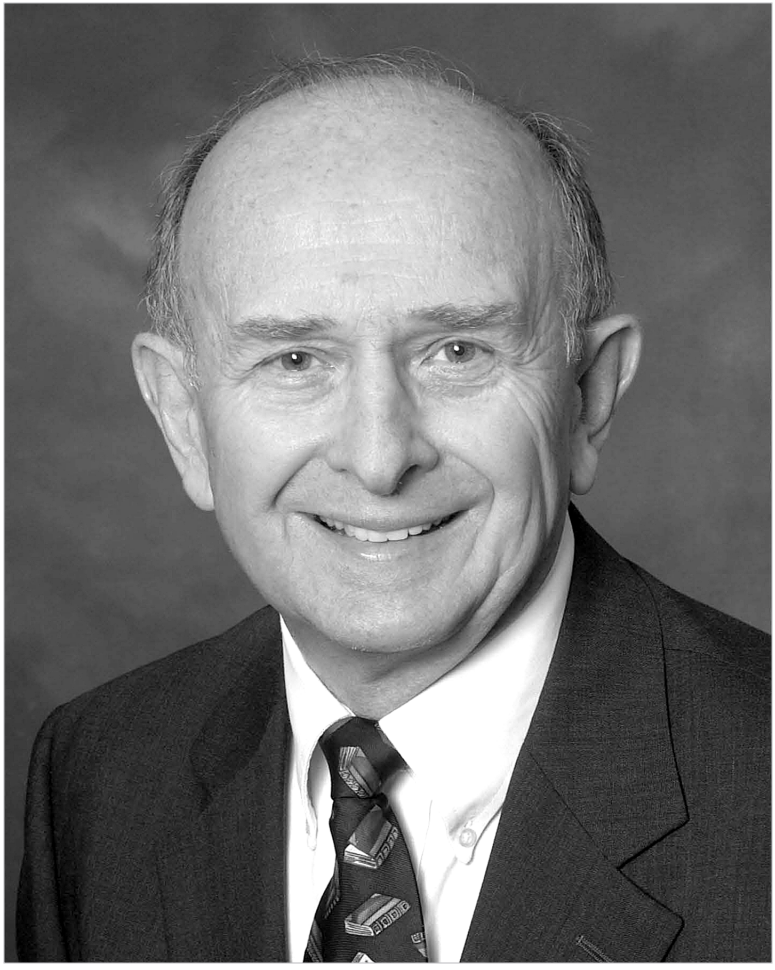

Thomas G. Alexander

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INTERVIEW BY DAVE HALL

THOMAS G. ALEXANDER, Lemuel Harrison Redd Jr. Professor of Western American History Emeritus at Brigham Young University, is an important leader of the New Mormon History. One of the most prolific historians of Mormonism and the American West, he has authored, coauthored, and edited twenty-six books and monographs and has published well over 150 articles. His books include *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930; Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet*; and *Utah, The Right Place: The Official Centennial History*. A fellow of the Utah State Historical Society and an honorary life member of the Western History Association, he has served in the leadership of numerous professional organizations.

DAVE HALL lectures in history at California State University, Fullerton, and Cerritos Community College. His publications include "A Crossroads for Mormon Women: Amy Brown Lyman, J. Reuben Clark, and the Decline of Organized Women's Activism in the Relief Society" in the *Journal of Mormon History* and "From Home Service to Social Service: Amy Brown Lyman and the Development of Social Work in the LDS Church" in *Mormon Historical Studies*. He is currently preparing a biography of Amy Brown Lyman for publication.

THE INTERVIEW

HALL: Tell us a little about your family, where you grew up, and your experiences in school. We would like to know how you ended up in history and where you are today.

ALEXANDER: We lived in a number of places before we moved to Ogden, Utah, when I was six, and essentially I grew up there. I was born in Logan, Utah, and my folks lived in Fillmore, Price, and Ephraim before we moved to Ogden. My father was a professor at what was then Weber College, now Weber State University, in the Engineering Department, and I went to the public schools in Ogden. I think the city had a conspiracy against me because it tore down the schools as I finished going to them—Lincoln Elementary and Mount Fort Junior High. Fortunately, the city didn't tear down Ogden High, which I attended. That building is probably the best example of Art Deco architecture in the state. Designed by Hodgsen and McClenahan, it was a beautiful building. I think I had a good education in the public schools in Ogden.

When I went to college, I had a scholarship at Weber in social studies, but my father thought I ought to be an engineer, so I studied engineering for two years. I still have an associate's degree in mechanical engineering. I went to the University of Utah to study engineering for a quarter and was then called on a mission to Germany. Going on a mission was difficult at that time. It was just after the Korean

War, and the draft board would only let one missionary go from each ward. But they would let a stake pool its mission allotments, so we actually had three missionaries out from our ward. All of us were good friends, and on our missions we sent a round-robin letter to each of us—one in Illinois, another in Brazil, and me in Germany. We had another friend, not from our ward but a close friend, who was in Finland at the time. It took about a year for the letters to get around, but we kept up correspondence with one another.

By the time I finished my mission I decided that I really did not want to be an engineer—something I had already thought about before I left for the mission field. When I came back, I spoke with Dello Dayton at Weber College. Dello had been an adviser to the Phoenix social club that I was in, and he was a historian. I told him that I wanted to major in history, so I decided to go for a quarter to Weber to try to pick up some classes I hadn't had. I took a couple of classes from him. When I finished those classes, I asked him to write a letter of introduction for me and talked with him about various places I could go. He suggested Utah State.

So I went to Utah State and worked with S. George Ellsworth and Leonard J. Arrington. I also took a number of classes from Judd Harmon, and I finished my undergraduate degree with a dual major in history and political science. I started doing some research work for Leonard Arrington while I was there. The last summer I was there I couldn't work for him because I was finishing my master's thesis. Before I left he told me that he would like to hire me the next summer.

I went to the University of California at Berkeley for my PhD, but during the year I didn't hear anything from him. Then, in a fortuitous accident, I met him in the library at Berkeley. He happened to be there one day just at the same time I was. I reminded him that he had asked me about coming back to Utah State to work with him. He hired me then to come back during the summer, and the two of us collaborated on a series of articles on military defense installations in Utah. Essentially, I would do the research and write a draft, and he

would work through the article. These articles were published in the *Utah Historical Quarterly* and the *Pacific Historical Review* while I was still in graduate school. That experience launched me into my career as a historian. Today, many students have already published before they finish advanced degrees. Then it was unusual, but I had six articles published before I finished the PhD.

As I was finishing my PhD at Berkeley, I started looking for a teaching position. A number of positions were available then because of the expansion of higher education. Unfortunately, the situation became much worse about five years after I graduated. At the time, however, there were a lot of history jobs. I was offered a position at Fresno State University in California and at Brigham Young University (BYU). Fresno State wanted me to become its specialist in California history. Well, when my wife, Marilyn, found out that I was considering Brigham Young, she said, "Oh, you don't want to go there. That's the enemy!" Both of us had graduated from Utah State. Nevertheless, we agreed that I consider the position, and after some negotiation I accepted the offer at BYU.

Interestingly, Marilyn is now a dedicated BYU fan. She's even got a license plate with "MA4BYU"—"M" for Marilyn, "A" for Alexander, then "4BYU." I could have gone to Fresno State since I had worked as teaching assistant for Walton Bean in California history classes, but I was really more interested in Western history, and particularly Utah and Mormon history. I did my doctoral dissertation on the financial aspects of the relationship between the Interior Department and the Intermountain Territories from 1863, when Idaho and Arizona territories were organized, to 1896, when Utah became a state. Idaho had already become a state in 1890.

HALL: What led you to that topic?

ALEXANDER: It was actually a suggestion from Leonard Arrington, who said the subject was something that probably needed to be done. Eventually, I published the dissertation, somewhat revised, as

a book under the title *A Clash of Interests: Interior Department and Mountain West, 1863–1896*.

HALL: Who did you work with at Berkeley?

ALEXANDER: At Berkeley I worked with Walton Bean, but Mario DePillis was on my committee, and also Gunther Barth. Charles Sellers was in charge of the examining committee. The doctoral committee was separated from the committee that did the examinations.

HALL: What was your experience like at Berkeley as a graduate student?

ALEXANDER: It was mixed. There were about five hundred graduate students at Berkeley at that time, so you didn't get a whole lot of personal attention. I had a very bad experience with Carl Bridenbaugh. I took classes from Clark Spence (he was there on a one-year appointment) and from Mario DePillis. Clark and Mario have become lifelong friends. I did very well in those classes. I also took historiography from Raymond Sontag and did very well. But I didn't get along very well with Carl Bridenbaugh, who almost torpedoed me.

HALL: What was his problem? Just personality conflict?

ALEXANDER: I think it was partly a personality conflict. Fortunately, he left Berkeley for Brown University the year before I finished up the examination, so I didn't have to deal with him anymore. I finished the PhD and then took the position at Brigham Young University. I was on the faculty at BYU for forty years before I retired. The last twelve years I had an endowed chair, the Lemuel Harrison Redd Jr. Chair in Western American History. I was able to teach Western and Utah history classes, and I originated the environmental history course at BYU. I have done some research and publication in that field, particularly dealing with the US Forest Service, and with ecology and the environment of the Wasatch Front area.

HALL: What was the History Department like at BYU when you arrived? Who was there and how would you characterize it?

ALEXANDER: When I came to the History Department, there were about thirteen faculty members. When I left, there were thirty-five, so the department grew a great deal over the time I was there. I really like the people in the department. My closest friends in the department were James B. (Jim) Allen and Ted J. Warner; the three of us and our wives did a lot of things together. The first year I was at BYU (1964), Jim, Ted, and I drove in Jim's old Plymouth station wagon to the Western History Association meeting in Oklahoma. Ted and I were a bit embarrassed to ride with Jim, who had a "Goldwater for President" sticker on the back of his car. We traveled a great deal to history conventions together after that.

After I joined the faculty at BYU, I continued to work on articles with Leonard Arrington and then eventually published my doctoral dissertation. In 1972 Leonard was called to be the LDS Church Historian. At the same time he moved from Utah State to BYU, where he was appointed to the Redd Chair and as director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. It was at that time that he asked me to serve as assistant director of the Redd Center. Because Leonard was living in Salt Lake and spending most of his time at the Church History Department, my position really was more like executive director because I carried on the day-to-day operations of the center. We had an office for Leonard, who taught classes at Brigham Young, but he spent most of his time in Salt Lake City until 1980. He and I consulted regularly on the Redd Center, and we worked together in planning the center's programs, such as the lecture series, monograph series, and research awards program. In 1980, when the Church History Division was moved down to BYU as the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History, he was appointed director of the institute. Because of his directorship of the institute, the university asked me to become the director of the Redd Center, and I remained in that position from 1980 until 1992.

So I was in the Redd Center administration from 1972, when it was organized, until 1992, when I was appointed to the Redd Chair. I saw most of the growth of the Redd Center during those years. In the meantime, I published several books: *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* and the biography of Wilford Woodruff. Jim Allen and I coauthored *Mormons and Gentiles: A History of Salt Lake City*. Later I published independently *Grace and Grandeur: A History of Salt Lake City*, and I've added in a number of other books and over 120 articles.

HALL: You have got to be one of the most prolific scholars around, and certainly, as Jan Shipps has said, you are probably the only one for whom she has not read everything you have written. You have produced a huge amount of history. How do you account for your productivity?

ALEXANDER: I have a lot of interests in a lot of different things, and for me, doing historical research is kind of like detective work. You find out something that nobody else has ever known or has known in the way that you know it. You do research on the subject, and then you organize the research and put it into words for the public. History is just something that interests me.

One of the problems that many historians have is that they are willing to do research, but they don't commit the research to paper. Doing research is a lot of fun, but writing is hard work. To try to write something—to get the words on paper, to get them to sound right, and to get them to make sense so that people can read and understand them—is simply very difficult. I think that is the thing that stops most people who do not publish very much from publishing. They just have a hard time getting the stuff down on paper. You've just got to force yourself to do it. My theory is that if you have problems with something, you just sort of push your way through it and write on.

Jim Allen introduced me to the computer in about 1983. He said he had gotten a computer, an Apple, and wondered why I

was not using a computer. I said, "Well, why should I do that? I write a manuscript, I give it to a secretary, and she types it up and gives it back to me. Then I go through the manuscript and edit it. Afterward, I give it back to her, and she types it up." He said, "Yeah, but editing it is so much easier on the computer than giving it to someone." He was right. I got a computer, and I've used it as a word processor ever since. The first computer I bought for myself was one of those IBM Luggables. They weighed about fifty pounds and were about as big as a coffee table. You were supposed to carry it with you to do research. It was almost impossibly backbreaking, but you did it.

HALL: Do you see yourself as a workaholic? Do you always need to be busy? Your output is just phenomenal.

ALEXANDER: I'm not happy if I'm not busy.

HALL: Was your family like that?

ALEXANDER: Yes, my father was always busy. I really did not have a great relationship with my father. He was never at home very much. He taught night school during the week. He was never very active in the Church. My mother's family was always active. My brother, sister, and I always went to church, but Dad did not go with us. He seemed to me to be a hard person to get to know very well, but the funny thing about it is that when I went to college, I found out that he was extremely popular as a teacher, and the students thought he had a great sense of humor—a sense of humor that I did not ever see. He was much closer to my younger brother than he was to me. Still, I think I probably inherited that workaholic tendency from him. I've always thought I've needed to work hard. I have an almost puritanical sense that if I am not working hard I am failing or being immoral in some way—that it is wrong not to work hard. I must say that I have slowed down some in the last couple of years. I do not work as many hours as I used to. I am into my seventies now, and I get tired more easily than I used to.

HALL: Before I forget, what was George Ellsworth like as a teacher?

ALEXANDER: George is probably the best teacher I have ever had, and he mentored me in that regard. George was an excellent writer—an excellent word craftsman. Leonard Arrington took George's class in historical research and writing at Utah State when he was there, and I took the same class, though later than Leonard. George was a brilliant teacher, but his productivity in publishing never matched that of Leonard. I think I would say that George mentored me as a word craftsman and as a teacher. Leonard mentored me in research and writing—how to get things done. He always worked hard at writing.

HALL: My impression is that you and Leonard were similar in the approach you took toward mentoring students. Leonard kind of took you under his wing, put you to work, and then you published things together. You have kind of done the same thing.

ALEXANDER: I have done the same with a number of students. You and I did several things together. Rick J. Fish and I, and Harvard S. Heath and I, did several things together, but I have never published with others to the extent that Leonard did. He published a whole lot of things with other people. I think that was partly his background in economics; that's a model that most economists use. Historians, on the other hand, tend to do things alone rather than as a group.

HALL: What was Leonard like to work for, or rather to work with?

ALEXANDER: Leonard was a person of unbounded optimism—always friendly, always open. He worked hard. He expected you to work hard, but he was always in excellent humor, very jovial and very optimistic about things. One of the things that Leonard taught me was how to get along well in the profession with people who were not Latter-day Saints. Leonard was always open and

friendly with people who were not from the Latter-day Saint community, and he always got along well with them. I learned that from him, and I think I have been able to do that, too. From 2005 to 2007, I served on the council of the Western History Association, and I have served since the 1970s as parliamentarian of the association. I have been a member of the council and president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association. From 2006 to 2008, I served as president of Phi Alpha Theta, the national honor society, and I, at the time of this interview, was still on the executive committee of that organization. I have tried to be open to work with people. I think some Latter-day Saints get a kind of holier-than-thou attitude, or they are afraid to risk being friendly with those who are not members. Some of them are turned off by the habits of other people. One of my friends, Don Pisani at the University of Oklahoma, told me about one of our BYU undergraduates who went to Oklahoma on a fellowship. He was assigned to work as Don's teaching assistant. Don said that at the beginning of the semester he takes the students over to a restaurant where they sit down together, and he talks with them about their assignment. They have a meal together, and he orients them to what they are going to be doing during the course of the semester. Well, this student said, "I can't go there. That's a bar." Don sat him down and pointed out that the place was a restaurant. He said further that he had been to a lot of different meals with me. Don pointed out that at these meals he has his wine or a cup of coffee and I do not. He said that neither of us cares about that in the sense that it disrupts our relationship at all. Don is, in fact, one of my best friends in the history profession. Some of his personal preferences are different from mine, but he is one of the most moral and honest men I have ever met. I think Don was able to convince the student that he could go to a restaurant that served liquor and still not compromise his standards.

HALL: This is one of the things I wanted to bring out. What do you think the value is of this kind of association with other historical

groups? You seem to know nearly everybody that I come in contact with. So what is the value for a scholar—for a Mormon historian?

ALEXANDER: I think that the historical profession is a fraternity in a sense, and you have to know these people for a number of reasons. In the first place, they are people who are writing important things that students need to read and that you need to read. It is important to understand how their minds work in those things, and sometimes you can get that more easily by informal contact with them than by just reading the things that they write. You can learn a lot from other people.

HALL: Let me ask this question. When I hear this question, I always think of Marvin S. Hill, because Marv told me this one time about teaching at BYU. He said, "Sometimes I think it's the most wonderful place in the world to teach, and at other times I wonder, 'Why am I here?'" What do you think the benefits and the challenges have been as an educator at BYU?

ALEXANDER: I have never had the thought that I should not be here. A lot of what you think about your position at BYU depends on what you make of the position. I really liked teaching at BYU, and part of the reason for that was the people I got to work with. I cannot think of a finer group of men and women to work with than the faculty in the History Department at BYU. I get along well with them. The other advantage I had was that I was able to do research and writing while I was there. I had all the money I needed to do the things I needed to do and to go to conferences and so forth. I talked with colleagues from other universities who told me that they had a difficult time finding sufficient funds to go to conferences, that their funds were limited, or that they had to spend a lot of their own money to do those things. I did not have that problem at BYU because of the position I had at the Redd Center, which helped considerably in that regard, and it was also the willingness of department chairs and colleagues to support the work I was doing. While I was at BYU, the university moved from being what I would consider a second-rate institution to a first-rate research

institution. The president of the university might not say it publicly, but if you look at the university's standards for promotion and tenure and for salary increases, it is true. The rewards of being a faculty member at BYU really depend a great deal on how much you are able to publish, or whether you are publishing in well-recognized scholarly journals and things of that sort. I would say that this was something that attracted me to BYU during the time I was there. I would probably still be actively teaching and doing research at BYU if it had not been for the fact that we were called on a mission in 2004. I had to make a decision then if I was going to accept that mission call. I actually retired a year earlier than I was going to. I had an agreement with the dean that I could keep the Redd Chair until age seventy, and that would have been in 2005. But the mission call seemed important to me.

The Church Educational System wanted Marilyn and me to go to Berlin and to work at the LDS Institute of Religion—to work with young single adults. We were to teach a class in LDS Church history and help activate young single adults, and that seemed to me to be important. Interestingly, my department chair then, Neil L. York, was very much opposed to it. He said, "Your mission is here at BYU." But I talked to the dean, David Magleby, who thought it was a wonderful idea. In fact, he knew that I was president of the Pacific Coast Branch of the American History Association, that I was president-elect of Phi Alpha Theta, and that I was on the council of the Western History Association. So he worked out an arrangement with the area president, who at that time was Marlin K. Jensen, to allow me to come back for conferences from Berlin. This allowed me to remain active in the profession during the time we were on our mission.

HALL: You said that the academic standards at BYU improved dramatically during your years at BYU. Who was responsible for these changes?

ALEXANDER: I think there are a number of people—Dallin H. Oaks, Jeffrey R. Holland, Rex E. Lee. All of them were responsible. All

of them had academic aspirations themselves. All of them had academic backgrounds, and they understood that if the university was to achieve any kind of recognition, faculty members were going to have to compete with faculty members at other universities on the same basis. We simply could not say, "Well, we're a teaching institution and a religious institution, and we have different aspirations." BYU is certainly different. The university has a dual heritage—Athens and Jerusalem—but it has to compete with other universities. President Kimball's second-century address in 1976 emphasized that. He said that we need to be bilingual—to speak the language of faith and the language of scholarship.

HALL: Maybe we can talk a little bit now about your association with the Mormon History Association. When did that start?

ALEXANDER: The Mormon History Association was organized in December 1965. I had been on the BYU faculty then for just over a year, but the prime mover in pushing for the organization was Leonard Arrington. We had a number of preliminary meetings in connection with an organization called something like the Utah Council on Higher Education—I do not remember the exact name for it, but it was something like that—which met at various places, and we had decided that we wanted to organize an association of Mormon historians.

HALL: So about whom are we speaking?

ALEXANDER: The people involved in that were Leonard Arrington, George Ellsworth, Jim Allen, Davis Bitton, Wesley Johnson, Richard L. Bushman, and Richard Poll. In organizing we included some people who worked in other fields but who had some interest in Mormonism, like Ted Warner and De Lamar Jensen. In addition, there were some people who were not Mormons, such as Merrill Wells, director of the Idaho State Historical Society. At any rate, we decided to have our organizational meeting at the American

Historical Association conference in San Francisco in December 1965. We each had a number of assignments. One of my assignments was to try to find a place where we could hold the meeting, so I arranged that. Leonard arranged a program. We decided how we were going to organize, and a number of other things were done.

We met together in San Francisco and held an organizational meeting. For several years after that we met in conjunction with other historical organizations—the Pacific Coast Branch of the American History Association or the Western History Association. We were able to get status as an affiliate organization of the American Historical Association. We decided to elect Leonard as the first president—the logical choice. Eventually we were large enough that we felt we could hold a separate annual meeting. Of course, since then the organization has grown extremely large. We are limited now on the places we can hold the meetings because we have seven hundred to one thousand people who come to the annual meetings. Enormous groups of people attend. You have attended the meetings and know how big they are now. I am not sure that any of us understood when we formed the organization that it was going to become as large as it is today.

HALL: Why did you feel that there was a need for an organization like this?

ALEXANDER: By that time a great deal of interest in the history of the LDS Church had developed. The Church was growing rapidly at the time, and various people had shown an interest in the history of the organization. We believed that as a field of study the history of Mormonism warranted an organization that focused on that subject. The Church's history has a number of interesting and significant events and movements. Among them are the communitarian movement, problems of persecution, the growth of the organization, the Church's missionary system, the Church's colonization in a large section of the Intermountain West, the development of

irrigation, the kinds of ecological and environmental problems the Church has faced in this region, and the conflict with the federal government during the late nineteenth century over theocracy and the practice of plural marriage. All of these are topics of interest not just to people who are Latter-day Saints but to people who have an interest in the history of religion in the United States as well.

As you know, the Church has continued to grow rapidly; it now has about thirteen million members. We have more members outside the United States than in the United States. It has been one of the most successful religious organizations formed in the United States. Its history has continued to interest large numbers of people.

HALL: What relationship do you think there is between the New Mormon History (which you might want to define) and the Mormon History Association?

ALEXANDER: The people who have been critical of the New Mormon History really do not understand that those who have promoted the New Mormon History have been generally faithful historians—people active in the LDS Church who are interested in trying to explain the Church as a religious organization in ways that can be understood not only within the Church but by people who are outside of the organization as well. It is not, as some have insisted, a form of positivism. Rather, it is a group of faithful historians who are trying to understand the history of what to them is essentially a religious movement and who are willing to accept on their own terms the religious experiences of Church leaders and Church members.

HALL: So you think this approach was basically a rigorous scholarly approach?

ALEXANDER: I think partly it was. It certainly is if you look at the work of people like Leonard Arrington, Davis Bitton, Jim Allen, Richard Bushman, and others. The kind of work they have done would be generally applauded by people who are in the Mormon

History Association and recognized by people who are on the outside of the organization as well.

HALL: Do you think the Mormon History Association has been an important factor in gaining acceptance for scholarship regarding Mormonism in the larger academic community?

ALEXANDER: Yes, there is no doubt about that. The organization, of course, has its own journal now, but members from the organization have published about Mormon history in other national journals and in scholarly presses as well. The Tanner Lectures have been another thing that has helped. In these lectures, people who are not specialists in Mormon history are asked to look at their field as it relates to Mormon history and then to give a lecture about those aspects. Some important national and international scholars have participated in the Tanner Lectures.

HALL: You were president of the Mormon History Association. Do any particular highlights stand out, not just during your presidency but throughout your experience with the association?

ALEXANDER: The publication of the *Journal of Mormon History* and the ability then to attract larger numbers of people and people who are willing to present papers at the organization's meetings. I would not cite anything particular as a highlight. One thing that has been important has been the ability of the organization to bring together those from the former Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ) with people from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and carry on a dialogue, and also to bring in people who are not Latter-day Saints—people such as Jan Shipps, Sarah (Sally) Barringer Gordon, Larry Foster, and Mario DePillis—to join the discussion as well. From the Community of Christ that includes people like Bill Russell, Richard Howard, and Paul Edwards.

HALL: One of the things that strikes me about the meetings of the Mormon History Association, even though it has gotten very big, is that there is still a camaraderie, a closeness in the association, that you do not see in other historical associations.

ALEXANDER: I think that is true. My wife, Marilyn, enjoys going to the Mormon History Association meetings. She is not a historian, but she has a good association with the people who are members of the Mormon History Association. A lot of others, either husbands or wives who are not historians, also come. They have a fine association with one another as well. Bob Flanders told me on one occasion that he considered the Mormon History Association to be sort of like his church.

HALL: Let us talk a little bit about some of your scholarship and maybe about how you got involved in some of these projects. We will start off with what I think is the blockbuster, although there are a number of blockbusters in your career, but the one that moved me the most and really brought me into contact with you was *Mormonism in Transition*, which is such an important work. How did you get involved in that?

ALEXANDER: In the 1970s, one of the proposals that Leonard Arrington made to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve while he was Church Historian was to publish a sixteen-volume history of the LDS Church. He proposed to do that by inviting various historians to write on particular periods of Latter-day Saint history. He asked me to write a history of the Church from 1900 to 1930, and I agreed to do that. In many ways it was breaking new ground. The only thing that had been done to cover that history had been part of the last chapters of B. H. Roberts's *Comprehensive History of the Church* and the work by James Allen and Richard Cowan on the Church in the twentieth century. These had been overviews rather than exhaustive investigations of the early twentieth century. No one had really done an in-depth study of the Church in that period before.

In doing the research and writing, I was extremely fortunate. I had access to virtually everything I wanted to see—the diaries of General Authorities, minutes of the Quorum of the Twelve, records of the Presiding Bishop. Virtually everything I could think of that I wanted to see I was able to look at. In doing both the research and the writing I was able to envision the project quite broadly—to look at the Church's relationship to politics, the development of doctrine, the internal development of various auxiliaries and organizations in the Church, the kinds of problems that Church members had during this period, the effort to deal with plural marriage after the Church decided that it was no longer going to authorize the practice—in short, the myriad problems, challenges, and opportunities that the Church faced during that period. What I saw essentially was that the Church was really quite successful in dealing with those problems in spite of the difficulties it had and the opposition from outside. When I was finished with the manuscript, it was taken to the Quorum of the Twelve, and they could not decide to go ahead with the publication of this or any of the other volumes that had been completed; and only part of the books that were commissioned were completed—I think only about five or six out of the sixteen. Some of the authors ran into health difficulties. That was the case with T. Edgar Lyon, who was to do the book on Nauvoo; that volume was turned over to Glen M. Leonard, who eventually finished the book.

HALL: I think that was Eugene E. Campbell's problem. Wasn't he working on one?

ALEXANDER: Yes, he was working on one. He was not able to finish it because of health, so Fred R. Gowans finished that book for him. At any rate, they could not decide to go ahead and publish. Church leaders agreed to reserve the right for Deseret Book to publish the books as a series if the company chose to do so, but then they let us go outside and find publishers. Richard Bushman found a publisher at the University of Illinois Press for *Joseph Smith and the*

Beginnings of Mormonism, which dealt with the period down to 1830, and I also published with University of Illinois Press. Some of the books have been completed since and have been published by Deseret Book. Glen Leonard's book *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, a People of Promise* was published in 2002 by Deseret Book, which has never taken up the option to publish my book, though it still has the right to.

HALL: I was not aware of that option.

ALEXANDER: Yes, Deseret Book still has the option if it wants to. My book, I think, was quite successful. I got the best book award from the Mormon History Association for *Mormonism in Transition*.

HALL: The thing so striking to me, and which I have subsequently learned that is striking to many people, was that it was breaking new ground. In many ways it still stands alone for a whole era. We are starting to get a little bit of scholarship out on that period, but it is such an important book about such an important time in the Church. There are those who, surprisingly perhaps, are troubled by the book. Is there anything you can say about that? It is probably linked to the larger issue of the New Mormon History.

ALEXANDER: Some were troubled by it because I tried to deal forthrightly with problems the Church had during that period, such as problems with its members in defining doctrine. And it had problems with plural marriage, especially new plural marriages, during that period. Some people like to think the Church's doctrines were cast in stone in Joseph Smith's time and that there were not any problems after that. And some would like to argue that in 1890 the Church gave up plural marriage and that there were not really a lot of difficulties with it after that time. But the historical record simply does not bear that out. The Church had to deal with many problems in both those areas, and it was quite successful in handling them during that period. But there are people who do not like to talk about the problems.

HALL: I found the tone exactly as you have described it. The Church was successful in dealing with these challenges—the Church organization functioned eventually and essentially as it was supposed to, which was to deal with the challenges of the new era as they came up. Let us talk about some of the other books you wrote. How did you get involved with Jim Allen in writing *Mormons and Gentiles: A History of Salt Lake City*?

ALEXANDER: Pruett Publishing Company in Boulder, Colorado, approached Jim about doing a history of Salt Lake City. Jim and I had worked together on a couple of articles before that time, and I told him I would be interested in working with him on that. So we agreed to publish *Mormons and Gentiles*. What we did was agree to divide the chapters up. I did the chapter on the Progressive Era and the one on the period since the Second World War. Jim did the middle of the nineteenth century and the study of the 1930s. We agreed I would be listed as the lead author. We had published *Manchester Mormons*, which was an edition of William Clayton's 1840–42 journal. We had agreed that Jim would be listed as lead author for that book. Gibbs Smith published that book. Thus when we agreed to do a second book, we agreed that I should be listed first. Both books, however, are the work of both of us equally.

HALL: *Mormons and Gentiles* was also a path-breaking work. . . .

ALEXANDER: John S. McCormick had published *Salt Lake City: The Gathering Place*, and there had been some work on the city before, such as Edward Tullidge's work. Some of our work redid the work of others, but we carried the story down to the present, and that had not been done comprehensively before.

HALL: You brought up *Manchester Mormons*. How did you and Jim Allen get involved in that project?

ALEXANDER: Jim was approached by someone from the Clayton family—Comstock Clayton, I believe. They had found a

journal of William Clayton's that dealt with the 1840–42 period in England, and Jim asked me if I would be willing to work with him on editing that journal. We worked together to do it. It deals with what was happening in Manchester and in England after the LDS missionaries left from that first mission when Heber C. Kimball led the mission to England. It considers the people who were members, the problems they had, and their migration to the United States, to Nauvoo, to join the Saints there.

HALL: Obviously it went well, because you subsequently did the next book.

ALEXANDER: Interestingly, *Manchester Mormons* was supposed to be the first in a series of Mormon diaries that Peregrine Smith, an imprint of Gibbs Smith, was publishing, but it was the only one that appeared in the series. Peregrine Smith did not follow through to do further diaries in that series.

HALL: How did you get involved with your biography of Wilford Woodruff?

ALEXANDER: Signature Books had published the Woodruff diaries. Gary Bergera from Signature Books approached me and asked if I would be interested in publishing either an abridged version of the diaries or a full-scale biography of Wilford Woodruff. I thought about it for a little bit, and first I told him that I would like to do an abridged version of the journal. I called him back within a couple of days and told him, no, I would really rather do a full-scale biography of Wilford Woodruff. I explained that I thought that his life was important enough to have a biography that went beyond the things that Matthias Cowley had done. I did not know at the time that Francis M. Gibbons was working on a series of biographies on Church leaders. Had I known, it would not have mattered anyway, because I was interested in doing something quite different from what he did. So I undertook that project of writing the biography, and it also won

the Best Book Award from the Mormon History Association and the Evans Biography Award.

HALL: What were some of the challenges of writing the book?

ALEXANDER: A number of things. In the first place, the image that members of the Church and scholars have generally had about Wilford Woodruff was completely wrong. The general impression was that he was this old farmer from New England, and that was not the case. Wilford Woodruff was a student at the Farmington Academy, a classical New England academy. He would have studied Latin, Greek, and other things like that at the academy. It would have been equivalent to a junior college education but different from the kind of junior college education one would get today. So he was well educated, and you could tell that from the journal. As you would find with many people, there were some misspelled words, but his grammar was good. He was insightful. Information on his continuing education appears in his journal. He recorded in the journal the things he was reading, and he read widely.

It was a very interesting experience to work on that biography. I spent some time in Connecticut going through school records and other things that had come from his experience there and learning more about his background and family. I was able to get access to other papers. I was able to use a collection of Woodruff family papers at the University of Utah. I was able to see a number of things relating to Woodruff and his family that had not been published before—the kinds of family relationships he had, how his plural family worked, and what he did as President of the Church. I was able to deal with some of the problems he had when he became President. There was a great deal of antagonism toward George Q. Cannon on the part of some members of the Quorum of the Twelve, and it was interesting to see how President Woodruff was able to deal with those. He was quite forthright in the journal until he became President of the Church, and after that there were a lot of things he did not talk

about in the journal. And I was able to deal with some other things in connection with his life.

HALL: So he emerges as a much more vigorous and intellectual person than is often portrayed?

ALEXANDER: Yes, he was also an extremely spiritual person—a person very much in tune with the Spirit. That is one of the reasons I picked the lead title for the book, *Things in Heaven and Earth*. What is very interesting is that the year I published that book, I had seen Hamlet three times. The title of the book actually comes from Hamlet's discussion with Horatio where Hamlet says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Horatio was a very secular kind of person, whereas Hamlet was in tune with ghosts and witches and other things, and that struck me as a good description of Wilford Woodruff's feelings as well. So I picked that as a title for the book.

HALL: How long did it take you to write that?

ALEXANDER: It took about three years.

HALL: Very impressive. What about your book on the history of Utah? How did you get involved in that?

ALEXANDER: *Utah, the Right Place* was actually for the centennial of Utah statehood. Richard Sadler was the chair of the centennial committee, and Max Evans was director of the Utah State Historical Society at the time. They envisioned a multivolume history of Utah of four or five volumes dealing with different periods, and then one volume would cover the entire history of the state. When they asked me if I would be interested in participating in that project, I told them I would be. I would like to write the single volume—the history of the state—and they agreed with that. So I finished the volume and it was published in 1995, a year before the centennial. Since then I have done two revisions—one partial

revision and another major revision of the book. I am kind of disappointed in what has happened since that time. A number of people have used it as a textbook in Utah history classes, but Gibbs Smith has allowed the book to go out of print, and now it's not being published any longer. I have had a number of people, particularly Gene Sessions at Weber State University, who have tried to get me to find another publisher for it. I have actually talked with John Alley (who was then at Utah State University) to see if they would be interested in trying to get Gibbs Smith to release the copyright so they can publish the book. They are currently publishing *Utah's History*, which I was also involved in. I was one of the editors for that, but it is woefully out of date. I think *Utah, the Right Place* would much better serve students in their classes than *Utah's History* would. Some teachers have told me that they have been able to get Gibbs Smith to publish packet editions of it or to allow the universities to publish packet editions of the book.

HALL: There is definitely a need for your more thorough, up-to-date version. I know you have also done a lot of work in Western history and in environmental history. You worked on some projects for the US Forest Service, but where did your interests, or involvement rather, come from in that regard?

ALEXANDER: I have been interested for some time in the way in which this region developed and what happened over time in its development. I was approached by a research company that wanted to put a proposal in to the Forest Service to do a history covering the Forest Service in the Intermountain Region. The Intermountain Region, or Region Four, covers Utah, Nevada, Idaho south of the Salmon River, Wyoming west of the Continental Divide, and a small area in Colorado and Arizona. I agreed that I would write that history if they got the contract. They got the contract, so I wrote the book, and it was published by the Forest Service. I have since written an update to it, but it has not been published. That led, really, to an

interest in what has happened over time in the Wasatch Front region, and I projected the possibility of doing a book on the Wasatch Front. I have never completed it, but I did an article that was published in the *Western Historical Quarterly* dealing with the Wasatch Front and what has happened over time in that region. I still hope to sometime to be able to do a book on that.

HALL: I know environmental history has a great deal of interest to you. Do you think that there is a Mormon aspect of environmental history?

ALEXANDER: Oh, I think there is no question about that. The Mormons, of course, were heavily involved in the development of Utah and the Wasatch Front region. Some Mormon leaders played various roles in the environment. Reed Smoot, for instance, was chair of the Senate Committee on Public Lands and Surveys. I published three articles on the role he played in various aspects of environmental history. People in Utah do not really understand how important his role was. Before he was ever involved with the Senate Finance Committee he was chair of the Committee on Public Lands and was a strong supporter of Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot's conservation programs. He was responsible for the development of a number of pieces of legislation. He also was responsible for the designation of the first two national parks in Utah—Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks. I was so impressed with his role in those matters that I used his role in the creation of those two parks as my presidential address for the Pacific Coast Branch of the American History Association.

HALL: You have had a very long association with the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies. Tell me a little about how that came about.

ALEXANDER: As I mentioned, when Leonard Arrington left Utah State to come to BYU, he was appointed director of the Redd

Center, and he asked me to serve as assistant director. Subsequently, I served as associate director, and when he left to become director of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute, I became director of the Redd Center. It is interesting. When he asked me if I would do that, the idea was that I would serve for maybe a year or two until Richard (Dick) Poll could be brought back to Brigham Young University from Western Illinois University. He would then serve as associate director of the Redd Center. It was my good fortune and Dick's bad fortune that Charlie Redd did not like Dick Poll.

HALL: Why did he not like Dick Poll?

ALEXANDER: I don't really know. The two of them were neighbors in Provo. But he did not like Dick, and he did not want Dick to be associated with the Redd Center. So that project simply did not get off the ground, and as a result I stayed at the Redd Center. So it was partly because of Charlie's prejudice that I remained at the center. I should say, I had an excellent relationship with the Redd family, and while I was director we were able to raise additional money from the family. I developed an excellent relationship with Charlie's nephew Carl Butler. Carl and his sister donated considerable funds to establish the Butler endowment at the Redd Center while I was director. And I was able to get the Redd Foundation to double the basic endowment for the Redd Center during the time I was there. William (Bert) Wilson helped considerably with that because he got President Rex Lee to match the money they gave. The family agreed that they would contribute the money necessary if the university would match that money. The Developmental Office did not want to do that, because it would mean that they would need to come up with half a million dollars over a five-year period. But Bert went to Rex Lee, who was then president of the university, and got him to intercede with the Development Office to agree to do it. So the family agreed to contribute to that money, and the endowment for the Redd Chair in the Redd Center doubled as a result. The money we got from Carl

Butler and his sister amounted to something in the neighborhood of $750,000 to $800,000, making the endowment significant. So when I left the center, it was in excellent financial shape, partly because of the work I had done in fund-raising. I should say that I certainly did not regret fund-raising. I enjoyed doing it because of the people I was able to work with. I still have an excellent relationship with the Redd family members. I had an excellent relationship with Annaley Redd, Charles's wife, until her passing. Annaley was an interesting person. She and Charley had broad interests. Annaley almost considered me a part of the family. When we would go down to the ranch and La Sal, Annaley had a sign saying she did not let anybody else come into her kitchen to work in there. One day she was doing something in the kitchen, and I went in and started helping her. She said, "Oh, you can come and help. You're part of the family." I still consider Hardy, Paul, Robert, Becky, Maraley, Regina, Beverly, and Kathy to be good friends.

HALL: What was the purpose of the original endowment and the subsequent endowment?

ALEXANDER: The Redds were interested in having the story told of the people who settled and developed the West.

HALL: So, very broad?

ALEXANDER: Very broad, and what we decided to do was to define the scope of the Redd Center's interest as the Mountain West. An awful lot of work was being done on the Pacific Coast and the Plains, and Leonard and I discussed the matter. We decided we did not want to move into those areas. At first we decided to do a monograph series, and we were successful in publishing a number of monographs. But that kind of died out. At the same time we had a lecture series. We had a monthly lecture first, but the interest in that seemed to decline as well, and now the center has two lecturers a year. I was succeeded as director by Bert Wilson, then by Edward A. "Ed"

Geary afterward. Brian Cannon is the present director. I held the Redd Chair from 1992 to 2004 (when we went on our mission), and now Ignacio Garcia holds the Redd Chair.

HALL: What is the purpose of the Redd Chair?

ALEXANDER: The Redd Chair is like chairs at other universities. It is endowed with the funds from the grant the Redd family made. That supplements the salary of the chair holders. The chair holder is expected to do research and writing in the field of Western history. Of course that is what I did while I held the chair, and Ignacio is continuing that. His interests are somewhat different from mine, and that is fine. He is interested in Hispanics in the West, and there is no reason that should not be a part of Western history.

HALL: What projects are you involved in now? What things do you have on your agenda?

ALEXANDER: When we were in Berlin, I had a heart problem. I had an episode of tachycardia, which meant that my heart was beating at 185 beats a minute. I was taken to the hospital and could have died—because when your heart is going that fast it simply will not stop, and it does not pump enough blood into your system. I had had episodes of tachycardia before, but they had always subsided—only this time they didn't. The doctors actually had to zap me to reset my heart. You see in the movies the doctors coming in with the paddles and people jumping up three feet off the gurney. I did not know what had happened, because I was sedated at the time. After they had reset my heart, the doctors did an angiogram. They found that one of my arteries was 70 percent blocked, so they implanted a stent there. They had scheduled a procedure to cauterize the node that was causing the tachycardia. When the Missionary Department found out that I had had the heart problem, they sent us home immediately, and I had the problem treated here in the United States. After I was better, we were

reassigned to the Church History Department, and I was asked to work there as an editor on the Mountain Meadows Massacre project. The authors of the study were Richard E. "Rick" Turley Jr., Ron Walker, and Glen Leonard. They had a contract with Oxford University Press to write the book. I was not writing for them; I was working as an editor, and I spent most of my time editing and rewriting the section on the period that Rick Turley had drafted about what happened after the massacre. We were to be released from our mission in December 2005, which would have fulfilled the eighteen months of our mission. However, Elder Marlin Jensen at the Church History Department asked me to continue working on that project, and so I continued to do that into early 2007. At the time, the directors of the department agreed that they could probably get along without me. In the meantime, I have several other projects that I have been working on.

I was invited to give the Arrington lecture last fall at Utah State University, and for that paper I used some of the research that I have been doing for the Mountain Meadows Massacre. I looked into the Church officials' investigation of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. I came to a much different conclusion than Will Bagley and others have. I think that the Church leadership really undertook a serious investigation of the massacre and eventually found out what had happened. Bagley thinks it was all a cover-up and that Brigham Young himself had ordered the massacre. I think he is wrong about that. I do not think he has the evidence for it. He has used a lot of that rhetoric in his book, and he lets rhetoric substitute for evidence, which I think is not a good historical method. I also did a paper on the role that the federal judges played in the coming of the Utah War. I presented that at the Mormon History Association meeting, and I used it, with some additional work, as my presidential address to the Phi Alpha Theta Society in January 2008.

Before we went on our mission, I signed a contract with the Edward Hunter Snow family (Edward was a son of Erastus Snow)

to do a biography of Edward Hunter Snow. I had to put that on the back burner while I was working on the Mountain Meadows Massacre project; but I have been working on that project, and I have since finished that biography. I also agreed to give a paper on the role that David Eccles played in the development of the Utah Construction Company. I gave that paper at a symposium in October 2007 at Weber State University. So I am working on a number of projects, and I am working on a couple of encyclopedia entries, one on Brigham Young for Gordon Bakken at California State University, Fullerton, and a couple of others.

HALL: So you have enough to keep you busy for a while.

ALEXANDER: Right. I keep myself off the street, except when I am out walking in the morning. I try to walk a couple of miles each morning.

HALL: How would you sum up your contribution or the things you have tried to do as a historian?

ALEXANDER: I think I have tried to further our understanding of the history of Utah, the Intermountain West, and the Latter-day Saints. I have tried to help readers gain a better understanding of the relationship between the Latter-day Saints and the federal government. The first articles I published—which I wrote independently—were articles on some of the judges. My master's thesis was on the federal judiciary in Utah, and I published an article on Charles S. Zane and one on James McKean. I think I would probably revise the McKean article if I were to do it over again, because it left the wrong impression with readers. I indicated in the end of the article that I thought McKean used bad judgment in the way he dealt with the Mormons, especially with Brigham Young and the Church leadership. Some of the people who have read the article thought it was a whitewashing of McKean. The article on Zane, I think, stands very well. Zane was interested in upholding the law, but he was also willing

to accept the surrender of the Latter-day Saints after the Manifesto. He dealt fairly with city authorities and others, and he gladly worked with the Mormons and others in dealing with problems in the territory to achieve statehood. The people appreciated his work so much that they elected him as the first chief justice of the Utah Supreme Court. *Mormonism in Transition* pushed forward frontiers of knowledge on the history of the Church in the twentieth century. The biography of Wilford Woodruff revised our understanding of what Wilford Woodruff was like. It also helps us understand what he was about—how he related to the rest of the Church members and how he went about making changes in the late 1880s and early 1890s. I hope my general history of Utah has helped our understanding of the state, particularly in the twentieth century. More than half of our history since the settlement of Utah by Euro-Americans has taken place since 1900. Other histories have not really dealt with that history in a way that it ought to have been. I devoted more than half of that book to the period since 1900. The work I have done on the environmental development of Utah, on the Forest Service, on the Wasatch Front, on Reed Smoot, and on Sylvester Q. Cannon has helped increase our understanding of these individuals and events. I think a number of different things I have done have been useful in helping people understand the history of the LDS Church, the history of this region, and the history of this state.

HALL: What are some of the challenges for Mormon historians and those involved in writing about Mormon history?

ALEXANDER: I think one of the major challenges is getting out of the nineteenth century in the history of Mormonism and of Utah. I must say that I have contributed to some of that problem, because some of the research I have done has been in the nineteenth century. But we really need to better understand the history of the Church and of Utah in the period since 1900 and especially since 1930. No single volume has been written on the history of the period

after 1930. Jim Allen has been working on trying to finish his work on that period, but he has not been able to publish it yet.

On the history of the Church, we really need to better understand the growth of the Church. We need to have some histories that focus on the people in countries other than the United States. We know a great deal about the people in Utah in the nineteenth century, but we do not know as much about the people in other areas. Now more than half of the Church's members live outside the United States, and we really do not understand them very well.

HALL: Any last thoughts about how you would like to be remembered as a Mormon historian or a historian in general?

ALEXANDER: Well, I hope that I am remembered as a good and an honest historian—one who has tried to help other people as well. I hope I am remembered that way. I have tried to be honest because I think that honesty is the single most important attribute a historian can have. So I hope to be remembered as an honest historian.