

Thomas Wilson

Nauvoo, Illinois

Birthday: October 29, 1942

Interview on December 6, 2001, in City Hall by Libby Hanks

Eran Kraft and Carol McGhghy also present

Q. [Libby Hanks] How long have you lived in the Nauvoo area?

A. [Tom Wilson] Pretty much all of my life, except for military service. And I was a railroader for six years. I was gone most of the time.

Q. When did your ancestors first come?

A. They were mostly German and came from Germany—that is. my great-grandparents.

Q. What occupations did they pursue once they settled here?

A. They were farmers. One ran a blacksmith shop. One rode a lot of white lightning—whiskey.

Q. What occupations have you pursued in Nauvoo?

A. I'm a farmer and have been one since the '70s. Before 1 came here, I was a township supervisor. Then we left the farm, moved to town, and I ran for mayor.

Q. What do you particularly like about living in this area?

A. It used to be a nice, quiet place. But it's a little different lately. We're sure it'll get back to how it used to be.

Q. What events, traditions, and social or cultural characteristics make Nauvoo an attractive place to live?

A. It's just a nice, friendly town, mostly. The river. To go fishing and hunting. The grape festival. Q. What are some of the challenges that come with living here?

A. I don't know if there are too many challenges just living here. But as mayor we've had a lot of activity with all of the building and so on— people wanting to move to Nauvoo.

Q. What opportunities have you had to serve in civic office, community organizations, or church positions? Besides mayor, I suppose.

A. Being mayor takes in a lot.

Q. From your knowledge of the history of the area, what groups or individuals stand out in your mind as having made significant contributions to the growth and betterment of Nauvoo?

A. The history tells most of it. The Mormons were first, then the Icarians came along later. Other than that it's just a bedroom community: people live here and work other places.

Q. The Mormons, or members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, came to Nauvoo in 1839 under the leadership of Joseph Smith, a man they believed to be a prophet of God. Over the next few years they built a city with a population of over 15,000 people. Conflicts arose between the Mormons and the citizens of the surrounding areas that led to the Mormon exodus in 1846. What is your understanding of the causes of that conflict?

A. Oh, I don't know, because it is all hearsay. I guess at first the Mormons would go onto other people's property and tell them that the Lord told them to take their cattle. So they would round it up and take it to Nauvoo.

Then they got to having a militia and harbored a lot of fugitives there because nobody would come up and get them. Now that is all hearsay. As far as going to battle, I guess there were some battles between different militias.

Did you ever talk to Mike Trapp? He's told me a lot of things—he's a writer and researches it all. I didn't ever hear of anyone getting killed outside of Joseph Smith and his brother at Carthage Jail.

The 15,000 people—where would you put them? That was always my question. Because didn't every family have a house, a barn, and some horses? They would raise big gardens, so they would have had to go way out east to fit them all in—to get 15,000 in the area. I though maybe that number was exaggerated a little when you take into consideration that each family would take up three or four acres.

Q. What accounts or interesting stories of particular events associated with that time period have come down through your family or others in the community?

A. They talk about it. My great-grandparents lived in Niota. They didn't have much to do with the Mormons. There was people that lived way out in the county that were Mormons and had some really nice farms. When the Mormons went to Utah, these people stayed and became the Reorganized. That's the story I got. There are a lot of people that are relatives of the Reorganized Church [Community of Christ].

Q. Any of your relatives?

A. No, just friends of mine. I think that the ones that stayed here automatically became part of the Reorganized Church. I never did understand that, either. Is that what happens—everyone in the state just became Reorganized?

Q. Not all of them in the state, but some. I know that most of them who stayed here did become Reorganized, but not all of them.

A. In my high school, some of the kids were Reorganized Mormons, and they were no different than any of the

rest of us. At that time there were no regular Mormons here. Zero. We didn't understand until they started coming back and the restoration started that they are two different religions.

Q. Did your ancestors play any part in those events?

A. Not that I know of.

Q. Were any of your ancestors Mormons?

A. No.

Q. What is your understanding of the role anti-Mormon activists and newspapers played in stirring up animosity between Mormons and the citizens of the surrounding areas?

A. I have had some dealings with anti-Mormon people, especially during the *City of Joseph*. They don't cause any problems. They are handing out literature, but that's about the size of it. As far as any other anti-Mormon groups—I don't even know what the hell they call themselves. I think they are associated with the church lady up the street, Colleen Ralston and her Christian Visitors' Center.

Q. What is your understanding of how Joseph Smith was viewed by his enemies in the 1840s, and how he has been viewed by successive generations down to the present time?

A. People used to say that the Mormons would come onto their property, saying that the Lord told them to take their cows, and so they marched off with them. That's about the only negative thing I have heard about them. I guess they all give their tithing—ten percent, right? Do you give ten percent of everything you make?

Q. Yes. How do you think Joseph Smith is viewed today?

A. I don't know. People don't have much to say about Joseph Smith today. It's a shame he got killed. I never did read a whole lot of articles on him. I guess there is a lot of "anti" stuff in books, but I never read any of them.

Q. With the perspective of nearly 160 years of history behind us, what are your thoughts and feelings today about that period of Nauvoo's history?

A. It's certainly quite an achievement. It was one of the nicest and largest towns in Illinois. Maybe it would have been best if they would've stayed and kept their good work up.

Q. Are you familiar with the history of the Icarians who were here in the late 1840s and early 1850s? What legacy has been left in Nauvoo by the Icarians from their ten-year stay?

A. They brought the grapes and the wine and the cheese.

Q. Were any of your ancestors Icarians?

A. I don't think so. They were mostly Germans. The history of the Icarians—did you ever meet Dr. Lillian Snyder? She has an Icarian museum here.

Q. I don't believe so.

A. She's ninety-something, but she is pretty spry. She comes in and sees us quite often. She has quite a time keeping the museum going. She's a single lady, no children. She is trying to keep the Icarian heritage alive. I'm afraid when she's gone there isn't going to be much left of it.

Q. Do you know what caused the wine industry to decline over the years?

A. Prohibition was one of the big things back in the early 1920s. It lasted until President Roosevelt was in office in 1933, and that was the end of Prohibition. It didn't work. All it did was create a bunch of criminals.

Q. Were any of your ancestors involved in the wine industry?

A. Yes. Not so much wholesale or retail; they just made wine for their friends and celebrated a lot.

Q. Are you familiar with how the Nauvoo bleu cheese industry came about? How long has it been here?

A. I know when I was a young lad on the farm we would milk cows and sell the milk to the cheese factory. That was back in the forties. I really can't say what year they got going.

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

A. Several churches; they have been here for years. Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, now we got a Baptist, the RLDS—they had their church, which they still have. Now the Mormons. What do you like to be called—Mormons or LDS?

Q. Either one.

A. Now we have a new Baptist church out here. We used to have more taverns than churches; now we have way more churches than taverns. Things change.

Q. What have you heard about people's thoughts and feelings about what the Mormons have done over the past few decades in restoring some of the old homes and businesses in the Nauvoo flats and the coming of many tourists to Nauvoo? Have the changes been good or bad?

A. A lot of these Midwestern rural towns dry up like a mushroom. The tourist industry keeps this place going. It's pretty much all we've got going—a cheese factory, an elevator, and a little winery, and a lot of tourist attractions. That's what keeps it alive.

Q. What was your reaction to the announcement that the Mormon temple was going to be rebuilt in Nauvoo? What have you heard from others about their thoughts and feelings about the temple being rebuilt? How do you think the temple will affect things in Nauvoo?

A. All the old-timers around would talk about how the temple was going to be rebuilt one day, but nobody knew when. It was a pretty shocking announcement.

Right now we have all of this construction, so it is pretty hectic. You have all of the construction workers and the tourists too. As soon as they get that built, things will settle down to pretty much normal.

A lot of our concern right now is the temple open house—eight to ten thousand people per day. What are we going to do with them? We have committees working on that. We have to have bathrooms for them; they have to eat and sleep. We have some small motels, but it's the same way in Iowa across the river—they don't have anything to accommodate ten thousand people. The whole tri-state area doesn't. I don't know what is going to happen. It's going to be interesting.

Q. For the past few years there have been groups of Brigham Young University students coming to Nauvoo to study. What, if any, contact have you had with the students? What have you heard from others about their being here?

A. The students are coming in here all the time. Your dean or professor, he's in here. We don't have near as much contact with them as we do locals. But we do see them. All of the time there's more of them, and they are here looking at the town or jogging or running. And there is no problem with them.

Q. What of the future of Nauvoo? What would you like to see happen? What do you expect to see happen?

A. There are going to be some more motels built and more restaurants. Moderate growth as far as housing. As far as industry, I think that tourism will be our leading industry. One of the things that run this city is sales tax. I want to get people in here, get them to stay all night, get them hungry so they will come up to town and buy stuff, and pay that sales tax so my salary will keep coming in. That's about it. We don't see any drastic changes—there's going to be some.

Q. Do you have any other comments or observations you would like to make for the record?

A. It's been quite hectic at times with this building of the temple and the parking lot across the street. Streets closed and streets caved in, but nobody got hurt.

Q. Are you going to go to the open house of the temple?

A. Sure. I just went out and bought a new suit. I'm going to a wedding on Saturday, but I still got the suit.

Q. Well I'm sure you can use it more than once.

A. We've got along fine with all of the builders. Do you know Mr. Prince?

O- Yes.

A. He's a nice guy. There is a lot of pressure on him. Sometimes the streets get all full of mud, and I've got to call him so they can do something about it. All in all there have really been no big problems. We had a group in here that caused some problems—temple workers—but they left town. Some Mexicans didn't settle in too well. They did some stealing from the storage buildings up here.

Q. And they were workers on the temple?

A. They were, but they got rid of them.

Q. Other than that has it been an okay experience?

A. Yes. Sometimes I have a rough time finding a parking spot, but there are signs up that say that no construction workers should park here. That helps.

A street caved in down here. It was a surprise to them. We just worked around it. And they put in new streets and services. How can you complain about that? Things are getting back to normal already. The sidewalks are in now, for some of us, along with the ones we built ourselves.

One big issue that came up was rest rooms. The temple engineers wanted to put them in the park. People just didn't want them there. That was about the biggest issue that came up. So now they are putting the rest rooms in their parking ramp. That will solve all the problems. So tell us. What's the future of the Church around here?

Q. The homes being built down on the flats resemble the homes that were here in the 1840s. They will be for the temple president, who will come and live here, and the temple workers.

A. He's going to live next door to the temple?

Q. Right, and the temple workers will live in the homes.

A. When are you going to knock down St. Mary's Academy?

Q. I don't know what they are going to do with it. I know they are going to keep having students here. They already have it planned for next semester, but I don't know how long they are going to keep doing a school program. I know that you will have a lot more tourists because of the temple. I know I will be coming back.

A. Some of them won't exactly be tourists—they will be coming to use the temple. They figured that about five hundred people a day would be using the temple. That is going to be long hours.

A. [Carol McGhghy (secretary)] On the average, how many go through a temple a day?

Q. I'm not positive what the average is. but five hundred wouldn't be ridiculous, because you have a lot of people working in the temple.

A. [CM] Is it as busy every day as the days when you have a wedding or a baptism?

Q. I don't think it would be that busy every day.