure which is now associated with the Joseph Smith Sr. family in the Palmyra-Manchester area. It is the Palmyra Temple located on East Hill, part of the Smiths’ one-hundred-acre farm. What a thrill to see that magnificent house of the Lord at the central point of the Restoration dedicated by President Gordon B. Hinckley on April 6, 2000. At the instigation of President Hinckley, a clear glass window in the temple looks out on the Sacred Grove to the west.

**WALKER:** You had been trained to microfilm selected materials as opportunity presented itself. Can you tell me something of that operation?

PORTER: I obtained a portable microfilm machine from the Genealogical Society. Perhaps I could give you a sampling of people, places and types of materials filmed, or arrangements made for filming by others. John S. Genung, board member of the Waterloo Library and Historical Society, arranged for me to microfilm selected years from their excellent collection of Seneca County newspapers; I also did the Reverend Diedrich Willers papers and notebooks of Waterloo's "walking postman," Stanley Reynolds. John also introduced me to Mr. Madsen, county clerk of Seneca County at Waterloo. When I explained to him that the incorporation record of the organization of the Mormon Church had not yet been found, he voluntarily asked if I would like to inventory the contents of the county vault in my search. Nothing was found, but I did make photocopies of his shelf volume of "Incorporation of Religious Societies, Book B," containing the incorporation records of the various religious societies of that period. Because Seneca County is a two-shire entity, Mr. Madsen then contacted Gerald Brewer, the undersheriff at Ovid, who in turn gave me permission to survey what records were in his care—but again nothing on our incorporation. Mrs. Shirley Patterson at the Seneca Falls Historical Society gave me access to their Reverend Diedrich Willers's holdings. Miss Mary Sawyer, librarian at Palmyra's King's Daughters' Free Library, assigned a backroom to film the Sanford Van Alstine collection and their family name files.

James Black, coordinator for Church microfilming, arranged for me to team up with Phillip Adair, a microfilm operator under contract for the Genealogical Society. We worked together under the direction of Mr. Howard Davis, the Broome County clerk, to shoot certain county records, such as civil and criminal court ledgers of historical value, which I targeted for Phillip. When a genealogical operator like Phillip was present to film the land records or wills and probate records, it was an easy matter for me to target additional materials for him that he would not ordinarily shoot. Phillip Adair and I next worked a back-to-back operation in the Chenango

County Courthouse at Norwich. Mrs. Margaret B. Finch and her assistant, Mrs. Charlotte Spicer, at the Guernsey Memorial Library in Norwich, Chenango County, made available personal histories, reminiscences, and genealogical data on persons of my interest to film in their designated local history room. Mrs. Dorothy Facer, Wayne County historian, whose office was in the Wayne County Museum and Historical Society, Lyons, New York, allowed me to transport old books and documents from the society over to the Wayne County Courthouse, where the county clerk, Mr. Leonard Schlee, offered the use of his own microfilm machine. I have tremendous appreciation and respect for the county clerks and historians. They are the key to so many primary records maintained by the counties.

All of the counties have historical societies and public libraries. The historical societies and libraries became the repository for historical records outside the courthouses. Each county has a historian with salient materials under his or her care. The villages and towns have historians who may operate out of their homes or often the libraries. An example was Robert O. Lowe in Palmyra, who was both the village and town historian. Often working out of the King's Daughters' Free Library and Historical Society in Palmyra, he directed me to a host of prime sources for microfilming. Wherever I went I experienced that element of trust that I have mentioned. Mr. John McGuire, county clerk at Norwich, Chenango County, invited me to inventory his entire vault, requesting only that I "put everything back just the way you found it." I treasured a lasting friendship with him and a good many others of these marvelous public servants. This may give you some idea of the endless wealth of material available in a myriad of repositories. However, as hard as we might try, it is impossible to sweep the closet clean. There is always another document to assess, another record to survey in the endless pursuit of Mormon origins.

**WALKER:** You have kept up with a number of your New York contacts through the years, haven't you?

**P O R T E R :** Across the years I have stayed in touch and continue to work with many of them. Sadly, they are a disappearing breed. Bob Lowe passed away in a nursing home in Newark. John S. Genung at Waterloo died a little over a year ago. Horace H. Christensen, a Mormon stake historian at Endwell in Broome County, is gone. He introduced me to the historic sites in Broome, Chenango, and Susquehanna counties. Karl D. Butler, a member of the LDS stake at Ithaca and descendant of Solomon Chamberlin, opened many doors for me in Tompkins and Seneca Counties. He too has passed away. J. Sheldon Fisher, former Ontario County historian and curator of the Valentown Museum near Fishers, New York, has died. They were grand associates. You dearly hate to see them go, but somehow a new generation arises. Some very fine replacements are now carrying on the tradition of excellence exhibited by their predecessors.

**W A L K E R :** How have your research efforts impacted your teaching?

**P O R T E R :** You really can't overestimate the value afforded by on-site research in places of historical significance to Mormonism. As you visit the respective offices of the county clerks, assessors, and surrogates, you find basic documents of import pertaining to individuals and the periods in which they lived. Many times I have had the opportunity to survey court records, some of which appeared not to have been opened since the wrapping was put on them in the nineteenth century. In the files of the libraries and historical societies, a tremendous amount of information can be found on individuals or subjects of interest to the Mormon epic. People come alive, and you begin to feel you know them and their times. This can all be translated to the classroom experience; individuals such as Joseph Knight Sr., Newel Knight, Nahum Knight, and their families can be visualized in their natural Broome County setting. For instance, when you examine the conversion and baptism of Joseph Knight and his extended family, you can actually take the student to Colesville, New



York, with the aid of photography and graphic description. Students are transported to the very scene of the mill race where the Knights, Pecks, Culvers, Coburns, and Stringhams were immersed. They can visualize the mob calling to the candidates and asking Joseph and Oliver if they had been “dipping sheep.” Someone once asked me on a hot afternoon in Ohio regarding a site to which we were traveling that they deemed out of the way and a bridge too far, “Why do you want to go to that polluted and rundown stream?” I said, “I want to go there because Joseph stood there.” I have never wanted to be an armchair historian if I could help it. Hopefully that enthusiasm to find the Prophet where he was, and to relay the facts as nearly as they can be determined, can be carried over to the classroom.

**WALKER:** I know that all this research has led to a number of publications for you. In addition to your dissertation, which has been published, what are some of your printed works that stand out for you?

**PORTER:** Growing out of the New York experience was a bevy of findings that a number of historians were publishing in early issues of *BYU Studies* and other outlets. As mentioned, I became involved in the biography “Reverend George Lane—Good ‘Gifts,’ and Much ‘Grace,’ and Marked ‘Usefulness.’”

The Joseph Knight Sr. family and the Colesville Branch have had a lingering fascination for me in several publications. Among such are “The Colesville Branch and the Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon”; “‘Ye Shall Go to the Ohio’: Exodus of the New York Saints to Ohio, 1831”; and “The Colesville Branch in Kaw Township, Jackson County, Missouri, 1831 to 1833.”

Early in my experience at BYU, I was approached by Paul R. Cheesman and LaMar C. Berrett, who requested that I prepare for young teenagers a narration of the history of the Church from Joseph Smith to the present. Feeling that that age group had been somewhat neglected, they sought to help remedy the situation. It was to be

illustrated, and Vernon Murdock of Heber City, Utah, provided the artistry for the seventeen-volume set titled *Illustrated Stories from Church History*. We had a grand time talking over the pictorial portrayal of the various scenes.

A stirring letter which William E. McLellin wrote in this period to James T. Cobb of Salt Lake City sparked a particular interest in the life of McLellin. I had gone down to the New York Public Library in New York City to search the files. After I had been there about ten days, the curator said, "Come back tomorrow. There is a collection in the annex that I think you will like very much." The next morning he explained, "This is the Theodore Schroeder Collection, which we have acquired but not yet cataloged." As I sat down with the various files, I discovered Brigham Young family correspondence, William E. McLellin items, John H. Gilbert letters, James T. Cobb correspondence, and a host of materials I could hardly imagine. Theodore Schroeder was a disbarred lawyer who went away from Utah to the East and used his pen to attack Mormonism, which writings, interestingly enough, sparked the start of B. H. Roberts's series in the *Americana* magazine at the invitation of its editor. Roberts had written a response to something Schroeder had published.

While at the New York Public Library, I obtained a copy of the McLellin letter. McLellin decisively defended the validity of the Book of Mormon, though he had long since removed himself from the Church. "When a man goes at the Book of M. he touches the apple of my eye. He fights against truth—against purity—against light—against the purist, or one of the truest, purist books on earth." I placed the letter in the *BYU Studies* "Historian's Corner." This early exposure of McLellin later came to the fore. When the volume edited by Jan Shippo and John W. Welch titled *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* was published, I was invited to prepare a biography of William E. McLellin to accompany the journals. I wrote "The Odyssey of William Earl McLellin: Man of Diversity, 1806–83" for inclusion therein. I continue to have a great interest in McLellin and

was excited by the recent acquisition of collector Brent F. Ashworth of a lengthy McLellin manuscript simply inscribed “W. E. McLellin’s Book Jan. 4th 1871” (written between January 4, 1871, and January 15, 1872). A prolific writer, McLellin’s works just keep coming out of the closet and the attic.

In preparation for the 1987 sesquicentennial celebration of the Church in the British Isles, Elder Russell M. Nelson asked James R. Moss, V. Ben Bloxham, and me to edit a volume titled *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, 1837–1987*. Eleven historians prepared the various chapters in their areas of expertise. I contributed a chapter, “Beginnings of the Restoration: Canada, an ‘Effectual Door’ to the British Isles.”

Susan Easton Black and I coedited a volume titled *The Prophet Joseph: Essays on the Life and Mission of Joseph Smith*. Eighteen historians lent their expertise in defining primary aspects of his life. My essay was titled “‘The Field Is White Already to Harvest’: Earliest Missionary Labors and the Book of Mormon.” I coedited a similar treatise with Susan, including sixteen historians, depicting the life of President Young in *The Lion of the Lord*. My personal essay was titled “Whitingham, Vermont: Birthplace of Brigham Young—Prophet, Colonizer, Statesman.”

On September 21, 1989, Brigham Young University and the Church sponsored a one-day symposium of Nauvoo history in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the founding of Nauvoo. President Gordon B. Hinckley and Elder Loren C. Dunn, Church historian, were the featured speakers, along with a host of symposium presenters during the course of the day. William G. Hartley and I were invited to be the cochairs of the event and to be guest editors of a *BYU Studies* issue that would publish some of the presentations. Milton V. Backman Jr. and I together authored an article for the occasion, “Doctrine and the Temple in Nauvoo.”

In honor of the newly dedicated Joseph Smith Building at BYU and to honor its namesake, on December 10, 1991, the Religious

Studies Center sponsored the first symposium to be conducted in the building. My presentation on that occasion, “The Book of Mormon: Historical Setting for Its Translation and Publication,” appeared in the volume edited by Susan Easton Black and Charles D. Tate Jr., *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*.

A long-term interest in priesthood restoration generated a detailed *Ensign* article titled “The Restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods.” Also, I have been intrigued for many years by the life of Solomon Chamberlin, an early joiner who was baptized in Seneca Lake by the Prophet during April 1830. A. Dean Larson at the Harold B. Lee Library called me to say that the library had an opportunity to buy a pamphlet authored by Solomon in 1829. Was it something the library should acquire? Because it was the only known copy at that time (one other has been found since), I said, “You bet!” This was the stimulus for the article “Solomon Chamberlin’s Missing Pamphlet: Dreams, Visions, and Angelic Ministrants.”

An opportunity to commemorate the life of Brigham Young for the campus community came with an invitation to address a BYU forum assembly on January 27, 1998, in the Marriott Center. For me this was a rare moment to treat the experiences of the university’s namesake. The content was published under the title “Brigham Young: The Man for the Hour Will Be Ready Whenever the Hour Strikes” in *Brigham Young University 1997–98 Speeches*.

**WALKER:** You also were a major contributor to the six-volume Sacred Places series under the general editorship of LaMar C. Berrett.

**PORTER:** LaMar Berrett had the Sacred Places series in mind as far back as the 1960s. He collected thousands of file cards on historical sites and events of interest occurring at those places. LaMar pieced together a group of seven historians to assist him in covering sites of the Restoration—A. Gary Anderson, Donald Q. Cannon, Larry E. Dahl, Keith W. Perkins, Max H. Parkin, William G. Hartley, and me. Lamar served as general editor on the six-volume

series, starting with *New England and Canada*, volume 1; *New York and Pennsylvania*, volume 2; *Ohio and Illinois*, volume 3; *Missouri*, volume 4; *Iowa and Nebraska*, volume 5; and finally *Wyoming and Utah*, volume 6. I must add that LaMar knew the Mormon pioneer trail from Winter Quarters to Utah better than any person I have ever met. He has followed every rut countless times. It was a personal pleasure to travel the pioneer trail with him on numerous occasions and experience his never-ending enthusiasm. LaMar's inexhaustible declaration on a dead trot was always "Hubba, hubba!" We all miss being around him and observing his love of the work—whether climbing the pyramids of Egypt or surveying the grounds at Cold Creek Camp on the trail.

**WALKER:** Tell me about some of your colleagues in Religious Education. Would you care to share a few anecdotes about your association with these lifelong friends?

**PORTER:** The March 17, 1970, invitation of Dean Daniel H. Ludlow to join the full-time faculty of Religious Education at BYU was an invitation to enjoy a fellowship with a grand group of men, many of whom had been my instructors and mentors. I might mention Russell Rich, who was chairman of my master's program. I was trying to run a master's thesis out of California without the convenience of being present at BYU. He was kind enough to take copies of my thesis and distribute them to a committee and run paperwork through "officialdom."

Daniel H. Ludlow was an exceptional dean and a teacher-administrator. I appreciated my association with him dearly. Later, as the general editor of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, he invited me to participate as one of the many editors. The project operations center was in the Harold R. Clark Building. One day when no one came in but Dan and me, he turned to me and said, "Let's go fishing." I thought he was kidding, but he was serious. He had the poles and a lunch—it was all calculated. So we went up to old Nebo Creek, fished, caught some good fryers, and had a great time. I thought, "What a grand

individual, who would take time to do that sort of thing with this graduate student of yesteryear, midst the press of business.”

Deans Roy W. Doxey, Jeffrey R. Holland, Ellis T. Rasmussen, Robert J. Matthews, and Robert Millet made sure that I had the opportunity to walk where Jesus walked and follow the footsteps of the Prophet Joseph Smith during the process of the Restoration. No compensation is more meaningful to a teacher than to stand on ground that orients him to a historical situation. To associate with faculty members of the caliber of Hugh W. Nibley has been no small blessing. I'll share a simple and unexpected anecdote that I have long remembered. Hugh Nibley was given the opportunity to go out to the University of Chicago for some postdoctoral studies. When he came back, Dan Ludlow (who was dean at the time) said, “Why don't you tell us about it?” So the faculty all assembled in the old Joseph Smith Memorial Building library, with its beautiful oak tables and chairs to match. Doctor Nibley spent an hour telling us how good it was to get back to academia as he knew it at the University of Chicago. Right in the middle of a sentence, he suddenly stopped, paused, and said, “I don't know why we don't talk about guardian angels anymore.” Everyone looked up in surprise at the unusual change in direction. He then related that while he was in Germany during World War II, walking alone down the middle of a dirt road at night during a complete blackout, he was unaware that a two-and-one-half-ton army truck was bearing down on him in the darkness. The truck had blackout lights on, but they were just small, covered slits to protect the truck from any observation from the air, and those lights didn't project very far ahead. The truck driver couldn't see him, and he didn't perceive the truck. At that point, he said that out of nowhere, someone grabbed him around the waist and threw him off the road into the ditch. Hugh then commented, “It saved my life,” adding, “I don't know why we don't talk about guardian angels anymore.”

He then went right on with his discussion of the University of Chicago. I don't know what effect his account had on others in the

room, but it was a significant moment for me. I had experienced a life-threatening situation in the military while walking down a corridor road alone on an escape and evasion course in the middle of a Georgia swamp at midnight. The danger and the circumstance differed, but an unseen hand intervened on my behalf at a critical moment. I thoroughly related to what Hugh was saying and was personally grateful for a mutual reflection unexpectedly shared.

The various colleagues in Religious Education have added much in terms of the personal enhancement to my life. The conversations, classroom instruction, faculty, committee work, joint writing projects, symposiums, family gatherings, and the opportunity to travel together have been most meaningful and rewarding. We have grown very close to one another across the years. I feel more than twice blessed by their highly valued friendship.

**WALKER:** Tell us about some of the projects you have been working on since “retirement,” and I use the word very loosely.

**PORTER:** Just before I retired in the fall of 2001 a large group of historians were invited over to President Merrill J. Bateman’s conference room in the Abraham O. Smoot Building. Elder Neal A. Maxwell was presiding. Other General Authorities were present, including Elder D. Todd Christofferson, then executive director of the Family and Church History Department of the Church. Elder Maxwell unveiled to us the Joseph Smith Papers Project and the intent of the Church leadership to publish the holograph papers of the Prophet in a series of volumes. He outlined the organizational structure in brief and asked for our personal commitment to assist. I was pleased to add my name to the list of participants. It was particularly gratifying to be associated with Ronald K. Esplin and Dean C. Jessee on the project, along with many others whom I knew. We were invited to Salt Lake City and the Church Historical Department, where staff members laid out many of the holograph papers and documents of Joseph Smith. With white gloves we handled them, “hefted

them,” and looked at them with utmost interest. I was invited to be on a planning board under the direction of Ron Esplin, which met each Thursday in the Knight-Mangum Building at BYU to plan and report findings. After participating on the project as a regular for the first four years, I took the opportunity to answer a call to the mission field. I have been very pleased on my return to again be asked to review certain volumes.

**WALKER:** How exciting to be a part of that project!

**PORTER:** It was very exciting for me and other project workers to see the first volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers Journals* series issue from the press in November 2008. We were invited to a luncheon where the primary leaders on the project spoke and Elder Russell M. Nelson commended the whole for their labors. He, along with other principals, graciously signed our books. One of the signers, right up front, was Larry H. Miller. We were pleased that he was present in spite of severe health problems. He had underwritten most of the entire project, a part of which was an invitation for many of us to go out to New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois to personally follow the footsteps of the Prophet. He sent a camera crew along with us to film various historians giving presentations in areas of expertise right on-site. Those recordings have been part of the KJZZ series of broadcasts at 8:00 p.m. Sunday evenings. They will eventually be available on DVDs for personal enjoyment. Interested persons will be able to stand on the ground and have a vicarious experience with the Prophet. We sorely miss Larry’s personal drive, enthusiasm, and inspiration.

**WALKER:** So you continue to be involved in Church history and in various projects, like the Joseph Smith Papers Project?

**PORTER:** Yes, in addition to helping on the Joseph Smith Papers Project, some excellent personal projects are in progress or are waiting in the wings. They accumulate across the years and are often



deferred because of other obligations. Still, you hope that you live long enough to get to them—and that's the driver.

**WALKER:** If you had to live your life and career all over again, would you do anything differently?

**PORTER:** Realistically, it goes without saying that with the passage of time we all see certain holes in the dike that might have been plugged had we been more aware of the total ramifications of a particular circumstance. However, the overall structure of my personal experience has been pretty sound from my own point of view. Preferably I'd keep those experiences virtually intact another trip around. I've enjoyed many pleasant moments along the way. Each new insight, large or small, has become a pearl of great price. I have lived in what might be termed a golden age for the historical study of Mormonism. From a single long table in the Church Historian's Office on the third floor at 47 East South Temple Street to the interim growth represented in the newly dedicated Church History Library, quartered at 15 East North Temple, it has been a most satisfying journey. Love of family, choice friends and associates, and spirited students have made it a highly memorable career.

**WALKER:** How would you summarize your overall contributions as a historian?

**PORTER:** Any contributions I might have made have been accomplished in association with others, as you can appreciate. I pay a great deal of deference to the respective deans of Religious Education and choice colleagues who perceived the need for on-site study and research to enhance our instruction of the students. LaMar C. Berrett, Richard L. Anderson, and Truman G. Madsen sent me on one continuous search of the sources in New York, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. Within the university family it has been a genuine privilege to join with fellow faculty members and other associates in joint publication projects that were designed to be informative and

accurate portrayals of Restoration themes. Exploring the depths of Mormonism through constant and careful research and source assessments has been carried into the classroom to numbers of students during forty-two years of instruction in the seminaries and institutes and at Brigham Young University. In the final analysis it was for the student, and others interested in a factual knowledge of our history and obtaining the spirit of the restored gospel, that classroom presentations were made and written materials produced. Administrative assignments, such as chair of the Department of Church History and Doctrine; director of the Church history area of the Religious Studies Center; and occupant of the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding, were viewed as opportunities to assist others who were facilitating the instruction of large numbers in the accomplishment of their particular stewardships. John W. Welch's kind invitation to serve on the editorial board of *BYU Studies* as Church history editor cast me in a highly prized association with the editors and staff of that scholarly publication.

I hope that to some degree I might have been considered one of the ambassadors of goodwill among the local historical agencies in certain counties of New York and Pennsylvania in helping to facilitate the reception of those historians who followed in their efforts to gather materials on the early origins of the Church. I viewed calls to participate as a member of the Church Correlation Review Committee and later on various Church curriculum committees as opportunities to put whatever skills I might have in league with others to improve the level of instruction received by our fellow Saints. These committees were of like mind and were made up of highly capable people who worked exceptionally well together. The service as secretary-treasurer of the Mormon History Association for eight years prompted a personal desire to be a catalyst or thread that helped tie the various presidencies, boards, and members of that organization together by providing a common ground for the respective participants to share information and amicably discuss their particular points of view. The

2001 invitation of Elder Neal A. Maxwell to join with other historians in the Joseph Smith Papers Project was a distinct honor. To view the Prophet and the holograph papers from the genesis moment of a new dispensation can only be described as thrilling for me. A beautiful highlight along the way has been the call to serve a mission with my wife in the New York Rochester Mission under President Alan S. Layton. We felt we were literally in our element as site missionaries at the Hill Cumorah; the Egbert B. Grandin Print Shop and Bookstore; the Joseph Smith Sr. farm with its attendant Welcome Center, log home, frame home, and Sacred Grove; and the Peter Whitmer Sr. farm in Fayette. Our association with the mission presidency, the site missionaries, area Saints, Cumorah Pageant, and thousands of the visiting public are a priceless remembrance.

For an LDS historian, there is an added increment if you are a believer, and that is that the Spirit can confirm things of personal import relative to the establishment of the gospel. When you pull up your old Ford wagon, roll out your sleeping bag down on the Susquehanna near Isaac Hale's home, and walk down to the river in the evening shade, you can say in good faith, "I thank thee, Lord, for the knowledge that the account of the Restoration is true and this by the voice of thy Spirit within." That has been a coveted and welcome appendage to the theme of my studies and something I have been willing to testify of and share with students, colleagues, and associates across the years.