



CHAPTER EIGHT



THE TEMPLE GOES INTO SERVICE

Sunday evening after all of the special equipment had been moved out of the temple and the furnishings were put back into their places, including lamps and mirrors, there was a training session for the newly called temple ordinance workers. Paul Koelliker and Tom Coburn from the Church's Temple Department gave instructions. After watching a short training film, everyone went over his or her assignments. "The temple was to begin operation bright and early Monday morning, ready or not," President Meredith Romney recalled.¹ Preparations to make this possible had actually begun weeks and even months before.

THE TEMPLE PRESIDENCY

In the spring of 1998, when stake president Meredith Romney was in Chihuahua City with President Gordon B. Hinckley during his tour of the Mexico North Area, the prophet asked him to send in names of possible candidates who could serve as temple president. President Hinckley then called President Romney's home in November of that year to ask some questions about those who had been recommended.

President Romney gave the matter little thought until Tuesday, January 12, 1999, when he received a phone call from Don Staheli at Church headquarters saying President Hinckley wanted to talk to him. President Romney recalled:

At first when I heard he wanted to speak to me, I didn't really think much about it, as he had called a few times during the construction of the temple to ask me as stake president how things were going.

President Hinckley said, "President Romney, we need a president for the Colonia Juárez Chihuahua Temple, and we are calling you and your wife to be temple president and matron. How do you feel about it? Can you accept the call?"

Of course I was speechless and dumbfounded, very overwhelmed at such an overwhelming responsibility. I didn't know much about temples, only about my experiences in attending sessions in the Mesa Arizona Temple. Having been taught that we should never turn down a calling, but knowing that we would need a lot of help from above, we accepted. We felt honored for even having been considered to fill such an important calling. It seemed so unbelievable.²

President Romney, a cattle rancher and fruit grower, was asked to recommend two men who could serve as counselors. He was given about two weeks to think and pray about it. They needed to be men who could leave their businesses and dedicate their time to the temple. They were to be called from among local priesthood leaders, and they would not receive compensation from the Church. After much fasting and prayer, he phoned Elder Angel Abréa, who was over the Mexico area in the Temple Department, with his recommendations for counselors: Merriner Jones, a fruit grower and farmer from Colonia Dublán, and Daniel García, a farmer also from Dublán. Thanks to modern technology, news of the new presidency spread quickly through the colonies.

Probably like other newly called temple presidencies, Meredith Romney and his counselors wondered where, how, and when they would receive their needed

orientation. Soon they were contacted by Thomas E. Coburn, area director in the Temple Department, asking them to come to the Mesa Arizona Temple where they would be instructed on February 4 and 5. “We were glad to know we would be getting some training,” President Romney gratefully acknowledged. “We met with Tom Coburn and Kent Arrington for two complete days and watched videos and read through manuals prepared for new temple presidents. We were able to watch initiatory [ordinances] being performed and sealings and I was able to work at the veil. Even with this training, we felt very inadequate.”³

They learned that the temple president and matron were responsible to see that the temple ran smoothly, that there were plenty of ordinance workers, and that the temple was meeting the needs of the members in the temple district. The first counselor would serve as temple recorder. The second counselor would be the temple engineer and also have the responsibility to oversee the baptistry.

During the two weeks just prior to the temple’s dedication, various individuals came to instruct the new presidency on practical aspects of operation. Terry Floyd, engineering specialist from the Temple Department, instructed the group on cleaning the temple, including carpet care, organization of the locker keys, and other responsibilities. Pedro Vargas, from the Church Audiovisual Department, provided training on using the presentation equipment in the endowment room. A representative from Honeywell instructed them on the heating, cooling, alarm, and security systems in the building. Cobaco, the contracting firm that built the temple, sent men to give plumbing, mechanical, and electrical instructions.

On Tuesday, February 23, Thomas Coburn arrived to instruct the temple presidency before and after the dedica-



Original temple leaders, left to right: Merriner and Winafred Jones, Karen and Meredith Romney, and Hilda and Daniel García.

tion. He worked particularly with temple president Meredith Romney and temple recorder Merriner Jones.

On Sunday, March 7, between the third and fourth dedicatory sessions, Meredith Irvin Romney was set apart as temple president, along with his wife, Karen E. Romney, as temple matron, by President Gordon B. Hinckley. His counselors, Merriner L. Jones and Daniel E. García, were also set apart. Thus the prophet fulfilled the promise made during the first dedicatory session to bestow the sealing powers that same day. He also set apart Winafred A. Jones and Hilda M. García as assistant matrons. “What a special experience this was to be set apart and receive a special blessing by the hands of the prophet of the Lord,” Sister Jones recalled. “We were taken down the hall into President Hinckley’s presence. How humbling! As he placed his hands upon our heads, we were filled with deep humility and we had a prayer in our hearts that we would be capable and worthy of this great calling.”⁴

GETTING STARTED

Prior to the temple’s dedication, the presidency gave the bishops of the two stakes in the district forms to make recommendations for temple ordinance workers. They figured they would need about one hundred. As the temple presidency received names from bishops, they interviewed, called, and set apart workers.

Many of the colonies’ Saints had looked forward to working in the temple. Gayle and Ora Bluth of the Dublán First Ward had wanted this privilege ever since their family history mission to Argentina over ten years earlier when they were permitted to work in the Buenos Aires temple one day each week. “We were thrilled when we were set apart to work in the Colonia Juárez Chihuahua Temple,” they reflected. It was “a joyful experience.”⁵

Ever since Bertha Chavez of the Nuevo Casas Grandes First Ward had received her endowment at the Mesa temple in 1987, she had dreamed of becoming a temple worker: “It was a great and beautiful surprise when President García asked me if I would like to serve in the temple. I jumped up, crying for joy, with gratitude to the Lord for giving me this tremendous opportunity to serve in His house.”⁶

Another ordinance worker, Miguel Angel Martínez Vergara of the Alamedas Ward, thought that “this blessing would never come because of our being so far from a temple, but now that the Lord has blessed us with a temple close by, I can enjoy this opportunity.”⁷ He and his wife, Consuelo de la Cruz, enjoyed attending the temple together frequently until his untimely death.

Since the small temples would not have laundry facilities, it was necessary for the members to acquire their own temple clothing. The Church Distribution Center in Mexico City sent up a truckload of new temple clothing so the members in the temple district could purchase the necessary items at a reasonable price. Carol Schill, Colonia Juárez Stake Relief Society president explained, “They set up in the Colonia Juárez cultural hall and for two days, members were able to purchase clothing after showing their temple recommend.”

Furthermore, Church members throughout the western United States donated items of temple clothing. “This charitable service allowed many members, especially those who receive only subsistence wages, to obtain their own clothing, free of charge, in order to attend the temple soon after its dedication,” Sister Schill explained. “One of the choicest experiences was the time when sisters from the Colonia Dublán and Colonia Juárez Stakes were together to choose their temple dresses. They had had few times to meet together since the division into two stakes, so it was a joyous reunion. That week over four hundred donated temple dresses were distributed.”

Clothing continued to be donated even after the temple was dedicated. This met the needs of full-time missionaries, visitors to the colonies, and members from other areas who came without their own temple clothing, enabling them to enjoy serving in the house of the Lord. Sister Schill affirmed, “Miracles continue, as clothing seems to



At the Colonia Juárez Stake Center, local Saints purchased temple clothing items sent from Mexico City.

be donated just in time to fulfill a specific need.”⁸

THE TEMPLE IN OPERATION

On Monday, March 8, 1999, the day after the temple dedication, there were 112 endowments performed for the dead and nine people received their own endowment. There were also two live sealings of couples, one live sealing to parents, and nine initiatory ordinances performed. “For us not knowing much of anything,” President Romney acknowledged, “we were grateful for President and Sister García who had been in the presidency of the Mexico City temple and for all those who had had previous experience in other temples.”⁹

For the first two weeks the temple was open, Thomas Coburn remained “to guide and teach us as we struggled to learn all the methods and procedures of temple recording,” recalled Merriner Jones. “Brother Coburn praised our every effort, careful not to let us get discouraged, kindly guiding us through our many errors. By the time he left, he made us feel that he had confidence in our abilities. Yet he wisely left us his telephone number and several other numbers in Salt Lake that we could call for help. We have used all of these numbers.”

Because the temple was to be open by appointment only, one of the first efforts in the recorder's office was to make an appointment book. “Realizing that our ordinance room has a seating capacity of fifty,” President Jones explained, “we made a page with twenty-five lines divided down the center with a column for twenty-five male and twenty-five female participants, making a total of fifty lines. There was a space at the bottom of the page to make appointments for baptisms, initiatory [ordinances], and



Paul E. Koelliker, managing director of the Church Temple Department (right), and Thomas E. Coburn, area director (left), instructed newly called temple president Meredith I. Romney (center).

sealings and for making appointments for excursions or other large groups.”¹⁰

“The first week or two that we were open, it was frantic. What with scheduling the workers, giving out the assignments, and trying to coordinate everything was a little hairy,” President Meredith Romney conceded. “Learning to operate the equipment was a real challenge, also. Taking farmers and ranchers and teaching them computers and technical things was not easy.”



The temple presidency supervised getting the temple into operation.

After Brother Coburn left, “Kent Romney became our support system, computer-wise,” acknowledged President Merriner Jones. “He just generally got us out of many a tight spot.” Kent made up lists of temple workers who were available each day. The temple presidency determined how many male and female temple workers would be needed for each session. Men would officiate during endowment sessions and also run the recommend desk. Women would also assist with the session and direct patrons throughout the temple. A total of at least twenty temple workers were needed for each session. By June 1999 about 110 temple workers had been called, so the presidency, with Kent Romney’s help, was able to schedule individuals to specific assignments in each temple session.

“The real test of our efficiency came as more and more temple workers were called,” President Jones reflected. “Everyday we were adding one or two new ones and working them into our schedule. The willingness of the newly called workers was amazing as they were ready to adapt their schedules to the needs of the temple.”¹¹

President Daniel García had similar feelings: “At first it was somewhat difficult for President Romney and me, but the Lord guided our hands and minds and in some way we did things well.” He specifically acknowledged the help of President Romney and

Kent Romney in helping him remember how to operate the audiovisual equipment, which was one of his major responsibilities.¹²

Because of the lack of time to learn the different ordinances, the temple presidency allowed workers to use ordinance cards until June 1. After that date, they were expected to have the ordinances memorized. This posed a particular challenge for many sisters who did not speak much Spanish. “There was a lot of studying going on,” President Romney observed. “We feel greatly blessed at the way the temple workers have been able to learn the ordinances.”¹³

Among those called to serve in the temple were Virgel and Fern Farnsworth of the Colonia Juárez First Ward. Although Virgel had never envisioned himself working in a temple, they now counted it a “beautiful blessing” in their lives. They loved the spirit there and the joy that patrons brought, so they didn’t want to leave the temple at the end of their shift. Because they served together, they felt that this had brought them closer as a couple. Since this experience of working in the Colonia Juárez temple, they

have served in presidencies of several other temples in Mexico.¹⁴

Thomas Coburn had given the temple presidency a manual entitled Record Verification Procedures. It outlined what to do with temple recommends or family group sheets, and how to help first-time patrons receive their own ordinances, with assistance each step of the way. “We try to make the wedding day special for those coming for this important step in their lives,” President and Sister Jones emphasized. “There are rules for other special circumstances, so we studied this book faithfully.”¹⁵

“The first weeks were very busy, and even without proper training, went remarkably smooth,” President Romney gratefully reported. “Of course



Clarence Turley attended the temple with forty-two members of his immediate family to celebrate his ninety-ninth birthday on July 16, 1999.

the usual mistakes were made, but everyone worked hard at learning the ordinances and learning their responsibilities.”¹⁶

After the temple had been open for five weeks, Elder George I. Cannon, a former member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, and his wife, Isabel, came to offer welcomed help. They had served as president and matron of the Salt Lake temple and now, as Church service missionaries, were assigned to visit newly dedicated temples and to instruct their presidencies concerning temple operation. They stayed for ten days and were “delightful, positive people,” President Romney recalled with appreciation. “We learned to love them.”¹⁷

Many individuals were willing to help with the upkeep of the temple. The two stakes took turns providing sisters every Monday morning to clean the temple. “Temple work, in whatever form, is a joy,” observed Sister Carol Hatch, a future assistant temple matron. ¹⁸ At first, men in the community took care of the lawns and grounds. Later, a permanent crew was hired to assume this responsibility.

The Colonia Juárez Chihuahua Temple served more than just the members of the two local stakes. There were frequent excursions from Ciudad Juárez and Hermosillo (most of these ended, however, with the dedication of temples in these cities in 2000). Excursions also came from Parral, Agua Prieta, La Junta, and Madera in the mountains, as well as from Delicias, Chihuahua City, and Cuauhtemoc. Saints even traveled from as far away as Durango, Tijuana, and Mexicali. From the United States, groups came from Albuquerque, Las Cruces, and Deming, New Mexico, and from El Paso, Texas.

There was a great outpouring of love and appreciation for this temple. Those who came from near and far were all so grateful for its blessing in



Elder George I. Cannon and his wife, Isabel.

their lives. Many brought discs with family file names in TempleReady and were eager to perform the ordinances for their ancestors.

A significant challenge was working out a suitable schedule to meet the needs of the temple district. There were several changes during the first year, before settling on a schedule of endowment sessions: Tuesday, 10 a.m. and 7 p.m.; Wednesday and Friday, 7 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. and 6 p.m., for a total of six sessions per week. Extra sessions were scheduled as needed, especially on Saturdays, to accommodate traveling Saints. During the first year, the largest group attending a single temple session included sixty-seven patrons, which meant that seventeen chairs had to be brought in. Temple workers concluded that bringing in any more than eleven additional chairs made the room too crowded.

“One of our goals is trying to get the members in the temple district coming to the temple regularly,” noted President Romney. “Most people have not yet caught the vision of temple work.” Typically, they had traveled to the Mesa temple just once a year, so attending the Colonia Juárez temple two or three times made them feel that they were doing better. This judgment was incorrect, because each trip to Mesa had included several temple sessions.¹⁹

Another problem during the temple's early months was the nightly transmission of ordinance data to Salt Lake City. This information frequently went through in poor condition. After a few months, however, a new computer program developed for the Madrid temple was made available and solved this problem.

Nevertheless, temple recorder Merriner Jones believed, “The programs that the Church has on the computer are amazing.” He recalled a meeting in which Elder Richard G. Scott had asked who had invented the computer. “He then answered his own question by telling us that the Lord invented the computer for the purpose of family history work. This becomes obvious in the temple recording process.”

“Sometimes here within the confines of the Recorder's Office where we work with cards, names, dates, rules, regulations, reports, and computers,” Brother Jones continued, “it's easy to forget what it is that we have been called to the temple for. When we have someone come to the temple for the first time and we process his or her papers, it

helps us to remember that each card is a real person, a son or daughter of God. To each of His children He has made the same promises.”²⁰

Maurice and Nellie Bowman agreed to come in to assist whenever they were needed. “They became, in essence, assistants to the temple recorder,” Brother and Sister Jones acknowledged. “We don’t know how we’d get along without them.”²¹

At the end of the first year, Meredith and Karen Romney reflected: “This has been a very humbling experience being called as temple president and matron, but with the help of the Lord and having good counselors and so many capable people ready to serve, we feel very blessed. It has been a wonderful year and we have learned so much.”²²

IMPACT ON FAMILY HISTORY

The temple’s going into service stimulated an increased interest in family history. Loretta Farnsworth, the Colonia Juárez Stake Family History Center director, was impressed by the many sacrifices members made on behalf of this work. Visits to the center increased considerably as members came to seek out their ancestors and to prepare family names for temple ordinances.

One of these was Amelia Saucedo, a sixty-four-year-old member of the Obrera Ward. Although retinitis pigmentosa had left her almost blind, she would ride a bus nearly twenty miles every morning from her home in Nuevo Casas Grandes to the family history center in Colonia Juárez. This faithful sister felt discouraged that poor eyesight would hinder her from reading her recently ordered film. She decided to fast and pray that the Lord would allow her to complete the work. Then, while she was whitewashing her house, a drop of paint fell into her eyes, filling them with tears for three days and then restoring her eyesight. She felt that it was the Lord’s way of cleansing and restoring them—an answer to her prayers. “I can read the microfilm clearly now, even the unclear ones,” she gratefully acknowledged. “I have decided to dedicate myself to this work in a special way to show how much I love my Heavenly Father.” Not only did Sister Saucedo frequently work at the family history center, she also attended the temple, often several times each week.²³

Ellen Robinson, who became the director of the Colonia Dublán Stake Family History Center, also witnessed a growing interest. She acknowledged she knew very little about family history when she began, but as she started entering data into her computer, this information became real members of her family rather than just names on the screen. “I can remember the tears running down my cheeks. Therefore, when I was called to serve in the center, I had already been touched by the Spirit of Elijah.” Under the direction of the stake presidency, she was invited to speak on family history in several of the wards, and interest began to grow. Members donated enough money to purchase a new computer capable of running the Church's FamilySearch Web site. The center also had microfilm readers, which had been used over the years for name extraction in the stake, and additional computers were donated for Personal Ancestral File (PAF).

“Even more exciting than the physical growth of the center is the growth of interest in doing family history research and preparing ancestors' names for the temple,” concluded Sister Robinson. The Alamedas Ward organized family history classes in Sunday School, calling different groups of people to participate in the six-week course. Consultants in Dublán brought families to the center to show them what was available on their own family names and to teach them how to do the work. The Young Women president in the Huertas Ward challenged the girls to prepare their own ancestors' names to take to the temple for baptisms; she then brought them to the center to teach them how to do it.

During February 1999, seminary teachers at the academy encouraged their students to come to the centers to research their own family history. “We have had quite a number of youth here, including non-members, who have organized their four generations and even found information further back,” Sister Robinson reported. “Some of the youth have ordered films and, while waiting for them to arrive, have volunteered to do other service at the center.” Many brought their parents to see what they were accomplishing.

Activity at the Dublán family history center climbed to about two hundred patrons each month. Sister Robinson believed that no single method had accomplished

this, but that “the Spirit of Elijah [was] having a stronger influence in our area. . . . I know that this work is inspired and is the reason for the restoration of the gospel in this last dispensation. Without it, it would be impossible for all of Heavenly Father’s children to receive the blessings of the Savior’s sacrifice, Resurrection, and Atonement. I am grateful for the opportunity I have to be involved in this great work.”²⁴

President Merriner Jones noted that “the members of the area had been working diligently doing family history and preparing for the opening of the temple.” Some had



The Vazquez family from the Obrera Ward, left to right: Alfredo and Araceli, Alberto and Catalina, and Pedro and Conrada.

collected as many as one thousand names and were eager to perform all the ordinances for them immediately. They were asked not to bring them all at once. Still, some arrived at the temple with disks containing three hundred names.²⁵

The Obrera Ward set a great example of doing temple work. Alberto Vazquez and his son Alfredo worked two

sessions in the temple every Saturday morning. Another son, Pedro, who was bishop of the ward, had, from the time the temple was first announced, encouraged his ward members to become involved in family history and to prepare themselves to receive their own temple ordinances. As soon as the temple opened, the Vazquez family and others from the Obrera Ward began attending the temple Wednesday evenings.

After joining the Church in Holland in 1947 as a seventeen-year-old, Nellie Beuk immigrated to Zion in March 1950. When she first saw the Salt Lake Temple, illuminated in the evening, she promised herself that as soon as she was worthy, she would go there. Soon afterwards she received her patriarchal blessing, which promised, “You will be able to do a great work for your kindred dead in the house of the Lord.”

When she received her endowment, she felt the Spirit strongly and returned often. Later she married Maurice Bowman and moved to Colonia Dublán, far away from any temple. She wondered, “Just when will this great work for my kindred dead take place?” After her children had grown, she repeatedly asked the Lord, “Please open the way so that this part of my patriarchal blessing may be fulfilled. I am getting older now, should we sell our home and move back to Salt Lake City?” But she would always receive a peaceful feeling telling her to be patient.

She then recorded how her prayers were answered: “Maurice and I were watching the October 1997 priesthood session at home via our satellite dish, when President Hinckley made that glorious announcement—the decision to build small temples and thus provide temple blessings to the Saints in remote areas. And then when he said that a temple would be built in the colonies in northern Chihuahua, we were stunned, and I started to cry for joy!” Her prayers had been answered.²⁶ They would not only serve in the Colonia Juárez temple but later would become president and matron of the Oaxaca temple.

SOME THOUGHTS AS THE TEMPLE WENT INTO SERVICE

Both the temple workers and the patrons experienced many feelings respecting their service in the Lord's house. In the temple, they felt a spirit of peace, unity, and a nearness to heaven and to loved ones gone before—feelings they could not experience as well in any other place. For many, having a temple close was a dream come true.

Hilda García, one of the assistant matrons, expressed these feelings well: “We need to live with the Spirit constantly to be able to make correct decisions regarding temple matters. . . . I like to work in the temple, and I like working



*The Colonia Juárez Chihuahua México Temple.
Courtesy of Scott Esplin.*

in all that is done there. . . . I feel a profound joy when I fulfill this high calling. I love the temple.”²⁷

Many youth groups came to participate in baptisms. Soon after the temple opened, a Scoutmaster from the United States brought his troop to the temple. As he was about to leave, he turned to Winafred Jones in the temple’s foyer and remarked, “Sister, this has been such a wonderful experience. Never have I felt such a sweet, strong spirit as I’ve felt here.”²⁸

“We would have a hard time telling all of the spiritual experiences we’ve had with those coming to receive their endowments and having their families sealed together,” reflected temple president Meredith Romney. One family traveled over two hundred miles from Delicias in an old truck with threadbare tires. “They had all the faith in the world that all would go well and that the Lord would look after them.” They brought their four children with them. One, a son who was ready to go on a mission, had not planned to receive his endowment at this time, but since he was there with his family to be sealed, the decision was made for him to receive this ordinance with his parents. Because he had not brought any clothing with him, “we were busy calling around town trying to locate what he needed,” President Romney recalled. “After the sealing of the family, they were so excited; it was a joy watching them. There were a lot of prayers said in their behalf that they would make it back home okay.”²⁹

Sister Hilda García had the particular responsibility to help those many who came to the temple for the first time. She rejoiced to see them come “crying for happiness and joy as they received blessings and promises. . . . It is something marvelous when a father and mother kneel at the altar to be sealed as a family for time and all eternity. After this, their children come in with smiles on their faces and leave with eyes full of tears because of the joy and happiness they feel.”³⁰

Being in the temple with groups that came from distant areas was a favorite experience of the workers. On Saturdays they reported to the temple before the groups arrived at 7 a.m. and often did not leave until after 3 p.m. Saints arrived by bus or by car, many coming to the temple for the first time. They participated in baptisms, initiatory ordinances, the endowment, and sealings. Most Saturdays four endowment

sessions were held to accommodate them. In order to arrive on time for the first session, patrons needed to leave their homes early. All would come dressed in their Sunday best, so excited and anxious to be in the temple. One worker reflected, “How touching it was to see and realize the sacrifices that were made. Soon faces would become familiar as many returned on future excursions. Many tears and hugs were experienced and shared. The Spirit of the Lord was truly felt in all phases of the work.”³¹

María del Refugio Durán de Zapata from the Huertas Ward, a faithful temple patron and ordinance worker, explained how her excitement about serving in the temple on Saturdays actually began Friday evenings as she prepared her clothing with love and care: “It is a feeling of joy and humility to attend this holy place Saturday after Saturday. Upon entering the beautiful doors, we are welcomed by a person who radiates peace and love. We are assisted by people who seem like angels, in an ambience of cordiality. Immediately we feel a peace and tranquility that cannot be found in the world. The Spirit touches every fiber of our hearts, making it an unforgettable experience.”³²

Temple workers were saddened when, after about a year, the dedication of other

temples in northern Mexico reduced the number of excursions. Still, similar experiences continued on some Saturday mornings, when members from small mountain branches in more remote areas of the temple district came in groups. The temple also continued to receive some special excursions, including family reunion groups from distant areas. One group of fifty-six youth and their leaders from Chihuahua City came by bus early one Saturday morning to perform baptisms for eight hundred individuals they had

TEMPLE LEADERS

Meredith I. and Karen E. Romney

temple president and matron, 1999–2004

Merriner L. and Winafred A. Jones

first counselor and assistant matron

Daniel E. and Hilda M. García

second counselor and assistant;
succeeded by Maurice D. and Nellie B. Bowman,
then by John B. and Ellen J. Robinson

John B. (III) and Ellen J. Robinson

temple president and matron, 2004–

Ismael G. and Guillermina P. Acosta

first counselor and assistant matron

Fred R. and Carol C. Hatch

second counselor and assistant matron

identified through their own family history research. After the baptisms they enjoyed eating lunch on the temple grounds and then visiting the nearby Paquimé archaeological site before returning home.³³

Victor Salcido had allowed his interest in playing baseball to replace his activity in the Church. When he learned that the temple was going to be built nearby, he began to ponder which should come first, the game or his family. On a Sunday in August 1998, he took his family to church; President Meredith Romney happened to be speaking. “His words pierced my soul,” Victor reflected. “He said we members should be grateful for the temple being built and that we should have a recommend to enter and make covenants. I thought about this for a long time, and on that day I felt a great desire to enter the temple. That became my goal.” It wasn’t long until one Sunday morning he made the decision to exchange his baseball uniform for church clothes. Finally, he was ready to go to the temple on April 10, 1999 (only three days after it was dedicated). He went with his wife and their two little children; many friends accompanied them on that special occasion. “Upon being sealed as a family, we were very happy,” Victor testified, “because we felt the Lord’s Spirit very close.” He was holding his little daughter in his arms as they looked at their reflection in the mirror of the sealing room. “There is my grandpa,” she exclaimed. (He had died two years before she was born.)

“Yes, he is the same person I saw in the photos at Grandma Irma’s house. Look how happy he is with us.” Victor realized that since that special occasion, “I have seen a change of one hundred and eighty degrees in my life. I could understand that the Lord Himself walks the halls of the temple and that He is pleased to see His children who strive to keep His commandments. Today I am very happy; I am a better father, husband, son, and member. I enjoy my family. I spend more



New temple presidency 2004, left to right: Ismael and Guillermina P. Acosta, Ellen J. and John B. Robinson, and Carol C. and Fred R. Hatch.



The temple is nestled in the beautiful valley of Colonia Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. Courtesy of Jeffrey K. Romney.

time with my wife as though we were newlyweds again. I know in my heart that this is the only way to enter God's kingdom and that it is certainly worth the effort."³⁴

SOME REFLECTIONS AFTER TEN YEARS

Meredith Romney and his counselors presided over the Colonia Juárez temple until November 2004. At that time, John B. Robinson III (who had chaired the original temple committee)

became the second president and was still serving as the temple approached its tenth anniversary in 2009. He selected as counselors Ismael G. Acosta and Fred R. Hatch. At the same time, Ellen J. Robinson became temple matron, and Guillermina P. Acosta and Carol C. Hatch were called as assistant matrons.

"One of the great blessings of having the temple here in our area," President and Sister Robinson noted, "is that those who desire to attend the temple may do so as often as they like—monthly, weekly, or several times a week." They regarded the temple as a great equalizer because all are brothers and sisters there. "Neither language nor race makes a difference inside the temple doors." Temple workers, men and women, have learned to present the ordinances in both English and Spanish. They noticed more willingness of members to pray and speak in the other language and an increased association between Anglo and Hispanic Saints, even outside of the temple.³⁵

President Ismael Acosta's love for the house of the Lord began when he was a small boy because his Grandmother García frequently told him about her experiences going to the temple. Later, as an adult, he rode the bus ten to twelve hours each way for temple excursions. "When President Hinckley announced our temple, our hearts were

full of joy,” affirmed President Acosta. “It was a special privilege helping at the temple in preparation for its completion and dedication.”

After serving as an assistant matron for three years, Sister Guillermina Acosta learned that she had a problem with her heart and feared that she and her husband might need to be released because she could not carry out her responsibilities. President Acosta was prepared to bring up this matter at the next temple presidency meeting. “Before you tell me, Brother Acosta, I have something to tell you and your wife,” President Robinson interrupted. “I received a call from the authorities of the Church asking us to extend our calling one more year.” Sister Acosta was encouraged, believing that if Father in Heaven was asking for one more year, she had to be well. Subsequently, a heart specialist in Utah examined her and concluded that “her heart problems had disappeared.” President Acosta reflected, “We recognize the hand of the Lord in her behalf and consider this to be one of the many miracles we have received since serving in the temple.”³⁶

President Fred Hatch enjoyed working with the youth, who were very active in doing baptisms as groups and as individuals. He was particularly impressed with the large groups that came from the Tecnológico Stake in Chihuahua City. In order to participate, the youth were required to conduct their own family history research. He believed that being involved in their own research added to the young people’s spirituality. He noted that “the groups that come the most often bring a much more reverent and joyful spirit with them.”³⁷

Sister Carol Hatch was impressed with the special glow on the faces of fathers, mothers, and children who came to be sealed as eternal families. She appreciated the “non-stop smiling and happiness” of young brides and grooms who



The Quintana family, left to right: Azucena, Transito, Dagoberto, Domitila, Manuel, Angel, Juan, and Luisa.

made the effort to come to the temple in order to start off right in their eternal journey together.

Others who work in the temple also appreciated this privilege. One of these was Manuel Quintana, who had been a temple worker from the beginning. During these ten years, he had missed no more than two or three assigned sessions. While living in La Junta, about three hundred kilometers south of Colonia Juárez, he felt that his



Left to right: *Rey L. and Erma Cluff Whetten and LaRayne Whetten and Waldo P. Call.*

family could never afford the trip to Mesa. However, he had always taught his family, “Todo legal, o nada” (all legal, or nothing). In 1979, he and his wife, Domitila, determined that they and their eight children (she was pregnant with their ninth) should be sealed as a family in the Mesa temple. “We decided that, if necessary, we would sell what little we had to accomplish this.” The following year, the family drove in their old, 1951 model truck over mountainous dirt roads to Colonia Juárez to join the stake excursion there and then rode to Mesa in a Juárez Academy school bus. They felt it was a miracle that they were charged the same fare as smaller families.

In 1981, the Quintana family moved to Colonia Juárez and regularly participated in excursions to the Mesa or Mexico City temples. Eventually the Quintanas had ten children, six sons and four daughters, all active in the Church. All six sons and one daughter served full-time missions. Brother Quintana and three of his sons have served as temple workers. During the last ten years, having the temple right in Colonia Juárez “has been the miracle of every day. . . . Attending the temple is part of our lives. It is motivation for us to become better. People are better because of its presence.”³⁸

Waldo Call, who had been a stake president, mission president, temple president, and member of the Seventy, also became a worker and sealer in the Colonia Juárez

temple when it opened in 1999. Even though they were assigned only one session a week, he and his wife, LaRayne, were there for four or five each week. Elder Call pointed out that without small temples, “many of the members would be able to go to a temple only once or at most twice in their lifetime,” but with them, “the members even have the special opportunity to be temple workers and sealers.” Sister Call remembered that at the end of their three years of service in the Mexico City temple she shed many tears because she loved the temple very much and feared that they would be able to attend there only once or twice each year. “We never in our fondest dreams expected to be blessed with a temple in this small area.” Even after ten years, “we are so thankful for prophets and for modern revelation.”

Sister Call’s parents, Rey and Erma Whetten, remained faithful patrons. They looked forward to attending each Tuesday morning. Even problems on the ranch, failing health, or age did not keep them away. They sat together in the back of the endowment room, smiling and holding hands. Things did not seem quite right when they were not there.³⁹

José Hermosillo had also been an ordinance worker from the temple’s beginning. He earned his living by operating a food cart in Nuevos Casas Grandes, and although Saturday mornings would be particularly good for his business, he rarely missed his temple assignments at this time. “No sacrifice is too much in comparison to the blessings that I have received. The temple has blessed not only me so much in my own life but also my entire family. . . . Nothing is more beautiful than serving the Lord in His house.”

President Leonel Villalobos of the Sierra Madre District and his wife, Sandra, particularly appreciated the spirit they felt in the Colonia Juárez temple: “We feel the same love and spirituality here as we did in Mesa,” so “we call our temple here the ‘little Mesa temple.’” All five of their children have had



José Hermosillo



Members from Agua Prieta in the Sierra Madre District.

temple marriages, two at Mesa and three at Colonia Juárez.

People of widely varying ages have found joy in serving in the temple. Santos Martínez, eighty-three, and his wife Aurora, seventy-seven, had served a two-year mission in the Mexico City temple and were among the few Colonia Juárez temple workers who knew what they were doing when they started. “It is not always easy at our age,” they conceded, “but we have received health and

strength from Heavenly Father to do this.” They made a point of arriving an hour early for their assignments because they were anxious to be in the temple and to be ready on time.

Rita Johnson, ninety-five, became an ordinance worker in the temple at its dedication. Either as a worker or as a patron, she rarely missed any of the temple’s six sessions each week. “The temple is such a peaceful place,” she affirmed, “meditating in the celestial room or offering up thanks for blessings received and asking for blessings needed. Even when I’m not feeling well at home, going to the temple seems to heal and make possible things one might think impossible.” She regarded the temple as “a special tribute to our ancestors, who struggled to build up this part of the Lord’s vineyard.”⁴⁰

In her late twenties, Gabriela Herrera, often called Gaby, became a worker in the Guadalajara temple when it opened. When she moved to the colonies to teach at the academy, she was called to serve in the Colonia Juárez temple. The young temple worker appreciated the love she had felt from the more experienced sisters. “The kind of smiles and genuine love they extend cannot be faked,” Gaby insisted. She wanted to radiate this same love toward the temple patrons she served and help them “realize how important these holy ordinances are and rejoice in the promises they receive.”⁴¹

The temple continued to have an impact on the Saints in the area. “I see and feel an increased spirituality of members in general—adults, youth and children—since the temple is here,” reported Steven Maxel Romney, president of the Colonia Juárez stake. He observed a higher percentage of endowed members, more couples and families being sealed in the temple, more going on missions, and the wards functioning better.



Santos and Aurora Martínez.

President Kelly L. Jones of the Dublán Stake felt the same: “I realize that having a temple in [this] area is a blessing that was given to us due to the diligence and faithfulness of our ancestors. In our area it literally serves as a spiritual refuge from the storms of life. We now have our own personal ‘sacred grove’ where we can go to meditate, pray, learn new truths, and be strengthened spiritually. The temple has raised the standard of spiritual excellence in our stake by deepening our understanding of the gospel.” His stake also saw an increase in priesthood ordinances for the living and the dead—“spiritual fruit that is blessing our lives, our families and our posterity.” District president Leonel Villalobos concurred: “Temple excursions have helped the spirituality of the members and the youth.” As they left the temple, many members from his district, both old and young, were smiling and holding hands.

Gay Longhurst believed, “Attending the temple puts everything in life into an eternal perspective . . . and you realize that so many other things are more important than just trying to keep the kitchen clean. In the temple I have received answers to questions, to problems, and have received so much guidance in my life.” She typically attended the temple weekly, bringing from three to eight sisters with her. While Carlos Valles of Nuevos Casas Grandes was a student at the academy, seeing the temple everyday helped him strive to go on a mission and to marry in no other place than the

temple. Later, as a student at Brigham Young University, he made it a practice to attend the temple as often as possible.

Even after ten years, the temple continues to attract interest. “Because of the beauty and peaceful atmosphere of the temple building and the grounds,” observed President Fred Hatch, “it is a very popular attraction for families out for an afternoon or weekend drive and for many tourists.”⁴² The temple “definitely has made more people aware of us living in the area,” acknowledged President Steven Romney. “Many have mentioned to me how beautiful the ‘big white church’ on the hill is.”

Elder Daniel L. Johnson of the Seventy, who was born in Colonia Juárez, effectively summed up feelings about the temple as it approached its tenth anniversary:

I remember when my mother would tell me, way back in the early eighties, that someday we would have a temple in Colonia Juárez. I would tell her that it simply could not happen because we only had one stake and that it would require many stakes to staff a temple. She would not argue, but would only say, “You will see, someday we will have a temple.”

That dream came to fruition with the revelation given to President Gordon B. Hinckley regarding the construction of small temples. Of the many blessings and benefits that accrue to those communities in which a small temple is built, four of them seem to stand out:

The social life in Colonia Juárez changed radically. Instead of revolving around the Church-run academy and orchard or ranch work, it now revolves around the temple. Men take time from their very demanding work schedules in order to fulfill temple assignments.

Before the temple, people would never have had the opportunity of being temple ordinance workers; now they have that wonderful privilege. Consequently, their personal lives have undergone a radical change. This change has, in turn, changed the very face of the community. There is more

unity and more love expressed and shown within the community as well as to those that visit.

As one attends a temple session in a small temple, those that officiate and those that are served are neighbors, relatives, and personal friends. These relationships greatly enhance those feelings of love and tenderness that are always found in any temple. This blessing is unique to small temples and to the small communities that they service.

Worthy members of the Church that live far away from large temples and are able to attend only infrequently—and then with great financial sacrifice—now have the opportunity to attend with greater regularity.

What a marvelous blessing has been given to Colonia Juárez and surrounding communities by having a small temple provided to them. This same blessing has been replicated many times in many parts of the world to worthy members of the Church. We have seen and felt the blessings that accompany the fulfillment of a revelation given to a prophet by the Lord who truly does love His people, even those that live in areas that could not sustain a large temple.⁴³

NOTES

1. Meredith and Karen Romney, “Temple President Training,” in Virginia Romney, *History of the Colonia Juárez Chihuahua Temple*, 2:375; manuscript in possession of the authors.
2. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:374.
3. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:374.
4. Merriner and Winifred Jones, “Temple Recorder Training” in Romney, *History*, 2:377.
5. Romney, *History*, 2:384.
6. Romney, *History*, 2:384.

7. Romney, *History*, 2:384–85.
8. Carol Sohill, “Distribution of Temple Clothing,” in Romney, *History*, 2:431–32.
9. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:375.
10. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:377.
11. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:377.
12. Daniel García, “Temple Engineer Training,” in Romney, *History*, 2:380.
13. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:376.
14. Romney, *History*, 2:384.
15. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:378.
16. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:375.
17. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:375.
18. Carol Hatch, statement, June 2008; copy in possession of the authors.
19. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:376.
20. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:378–79.
21. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:379.
22. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:377.
23. “Human Interest Stories,” in Romney, *History*, 2:432.
24. Ellen Robinson, “Colonia Dublán Family History Center,” in Romney, *History*, 2:433–34.
25. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:378.
26. Nellie Bowman, “Wait on the Lord and Trust Him,” in Romney, *History*, 2:434–35.
27. Hilda García, in Romney, *History*, 2:380–81.
28. Jones, “Temple Recorder Training,” 2:379.
29. Romney, “Temple President Training,” 2:376.
30. Hilda García in Romney, *History*, 2: 381.
31. Romney, *History*, 2:383.
32. Romney, *History*, 2:383–84.
33. “Youth in Mexico Visit Temple,” *Church News*, September 16, 2006.
34. Aurora Nielsen and Victor Salcido, “De Béisbol al Templo,” in Romney, *History*, 2:438–39.
35. John and Ellen Robinson to Richard Cowan, June 7, 2008. Unless otherwise

indicated, all quotations in this section are based on interviews by Virginia Romney during June 2008.

36. Ismael and Guillermina Acosta, interview by Virginia Romney, June 2008; statement in possession of the authors.
37. Fred Hatch, statement, June 2008; copy in possession of the authors.
38. Manuel Quintana, interview by Virginia Romney, June 9, 2008; statement in possession of the authors.
39. Waldo and LaRayne Call, statement, June 2008; copy in possession of the authors.
40. Rita Johnson, statement, June 2008; copy in possession of the authors.
41. Gabriela Ramos Herrera, interview by Virginia Romney, June 17, 2008; statement in possession of the authors.
42. Fred Hatch, statement.
43. Daniel Johnson, statement, July 2008.