

# LeRoy Ufkes

*Carthage, Illinois*

*Birthday: September 8, 1930*

*Interview on October 1, 2001, in his office by Jeff Johnson*

*Jed Briggs also present*

Q. [Jeff Johnson] How long have you lived in the area of Carthage and Nauvoo?

A. [LeRoy Ufkes] I have lived in Carthage all of my life. However, I practiced law and had a branch office in the bank; you have probably seen my name there. My ancestors come from Germany.

Q. Is the last name, Ufkes, German?

A. Yes.

Q. You are an attorney. What school or practice did you affiliate with?

A. I attended the University of Iowa. It was closer to home, only about 100 miles away. Then I came back home. I was offered to be on the faculty of a law school on the West Coast. I was too homesick or whatever you call it. I probably made a mistake—I should have gone there.

Q. What is it about this area that you particularly like?

A. I would say that I was born here and couldn't get away, [laughs]

Q. Almost like in your own little confinement?

A. You know it is easier to stay where you came from.

Q. Are there any events or things that occur here that make the Nauvoo-Carthage area a unique place to live? A. No, I think the most unique part of it would be the Mormons in Nauvoo. I don't think we have anything else here or in Carthage to keep the young people around. It seems to me that the young people are leaving. They go to college, and then they see greener pastures elsewhere. I think we all find that a little.

Q. Why do you think the Mormons make this area an attraction?

A. It brings up something—the residents don't have hardly anything else. This makes it a little difficult for them in this area. One of my partners, now deceased, said, "This is Copperhead country." I don't know whether you know

what that is. It's southern sympathizers. They just came here and stayed. My group came in the late 1890s, and I'm here now.

Q. Does any of your family live here?

A. South of Carthage is a German Lutheran area, which I am part of. Quite a few people live there—my relatives.

Q. What are some of the challenges that residents may face with living in this area?

A. It is a quiet and rural farm area. I feel that probably the challenge is keeping their young people here—keeping enough high-income jobs for them. There's not much to do for the young people except drive a truck unless you go to college.

Q. So you feel like there should be something to link the new generation to the old?

A. Yes, they are going to have to have industry here and other jobs. As in any other area, we are going to have to provide income for them.

Q. I am not familiar with your knowledge of history, but are you aware of any other groups or organizations that settled this area?

A. No, not really. The German element settled at Golden, Illinois, or Champagne, and here. I suppose it is a little like the area they came from originally. For example, I notice the Swedes and Norwegians moved to Minnesota, where it's colder. My daughter was in Europe. She says, "Dad, where your people come from, it's just like it here." Where your parents go, you are stuck there.

Q. You probably know that the Mormons came here in 1839 under the leadership of their prophet, Joseph Smith. They left to escape persecution. What is your understanding of the persecution and the conflicts that arose between surrounding communities and them?

A. I don't know. Of course I was not here. I see the fact that they developed very quickly and that they scared the other people. Others were afraid of the takeover. I've read some of the problems, but they were always accelerated by the people telling them. I think that was the Mormons' main problem—they were too successful.

Q. So people saw them as a threat?

A. An individual who came here one time will help illustrate the question. He and his wife had a divorce, and so he wound up in Carthage. Within a week he came to me and told me why the Mormons were run out of town: the Mormons were too successful. So you can imagine, this man was not a Mormon, so he was not objective about it. I think that was their problem. Some of that is still situated here.

Q. Do you know of any stories of your ancestors who were affiliated with the Monnons or came across any of the Mormons?

A. No. But I do know the history. You see, my people didn't get here until that time. But I think the Masonic lodge and the leader of that lodge who were here at that time were the big symbol of being in the right crowd—being a Mason. As I understand it, Mormons can be Masons now. There was a lawyer here who was very bitter against the Mormons. He calls it the—well, he has a nickname for it, from the people who ran them out. I think they were different. When you are different—and today, people are more tolerant than forgiving—people won't understand. That is why it bothers me a little what is going on now in the world. We have to be tolerant of the people that don't believe like we do. I am talking of the conflict in the Middle East.

One Mormon told me one time that he couldn't understand the Catholics and the Lutherans. Catholics were not a

dominant thing around here at that time. You kind of couldn't rally with them. It was something that happened, and when you get up to 15,000 or 16,000 and are the biggest town in the state—well, you can see what the problem was.

Q. What is your knowledge of the Prophet Joseph Smith?

A. He was a leader of a large religion that seems to grow rather than to deteriorate. There must be some background for it. I'm kind of being subjective. I know—I meet a lot of them. Certain religions have the ability to cater to people who have problems or want to blame someone else for it. Elder [Donald L.] Staheli, for example, was the president of ConAgra, and it is tied up with a people of leadership. Individuals of a good nature tend to go to a religion of a positive nature.

I have always admired you people who go on missions. A man who is a very wealthy Mormon went on a mission and took his entourage. When they [Church leaders] found out, they told him to send it back and do it manually. So he did it. Now you would not find that in many churches. They would have told the church to go to "H-E-double-L." [chuckles]

The men are always especially well dressed. They look like right, good people. They don't go around sloppily. And I have noticed another thing—they are a kind people. They do welfare. I noted that a truck moved in on Thursday morning from St. Louis and the committee on poverty—what do they call that committee?—they meet and decide who needs help, and they give them help.

Most of the other religions just kind of shove them off to the side and don't want to bother with them. They are aware of the problem but don't want to do anything about it. I know cases where the Mormons have paid loans on house mortgages in Nauvoo. I am the bank lawyer there, and so I am aware of them.

Q. Much of what Joseph taught and preached in his days are what we now utilize to practice our religion. A lot of people were opposed to his teachings. One of those things was the *Warsaw Signal* newspaper.

A. I mentioned the masons a little while ago. The Mormons were tied up with that group somewhat. People were afraid of the unknown, and at that time the Mormons were something new. I mentioned the Copperheads—these people were from the South. I think that was the [Mormons'] main problem. The Monnons were too successful.

Q. You can never be too successful in life.

A. No, no, you can't. But what I am saying is that they came in '39, and they were chased out in '46. There are six or seven years when they did all of this building without modern construction devices. That is what happened. I could tell you why they had trouble—they worked hard.

Q. Why do you think they worked hard?

A. They felt that was the way a good Mormon should be, not lazy. I do know there was a Masonic element. I'm not a Mason, but I have a lot of Masonic friends, so I don't like to discuss that. They were something new, and they were taking over. People who are successful take over. I have met a lot of hierarchy here, and they are bright—graduates of Harvard. Hell, Elder Jones was a farmer in Utah and a graduate from Harvard. I used to kid that I didn't know any Harvard farmers, [laughs] I am not trying to tell you something I don't believe; they have treated me very nice. When man treats me nice, I don't forget it. They don't get mad and fight about it. I got involved one day at the city council. Some party was antagonistic to the Mormons, and he tried to debate Dr. Kimball.

Q. Let us switch gears from the religious-type questions. Are you familiar with the beginnings or history of the wine industry?

A. Yes, I am. Of course a lot of French people came here—the Icarians. Those families raised grapes, and it was a big part of the community until small grape farming was no longer profitable. They used to have a grape festival. It got to the point where it was a big drinking festivity. They were always in good faith. My ancestors did not live in Nauvoo. They had a terrain that was useful to the wine industry. The Baxters were in that.

Q. You would say that small farming and binge drinking caused the decline of the wine industry?

A. That's right. It really was alive—it dropped out. I don't think a small winery could compete with the big wineries. Just like the brewing industries, some of the big ones have just taken over the smaller ones.

The bleu cheese—I don't know how that came about. It was synonymous with the grapes in some way. The politicians from here would take the bleu cheese and wine to Springfield. The factory has been here a long time here too, maybe fifty or sixty years. Now it is owned by ConAgra, a big chain that buys livestock, cheese, and milk products. Elder Staheli was a foster of it.

It was a drinking town, and as a practical matter the Mormons don't drink. I'll never forget. Coming out of my office one day during the grape festival, I saw a car that had a Decatur stamp on it which said, "Here we have come to get drunk." That reputation was out. When I got out of the service, on grape festival Sunday, east of town there was constant traffic back and forth on Connable road. It did become quite a drinking celebration. But then it gradually declined, and the Mormons weren't the ones that caused the deterioration. It was caused by the element. You see, the Catholics ran the town. They were always basically heavier drinkers than some other nationalities. Three or four people dropped dead off of a horse, and the next year it just kind of calmed down. But it was not the Mormons that brought that on. It was the leaders of the other churches.

Q. So those churches have been influential in the Nauvoo area over the years?

A. Yes, the Catholics really ran the town. It is the changing of the guard. As you know, the ones that are thrown out don't like the ones that kicked them out.

Q. I am sure you heard about the temple that is being rebuilt. I saw your sign on the side of the bank. How do you feel about having one of your offices next to the temple?

A. It doesn't bother me. I think the size of that building bothers people. Nauvoo is not big. If that building had been in the middle of Chicago, it would not have bothered people. An economic stampede took place—you probably heard about that.

Some Mormons came in and offered a big price for property. It was the people who were not the best of Mormons. There is a second factor involved: if you lived in the middle of Salt Lake, a lot is worth more money than in a little town like Carthage. There is a Mormon lawyer—I don't know how he makes a living in Nauvoo. I think his name is Loren Kovvalski. He wanted to go in with me. I know what happened: he saw my name on the back of the bank across the street from the temple. He thought, "Boy, it would be a wonderful thing to have a law practice right next to the temple."

Don't get me wrong—I am for the temple. I think after the temple is built and completed, you aren't going to have an overflow of people into Nauvoo like some of the people think. If you can't get inside, you are not going to want to go there to just walk around the outside. It's practical to me. You see, I can't go into the building.

Q. There will be an opportunity to go in and view the temple before it is dedicated. Do you have any plans to do that?

A. I sure do. In fact, the people have called to tell me when it is going to be finished—I have kept up with it.

Q. What was your initial reaction to the announcement of the temple?

A. I didn't see anything wrong with it, but right away here is what goes wrong all of the money grabbers come—both Mormon and non-Mormon. It scares a lot of the people—taxes go up when you build. Nauvoo is not a rich town—you've seen that.

Q. What do you think the future holds for Nauvoo?

A. I'll tell you a little story: I walked in the Bank of Bowen, Illinois, which is on the corner there. A man said there will be only one bank here one hundred years from now, and it will be in Nauvoo. What is going to happen, in my opinion—you are going to see counties, because of necessity, willing to consolidate. Therefore what will there be in

Hancock County? Nothing but the Mormons. They pay money because the temple is a shrine to them. This temple means more to them than any other temple. But it has a particular: they told me they wanted to build it and make it like the original except they couldn't put wooden stoves in it. Today you would have a fire hazard. What will happen is that more people who are outside of Nauvoo will gradually move here. People who are 65 years old or older will buy a house. There will be a tendency for the Mormon population to be the larger percentage of the population.

Q. Do you think that will have not necessarily a religious effect on people, but maybe a political impact?

A. The Mormon population will be the bigger population; it will have that effect, and I think Mormons tend to be Republican. I have heard all kinds of talk how Marriott is going to build a golf course out here. I'll tell you something you are probably not aware of: years ago, there was an individual who built a restaurant and a hotel on the corner where the bank is. He called it the Mormon Hotel. And boy oh boy, there was a sense of—and I was a young lawyer then. Watkins was his name. He came here, and it burned down.

The Mormons had nothing to do with it burning down. I think he himself did it because he was financially unstable. You have heard of Jewish lightning, haven't you? It is a colloquialism: people who are set or well-to-do. If you live long enough, you will hear that phrase.

Q. Tell me about your relationship with some of the General Authorities—Elder Staheli and President Hinckley.

A. Well, Kimball, who was a lawyer here, did a lot. For example, in 1950 when the Mormons came, they were going to bulldoze all of those buildings. It had to be done. Dr. Kimball came here and out of his own pocket started to build some of those buildings and convinced the hierarchy of the Church that they ought to get involved—and they did get involved. I think Kimball died in 1974. He and I had been friends. So that is my relationship with him.

At one time, the Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., was a corporation that acted like any other nonprofit corporation. Marriott and the guy that designed the building in Virginia—south of Washington—they built it just like it was years ago.

I have had the luxury of being close to a lot of your leaders. I remember a little thing that happened when they had the dedication for the visitors' center. About five of us drove to Adrian, which is south of here. The best farmland of Illinois is in Adrian. I made the statement and wondered what the Mormons would have done here if they had stayed here. He said we would not have been here and done nothing at all.

You see, Utah was desolate and dry. The Mormons were forced to be a group and to unite collectively. What I was saying about Adrian is that a lot of those fanners out there are relatives of the Mormons. When it came time for them to leave and go to the West, none of them had the guts to get on a boat and cross the river at thirty below. Beautiful people. Can you imagine a woman with a child riding in one of those wagons with the air coming up underneath her dress? I have a little history of your people. You boys weren't raised under as hard of circumstances as they were.

I met President Hinckley in the '80s, and he has always been in the Church. I think he is a professional with the Church. He is a fine man. His wife would take my wife in as if she was her own daughter. You see, we are not Mormon.

Have you been to the jail? I told somebody that there ought to be a fence around the jail because the Catholics park there, and soon the church won't have a nice yard. I said, "Why don't you put some bushes around the jail?" Sometime later here comes a beautiful fence. It wasn't cheap.

You see, this is what bothers a non-Mormon: the Mormons can do things, and they don't do them second class. They spend money. Another thing: how many people would give ten percent of their earnings around here? That is the thing that separates the Mormons from the local citizens. You look at the Catholic and the Lutheran Churches—they talk about giving, but they don't.

The Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., is made up of locals who took over the spending from Kimball—he was doing it all by himself. They can get along without me.

Here is one last story: my mother-in-law died. She was Catholic. My daughter, who is the only child, had the priest over from Macomb, Illinois, to arrange the burial. I asked him if he could sing as a hymn "Come, Come, Ye Saints"—you thought he had me. He said, "We can't play it in the funeral service, but we will play it in the procession if you have the music." I went upstairs and got my Mormon hymnal. Some people from Nauvoo commented on how beautifully played the music was. Later I was told by some people in Salt Lake, "That was probably the first time the song was played in the Lutheran church."

A while ago I met a man in Quincy, Illinois, a little, skinny guy. He came up to me and told me how he had always wanted to meet me. I asked him, "Why?" He told me that President Ezra Taft Benson was his father—the secretary of agriculture.

I hope you boys get something good out of this interview.

Q. It has been our pleasure. Would you like to put anything else on tape for the record?

A. No, not really. But the Mormon Church is the only church moving in an upward direction in membership. Most people don't realize that. I think that's the opposition's main problem. The Catholics had a hard time sending their kids to boarding schools. They could not maintain the school in Nauvoo—they sold it to the Mormons. I know two old ladies who could not afford to live in their houses. The Mormons bought the houses and told them they could live there.

I plan on keeping my shovel [referring to the groundbreaking of the Nauvoo Temple] until the day I die. They had section of sand designated for the groundbreaking service about thirty feet in length and eight feet in width. I felt because I was not a Mormon, I should kind of stand off to the side. But Elder Staheli made me stand and take a shovelful, [laughs]

## Jim Webb

*Nauvoo, Illinois*

*Birthday: January 31, 1919*

*Interview on November 5, 2001, at the Joseph Smith Academy*

*by Diana Johnson*

*Joella Peterson also present*

Q. [Diana Johnson] How long have you lived in the Nauvoo area?

A. [Jim Webb] All my life. I was born out on the farm that I live on right now.