

The Temple in Operation



1964 Pacific Northwest stakes added to the Oakland Temple district (June)

Temple dedicated, overflow in separate building for first time (Tuesday–Thursday, November 17–19)

First endowment session for stake leaders (December 17)

1965 Temple opened to general Church membership (Tuesday, January 5)

1980 First Tongan ward, representing growing ethnic population

1988 Temple closed for extensive renovation (December 29)

1989 Earthquake causes only few minor cracks (October 17)

1990 Temple reopened with two additional endowment rooms (October)

1991 No damage to temple during “Oakland Hills Firestorm”

2006 Dedication of Sacramento Temple takes workers and patrons from Oakland (September 3)

During the half century following its dedication, the Oakland Temple continued to play a key role in the spiritual life of the Bay Area.

President Wright Takes Charge

New temple president Delbert F. Wright's receiving the keys to the the courtyard gates from architect Harold W. Burton was symbolic of the temple's transition from construction to operation.¹ In June 1964, thirteen stakes from the Pacific Northwest had been added to the Oakland Temple district. This brought the total to forty stakes, with an estimated membership of 185,000, extending from Seattle on the north to Fresno on the south and Reno on the east.² Wright had several urgent tasks. He had to select, call, train, and organize the initial corps of 250 workers (eventually four times that number were required). He gratefully acknowledged, "There has been a very wonderful and spontaneous response from stake presidents, bishops and members throughout the district to the invitation for interviews of prospective temple workers. Many fine, worthy members are willing to devote the required time to this important work in the house of the Lord, and are planning to adjust their personal affairs to permit its accomplishment."

Intensive training commenced immediately following the temple's dedication. President Wright had hoped to start the process earlier, but the last phases of construction, followed by the open house and final cleaning, made this impossible.³ When Paul Summerhays was appointed to be the director of the Oakland "Bureau of Information," or visitors' center, he had been able to take on the scheduling and content of public tours, thus assuming some of Wright's workload.

After this orientation of workers following the temple's dedication, stake presidents and their wives attended the first endowment session on December 17, 1964. The temple was then opened to the general membership for ordinances on Tuesday, January 5, 1965. Hence a new phase began as members performed the ordinance work for which the temple was built. Now, they could drive to a relatively

Expanded Oakland Temple District, 1964



close temple rather than having to schedule long-distance temple excursions as in past years. Temple leaders hoped that the high level of interest, enthusiasm, and commitment during the construction phase would be maintained.

The temple quickly became a source of blessing to the Bay Area Saints. This was true in the lives of Henry B. “Hal” and Kathleen Johnson Eyring. Hal had described how he had “felt at home” in the temple when he first received his temple endowment. Kathleen’s experience was quite different. In a whirlwind experience, she flew to Salt Lake City, where she met her future in-laws for the first time when she was picked up at the airport. They drove directly to the Logan Temple, where she received her endowment and was married to Hal. For her, this experience was “unsettling.” At this time, her husband was a professor at Stanford University. During their first months of marriage, Kathleen not only had to learn practical homemaking skills, but she also became pregnant with their first child. In the midst of these pressures, she “made a weekly drive across the San Francisco Bay to the Oakland Temple, where she sought to find the peace that Hal had discovered in the Salt Lake Temple as a young serviceman. . . . It was nearly a year before she found the peaceful feeling she sought, but she came to it in the Oakland Temple. The price was worth paying: throughout her life the temple was her second home, the one on which she modeled her family’s home.”⁴

On the occasion of the temple’s first anniversary, President Wright gratefully acknowledged that there was a “pattern of good steady patronage” and that “there is evidence that wards and stakes are enthusiastic about temple work.” During the temple’s first ten months of operation, 213,000 ordinances—including 2,500 living persons receiving their own endowments—had been performed.⁵

Opposite: Expanded Oakland Temple district, 1964. Map created by Think Spatial BYU.

Volunteer Work in the Temple

While President Wright estimated that 250 workers were needed to staff the temple in Oakland, the actual number was much higher. In addition to the workers who assisted directly with temple ordinances, there would need to be volunteers to perform other functions,

including office staff, laundry and cafeteria workers, and receptionists to greet and direct patrons. A few additional paid employees would handle such tasks as maintenance and security.

Although all of the ordinance work in temples is under the supervision of the temple president, his responsibilities include much more. The temple recorder is his management partner. The recorder is responsible for recording and reporting on temple work done, as well as work for the physical plant, such as the laundry, the cafeteria, the gardens and grounds, and security.

Some personal examples illustrate the roles played by these various groups of workers in the Oakland Temple. Wanda and Reed Chase began their service there in December 1964, the month after the temple's dedication. They began their service on the grounds as tour guides. After the dedication, the temple was closed to the public, but tours continued of the grounds and the exterior of the temple building—including the magnificent views of the Bay Area from

Anyone could tour the grounds of the temple even though the temple itself was closed to the public. Courtesy of Matt Granz.



the roof terraces. By 1968 the Chases had both become ordinance workers. Four years later, Church President Harold B. Lee called Reed Chase to serve as first counselor to temple president W. Lowell Castleton. Rather than being released when Castleton finished his term of office, Reed Chase was called to serve for another five years as assistant to the new temple president, Richard B. Sonne. As Reed's activities increased, Wanda Chase served as a supervisor of sisters and a bride's attendant. The temple job required that they be there for opening at 5:00 a.m. This, of course, meant they had to rise much earlier to prepare for the day. Because Reed had not retired from his real-estate business in Walnut Creek, in effect he was doing two jobs at once—his business and his temple work. They served for seventeen years altogether.

At the beginning of each shift, one member of the temple presidency conducted a fifteen-minute prayer meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to create for all workers a spiritual atmosphere that might remain with them during their day of temple service and beyond. Among temple workers and others, Reed Chase was known for his beautifully prepared messages given at the prayer meetings. During his tenure he prepared some 500 talks on diverse topics, but he often returned to express an eternal perspective about our spiritual experiences compared to our worldly experiences—a subject that is very appropriate in the temple. "I'm satisfied," he reflected, "that the topics I choose to talk about are most often those where I am weak and need strengthening."⁶ Brother Chase's family has compiled these spiritual messages in a book titled *Think on These Things*.⁷

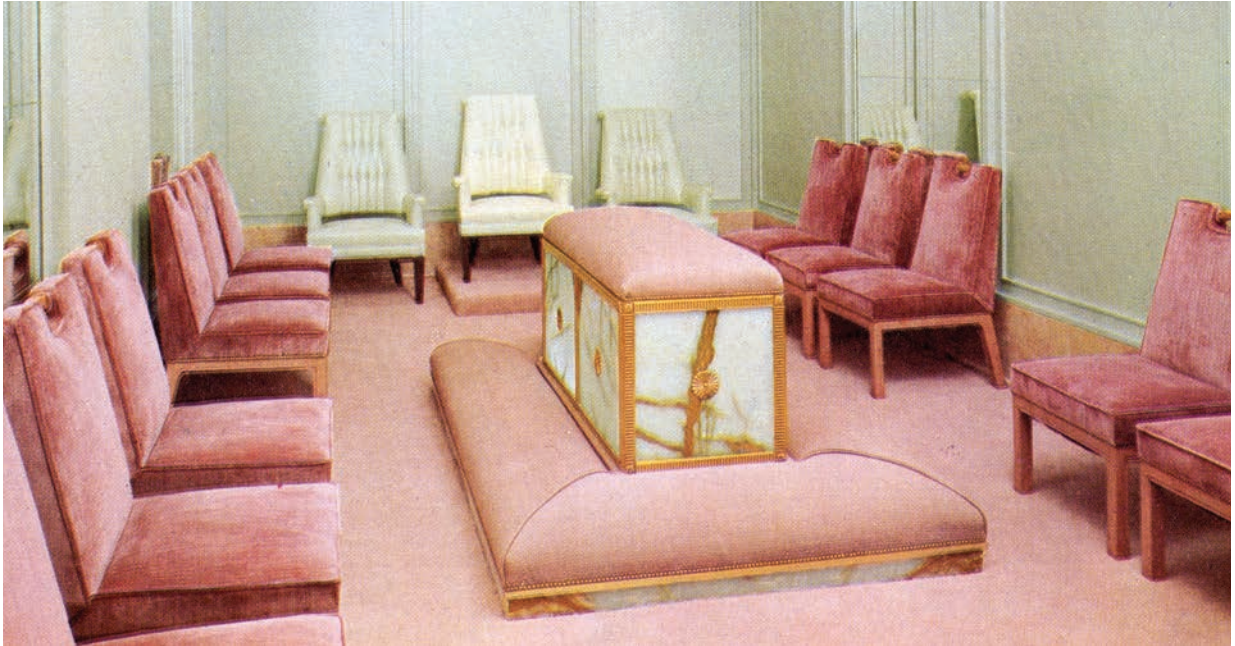
Frank and Violet Higham began service in the temple after retiring and completing a mission in Independence, Missouri. They were called to work Friday mornings until 3:00 p.m. and all day Saturday. In time, President C. Don Smith called Violet to be assistant superintendent on Saturdays. She was given a schedule of women assigned to Saturday work. She then placed them on a rotating schedule of assignments throughout the shift. Often workers called to say that they could not be at the temple that week, and Violet Higham would revise the schedule accordingly. She was a very conscientious woman who did the very best she could. Fortunately, there was some built-in

redundancy in the schedule; some assignments could be combined or separated as necessary. Violet Higham was also asked to learn some of the endowment ordinance in Spanish. She worked very hard on this and was quite pleased when she was finally able to do it well. The Highams often got up at three in the morning to be at the temple at opening time, and on occasion they missed lunch if the temple was very busy. They admitted that often they were so tired when they drove home that they forgot to fasten their seat belts.⁸

Becoming a temple sealer is a calling extended to only a few. A sealer performs the final and climaxing ordinance of sealing husbands, wives, and children together for all eternity. W. Glenn Harmon was one of the original seven sealers in the Oakland Temple. He traveled to Salt Lake to receive this special authority from Church President David O. McKay, and he served from 1964 until the early 1980s. As with other sealers, he “tied the knot” (his own words) for several of his own grandchildren in both Oakland and Salt Lake City.⁹

Frank Higham also received this special calling. His family met at the Church Office Building in Salt Lake City to honor him on the day of his ordination as a sealer. President Gordon B. Hinckley, a counselor in the First Presidency, was to officiate. Violet Higham expressed her gratitude to him for allowing members of the family to witness this setting apart. He responded in a kind but firm manner. “It is not a setting apart,” he said; “it is a bestowal of sealing authority. It comes directly from our Heavenly Father.” President Hinckley had been selected by Church President Spencer W. Kimball to perform this specific ordinance.¹⁰

Claude and Myrth Van Vliet started serving in the temple in 1981. “Our calling to the temple came as a bolt out of the blue. We were both working and we got a letter asking us to call the temple about a calling. We couldn’t believe it. Somebody who knew us pretty well thought we would be good temple workers. So they brought our name up. I guess they cleared us.” They gave two reasons for their long service in the temple: “There is a peaceful atmosphere within the temple, and it is a place to serve the Lord. You get a feeling of service here that you don’t get outside of the temple. Thirty years later we are still doing it. We would never not do it.”¹¹



A sealing room in the Oakland Temple. Originally printed in the *Improvement Era*. Courtesy of Craig Stewart.

Elwood Meredith became an ordinance worker upon his retirement. After a time he became an assistant recorder, an office which he held for a number of years. He explained, “I was set apart as an ordinance worker by Tom Byrne, who was a counselor in the temple presidency in 1973. That began twenty years of experience in the temple.” Elwood performed sealings. By his own account, he performed the total of a quarter of a million sealings in six years.¹²

Alan P. Johnson became a sealer in the temple. He was also a counselor in two temple presidencies and an assistant temple president—a temporary assignment—on another occasion. President Johnson was very eloquent about his favorite temple experiences. Speaking of “exercising the sealing power for live patrons,” he affirmed that “nothing else has such an impact in the lives of people. I love to administer the ordinances of the gospel.”¹³

In the late 1980s to the early 1990s, an interesting coincidence occurred. George Hilton (son of Eugene and Ruth) and his wife, Yvonne; and Pat Wright (son of Delbert and Gertrude) and his wife, Wanda, were ordinance workers, and Eunice Harmon Knecht (daughter of Glenn and Wanda) was a receptionist. All served for a few years on the same weekday and on the same shift. Considering that their fathers had played a key role in temple plans and service early on, it

Opposite: Courtesy of Marci Williams.

was appropriate that these family members were perpetuating the pattern of temple activity.

Temple workers often have highly spiritual experiences within the temple. These are considered sacred and personal, so they are not generally publicized widely.

Encouraging Temple Activity

One responsibility of a temple president is eliciting and maintaining interest in temple work from the members of his temple district. This responsibility is shared with numerous stake and ward leaders. Women usually perform more temple service than men; to equalize the numbers, special temple sessions have occasionally been scheduled especially for priesthood bearers. Finally, each ward has family history consultants who volunteer their time to teach others how to research and organize their own family records in preparation for temple ordinances, thus helping maintain interest in attending the temple.

Lorenzo Hoopes—known to everyone as Ren—and his wife, Stella, returned from their mission in Bristol, England, thinking that they would have free time for a while. Instead, Lorenzo was called to be an ordinance worker and then a sealer at the Oakland Temple. Within a few months, he became a counselor to temple president R. Don Smith, serving for two years until President Smith became seriously ill. The First Presidency of the Church deemed it appropriate to release President Smith in May 1985. Ren Hoopes was then called as president of the Oakland Temple, with Stella as matron.¹⁴

Very few temple presidents have prior experience in managing a temple but find that previous life experiences prepare them for the calling. President Hoopes elaborated on this point: “It has been my experience that there is not much difference between running a mission, a business, and even a temple. To be successful at any one of these things you must work through people. I have found in any assignment I have had that I could not do very much in and of myself. . . . You get things done by recruiting people, by training people and by hopefully motivating people, both those that serve and the patrons that come.”¹⁵



President Hoopes then gave attention to working with the 750 ordinance workers. One challenge was constant turnover due to their average age being in the seventies. Under President Hoopes's direction, temple leaders developed a mission statement. Their objective was "to see that every individual that comes to the temple has that joyful spiritual experience; they leave there with a desire to return often. So our entire effort is aimed at the achievement of that objective."¹⁶

President Hoopes and his counselors scheduled a series of dinner meetings in the temple dining room with each of the stake presidents in the Oakland Temple district. As a result, each stake had increased attendance. This increased attendance led to a renovation project to accommodate the growing number of patrons.

Temple Renovations and Miraculous Survivals

Over the years, ordinary maintenance at the temple has included cleaning, painting, and recarpeting. From time to time, special projects corrected problems or met specific needs. For example, in the fall of 1965—after the temple had been in service for about one year—unstable ground was observed on the slope 200 feet below the parking lot. The Church purchased this property together with four homes and five lots so that a heavy fill could be installed to prevent any further earth movement.¹⁷ Four and a half years later, a series of heavy rains caused new slippage on the hill, but the temple remained undamaged. Temple president Thomas O. Call affirmed, "We have had no slippage, no sliding, nothing. The temple is as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar."¹⁸

On December 29, 1988, the temple was closed for renovation for eighteen months. Temple president Hoopes remained on-site to make necessary decisions. The renovation was intended to enlarge capacity and provide a more efficient operation. Across the parking lot, a new visitors' center replaced the smaller one, which had been in the west wing of the temple. The vacated area in the temple was converted into two waiting rooms—one for guests from other faiths and

one for marriage parties. The terrace was sealed against water, and the roof garden was replanted. The recorder's office was moved, and an assembly room was added. To make these changes, much of the first floor was gutted to the bare structure. Two sealing rooms on the second floor were relocated to the third floor, and the second-floor sealing rooms became small endowment session rooms. With four rather than two endowment rooms, a new session could begin every half hour instead of just once an hour or so—a significant advantage in scheduling. Substantial temple renovations are occasionally followed by an open house and rededication ceremony, but this was not done at the time of the Oakland Temple's reopening in October 1990.¹⁹

The Oakland Temple has successfully withstood some rather diverse natural disasters. On October 17, 1989—while the temple was still closed for renovation—an earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter scale struck the Bay Area during the baseball World Series (which, interestingly, Oakland won). Known as the “Loma Prieta Earthquake,” the disaster resulted in widespread destruction. When a gas main burst, fires broke out in the Marina District of San Francisco. A small portion of the Bay Bridge's upper deck crashed down onto the lower deck, and over a mile of the double-decked I-880 freeway in downtown Oakland collapsed. In all, 62 people were killed and over 3,500 were injured. Fortunately, the Oakland Temple did not sustain any substantial damage, receiving only “a few minor cracks.”²⁰

Two years later—on Sunday, October 20, 1991—a brushfire broke out in the hills just above the temple. Known as the “Oakland Hills Firestorm,” it consumed 1,520 acres, destroying 2,843 single-family dwellings and 437 apartment and condo units, as well as killing 25 people and injuring 150 more.²¹ Even though the flames came as close as a mile from the temple, it suffered no damage. A sea breeze that arose shortly after the fire broke out even blew the smoke away.²²

A Multilanguage Temple

For over a century, the endowment was given only in English. But in 1945 temple ordinances were translated into Spanish and presented at the Mesa Arizona Temple for the benefit of the growing number

of Hispanic Saints. During the 1950s, temples were established in non-English-speaking areas, and immigrants increasingly came to US cities. A growing number of patrons did not understand English or used it only as a second language. The need for a more efficient and effective way of presenting temple ordinances in many different languages became increasingly apparent.

This need for translation was beginning to accelerate near the time the Oakland Temple was constructed. Because the Oakland Temple was the only new temple erected in the 1960s, it became a testing place for new methods of delivering the message of the endowment.

By the time the temple was dedicated, the Bay Area had served as a magnet for the immigration of Asians and other ethnic groups. Congregations of Tongans, Samoans, Chinese, and Hispanics began to grow among the Latter-day Saints. Later, large groups of Southeast Asians entered the Bay Area. The Oakland Temple's very architecture reflects this multicultural patronage.

Meanwhile, the 1950s decision to use films offered the means to present the endowment in many languages. This seemed to be simple enough, but some specific challenges arose. For example, Japanese requires more syllables, and therefore more time, to convey a concept than does English. Therefore, when the Japanese film was first produced, every fourth frame of the movie was repeated twice in order to give the Japanese narrators time to catch up.

Decades of experience have proved films (and later, video) to be an efficient way of conveying the message.²³ Temples have technicians as needed to provide a smooth-running system. Sophisticated electronic equipment enables patrons to hear the endowment in even more languages by using earphones. Oakland and other temples can also provide endowment sessions in American Sign Language.²⁴

Even children coming to the temple reflect its multilingual role. The Oakland Temple has a special place where the children are cared for while waiting to be sealed to their parents. This room has quiet toys for the youngest children, appropriate books for those who can read, and, of course, loving sister temple workers to care for the children. On one occasion, children speaking three different languages

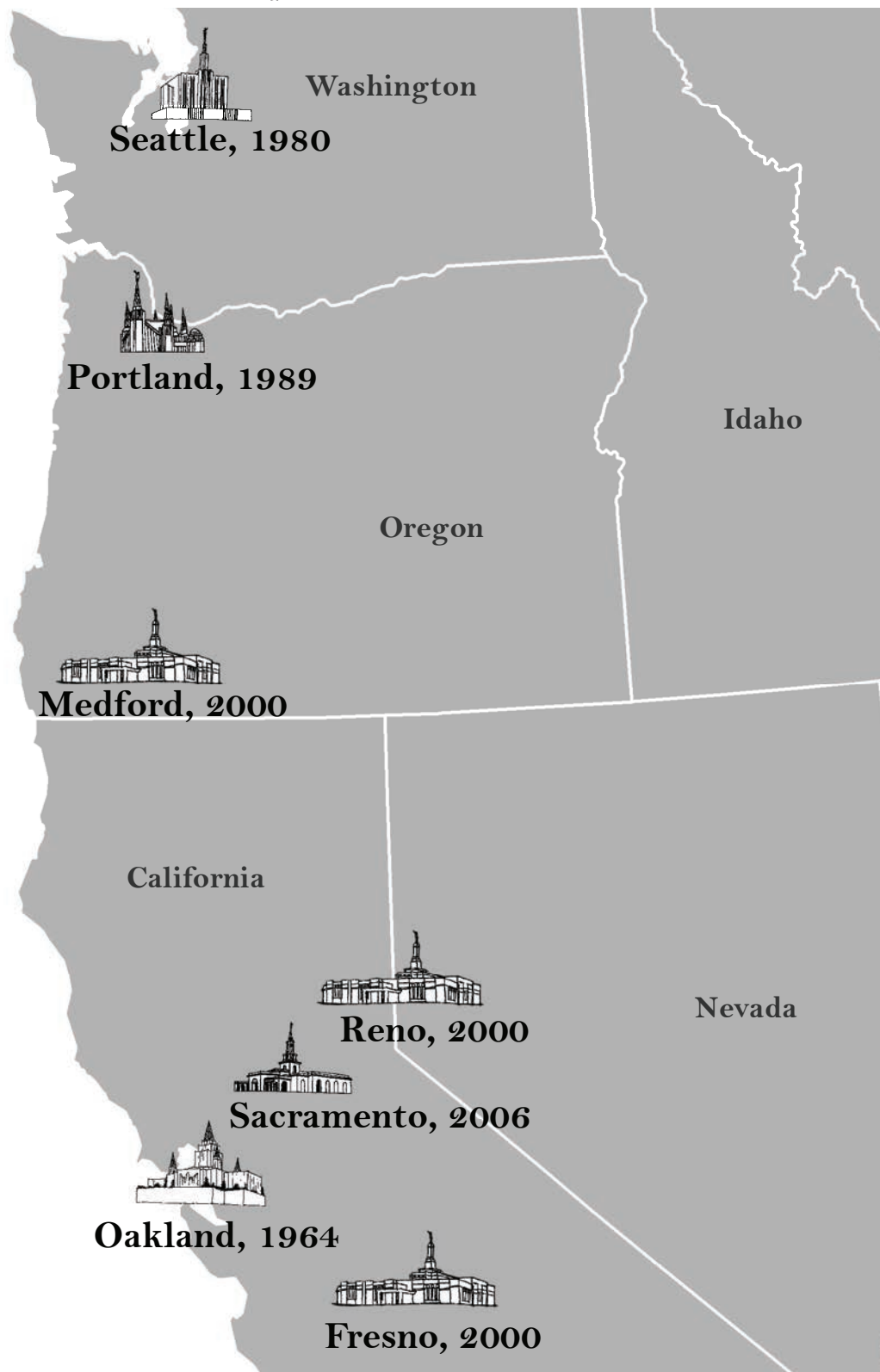
were in the room, absorbed in their own activities. The temple workers were holding two babies who were crying. When a teenager began to play “I Am a Child of God” on a keyboard, an eight-year-old Hispanic boy began to sing the words in Spanish. Soon, Tongan children joined in, singing in their own tongue. The babies quit crying and a special feeling of love permeated the room. Even though the children did not speak one another’s languages, they began playing together—unified by their love for a beloved, well-known hymn.²⁵

Population Changes

As the twenty-first century dawned, the Oakland Temple faced a decline in activity. Although the flight of many members from the center of the city to the suburbs may have been a contributing factor, the contraction of the Oakland Temple district was the major reason for the drop in attendance. The building of new temples and consequent creation of new temple districts caused Oakland to lose patrons as well as temple workers. Six temple districts have been carved out of the original Oakland Temple district: Seattle (1980), Portland (1989), Fresno (2000), Medford (2000), Reno (2000), and Sacramento (2006).²⁶ Predictably, the loss of the Sacramento area had the most significant impact on Oakland because of population and location. Temple president Richard Hunter stated that after each new temple district was formed, attendance went into a trough for a time but always came back up in a year or so. However, this was not the case with the completion of the Sacramento Temple. It was by far the nearest new temple geographically (being only ninety minutes from Oakland by freeway) and served the largest population. Therefore, activity level did not rebound as quickly as before. For example, earlier Oakland had expected forty or fifty marriages on a typical Saturday, but the number dropped to ten or fifteen. The decline in temple attendance was reversed in 2010, when the remaining Oakland Temple district showed a small increase in Church population.²⁷

Even though the level of attendance has declined, the temple continues to be a source of spiritual strength to the faithful Saints who do go, as well as a beacon to people living in the Bay Area—as

Temples in Former Oakland Temple District



Elder George Albert Smith had foreseen decades earlier. Thus, the Oakland Temple and Temple Hill continue to form a bridge of understanding between the Church and the broader community in the area.

Opposite: Temples in former Oakland Temple district. Map created by Think Spatial BYU; illustrations by Katie Jarman.

Notes

1. *Messenger*, November 1968, 6. For a list of Oakland Temple presidents, see appendix B.
2. O. Leslie Stone, “The Oakland Temple in the Making,” *Improvement Era*, February 1965, 110.
3. “Temple to Open Jan. 1965,” *Church News*, October 31, 1964, 3.
4. Robert I. Eaton and Henry J. Eyring, *I Will Lead You Along: The Life of Henry B. Eyring* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 104.
5. Nell Smith, “Oakland Temple Notes Anniversary,” *Church News*, November 20, 1965, 13.
6. John Hart, “The Kind Things,” *Church News*, January 26, 1991, 16.
7. Reed H. Chase, *Think on These Things* (Orem, UT: Noble, 1983).
8. Frank C. Higham, interview by Robert G. Larsen, 2011.
9. Eunice Knecht, remarks to Richard O. Cowan, December 8, 2013.
10. Higham, interview.
11. Claude and Myrth Van Vliet, interview by Robert G. Larsen, March 29, 2011, in possession of interviewer.
12. Elwood Meredith, interview by Robert G. Larsen, July 16, 1993, in possession of interviewer.
13. Alan P. Johnson, interview by Robert G. Larsen, March 18, 2011, in possession of interviewer.
14. For a glimpse into President Hoopes’s background and feelings about Temple Hill, see Greg Hill, “Temple Hill,” *Church News*, September 15, 2007, 8, 9, 13.
15. Lorenzo Hoopes, interview by Robert G. Larsen, November 16, 1988, in possession of interviewer.
16. Hoopes, interview.
17. “The Church in Action: Oakland: Property Bought Near Temple,” *Church News*, October 2, 1965, 4.
18. “The Church in Action: Oakland: No Damage to Temple,” *Church News*, February 7, 1970, 13.

19. "Oakland Temple to Close," *Church News*, November 5, 1988, 2; "Oakland Temple Reopens," *Ensign*, December 1990, 69.
20. "Oakland Temple Fares Well in Quake," *Church News*, October 28, 1989, 3.
21. Donald Parker, "The Oakland-Berkeley Hills Fire," San Francisco Virtual Museum, www.sfmuseum.org/oakfire/overview.html.
22. "Temple Unscathed in Oakland Fire," *Church News*, October 26, 1991, 5.
23. Frank S. Wise, oral history, "A New Concept in Temple History and Construction," 1983, cited in Devery S. Anderson, ed., *The Development of LDS Temple Worship 1846–2000* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 296–98.
24. A more complete discussion of material in other languages can be found at www.cumorah.com.
25. Saralynn Borrowman and Jill Van Orden, "Temple Service Reaps Blessings," *Church News*, March 5, 1994, 10.
26. For a list of stakes in the Oakland Temple district as it was in 1997, see appendix I.
27. Doug and Mildred Lindley, interview by Robert Larsen, May 18, 2011, 5.