REMINISCENCES OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE HONOLULU TABERNACLE
by J. Frank Wooley

I'm really flattered to be here in the presence of all of you who are more literate than I. When I see all of the PHD's listed here, I'm wondering why I am here. So I have a great deal of humility as I talk to you this morning and share with you some reminiscences of this building and the property that it's on. If I have a little difficulty keeping on the subject this morning I hope you will be kind. I'm the first grandson to engage in the struggle for life. He was born this morning three months ahead of schedule—he's very small and has a very difficult time going. And so, I ask the Lord to bless me that I can put into words the emotions that are in my heart when I look out on this building and recall some of those glorious days, the early development of this Church organization, particularly of the State. I have one more thing to say by way of a preface: I would like to apologize in advance if I take a little literary license and read into some of the characters and events some things that may not have been there. But as I look back on that early period, there come together in my mind certain perceptions that I think have some validity. I hope they do because they make an interesting story and I will try to present this to you in that context of that perception.

Our story really begins in 1935, as it applies to this building, when the Oahu Stake was first organized. You all know that the missionaries first came to Hawaii in 1859, so eighty-five years later the Church organization had grown from that humble beginning to some 13,000 members. And it was deemed time by the General Authorities to organize a stake, the first stake of Zion in the Pacific, the first stake offshore of the American continent. This was to be the 113th stake of Zion. Prior to that our meetings of the Church in general, had been held out in Lahi and then subsequently in Kalisi. Both facilities were of limited size and accommodated the Church population rather well at those intervals of time. But now that we had 13,000 members it seemed to be an appropriate time to move on to a stakehouse. Prior to 1935 the Church organization was the Hawaiian Mission and all the development of the Church prior to that time was under the auspices of this organization.

So we come to the organization and founding of the Oahu State of the Church. In the selection of Ralph Wooley as state president, Edward Clissold and Arthur Facer as his counselors, the leadership of the Church displayed its wisdom and foresight, in my judgment. There was a little controversy surrounding the selection of President Wooley. At that time in his life he was particularly active in the Church. He was a very successful businessman, a very successful builder. He was active in politics and public life, and he had clearly established himself as a leader. So the Church, in its wisdom, decided that the choice of Ralph E. Wooley was the best choice that they could make to pull together this organization and set it on its way. And that turned out to be a prophetic choice, even though I may be somewhat prejudiced in that view.

In 1935 Honolulu was a tranquil, lovely place to live. The population was not very large. The streets, although narrow, were not heavily trafficked, moving around was relatively simple and easy. That may seem strange, and it is particularly easy, and it was just relatively easy, and it was relatively fast and beautiful to live. When the state organization was put together it was clear to me that Ralph Wooley decided that if the Church was to really grow and live up to its potential that it needed some impetus, it needed some forceful direction and it needed a leader. If you think back prior to 1935 when the Church was under the direction of the mission, most of our properties, particularly the little chapels and meeting houses were in the back streets of the community and the less congested sections and out of sight, relatively speaking, to the more prominent buildings. The Church really didn't have much of an image, and if you wanted to go to one of the meeting houses you had to know where it was, because it wasn't that prominent. I think that one of the very first things that Ralph foresaw was the need to give the Church some visibility, and it seems to me that he set out right away working toward that objective.

The acquisition of this land really began in that year, 1935. One of Ralph's many businesses was a little firm called Home Factors, which was oriented to land development, so he was active in the land acquisition business even at that time. When this property became available he was quick to see its potential because it lay at the intersection of Kalakaua, which was the main thoroughfare in Waikiki, and Beretania, and it was, if you will, the Wilshire Boulevard of Honolulu. This seemed to be a very logical site for the tabernacle for it would have a high degree of visibility and easy accessibility because, if you remember we had street cars in those days and there was a street car line that came along King Street and went up Punahou Street, and Pauoa Junction which was only a block away from here, was a main junction point for that municipal transportation system. So it seemed logical from that perspective too.

The building that we are sitting in today, for me characterized three historical elements. One was the obvious triumph of a virtually faultless design, a faultless construction system that created this marvelous building. The second was both the beginning and the end of a concept of meeting house by the Church. I don't think that the Church buildings in the past were anywhere near as grandly done as this one is, and the last of its kind, at least in this part of the world. Now we build stake centers that have the same element as this does, but are more practical, flexible structures and are more easily removed to changing times.

The third one that I see is that this marked the destiny, if you will, of that man Ralph Wooley, who had already participated very actively in the creation of the first, and up to that point, the most important Church building in the Hawaiian Islands, the Mormon Temple, where he served as construction engineer in charge of that project. So I'd like to dwell on these three elements in considering this building.

The first that I mentioned, the triumph of good architecture and good construction methods, I think, is evident from the fact that the building is nearing as well as it is. When this land was
acquired in 1935, the Church was a little bit reluctant to pick up a site as large as this, and perhaps their consideration was that it was rather expensive, even though building in this particular area, from the Campbell family, was not the same family that is identified with the Campbell Estates. This man, Campbell, was a broker in town and I recall him sitting on property that began at the corner across the street from Central Union and extending down here to the beach. This parcel was acquired first. The original acquisition was in 1935, according to the records that I have, and it seems that the Church was not about very soon after the commission of the architectural firm of Pope and Burton to prepare plans and specifications. The plans were subsequently approved in 1936. Brother Burton, whose firm had previously designed the temple in Lai, was only too happy to have another opportunity to create an artistic edifice here in the Hawaiian Islands. He came over and actually moved into a little shack on this property and lived while he thought about how he might create this building.

It wasn't long before he realized that there were some significant trees on this property and some very significant landmarks, and that he wanted to preserve as much as possible. I was a teenager at that time but I can remember talking to him about that and I was very impressed that an architect would go to that extent to get the sense and feel of a piece of property before designing a building to go on it. He seems to have succeeded. The main drawback is that he preserve several of the important trees that were on the property. The banyan tree in the foreground is obviously a classic example of a banyan tree in Hawaii, and it was well preserved to this day. It is a very old and revered tree, very rare. Unfortunately, or fortunately I think more likely, it doesn't bare. I believe it originally bore every seven years or so, but I can't remember more than one time that it bore fruit, and that's perhaps just as well because it would have littered up that nice patio out there. That courtyard incidentally had a great deal of personal significance to me, for I was married there and many members of my family have been married there, so it has a great deal of personal history for me. He wanted to save a marvelous mango tree that was in this back courtyard and a sausage tree which was very rare. So given those considerations we managed to design the building around those trees and preserve them. The landscaping that was subsequently done complemented those trees, I think you'll agree.

The project was a grand one for the Church in 1935, but the budget for this project was around $300,000 and it seemed President Woolley and his counselors foresaw a general upgrading of other church facilities to be accomplished concurrently with the construction of this building. A project to beautify the existing wards and chapels was undertaken at about the same time. The cornerstone was laid down after the construction was completed. The building must have started around 1940 and took the better part of a year to complete. I can remember working on this project during the summer. I was away at engineering school and would come home during the summer and work here and so that I could save a little money. I remember returning after a full week's hard work in whatever they did in engineering school and vanishing. I'll tell you some of the details later if there is time.

As you can see from the building, it houses a great many things. It had an auditorium, particularly the state. This main assembly hall was designed to accommodate 1000 people, the social hall was designed to accommodate 100 people, the Ha'ikuli Hall chapel was designed to accommodate 200 people, and the hall that would have been used by the male speaker all could hear. This was the intent. It is unique to note that the dedication weekend more than that were accommodated, people stood in the corridors and out front in an effort to be a part of those dedicatory ceremonies. Out in back, as you know, there were classrooms, a kitchen, a Boy Scout room, a Sea Scout room, a Relief Society room, baptismal font, many other features of that kind all built into this marvelous building.

The design of the building is pretty hard to pin down to any one discipline. Brother Burton himself said that the key element in this was climate, that because of the favorable climate he could take much more liberty with the design of this building than he might otherwise be required to do. He didn't want to be tied to any established religious forms and so he decided to conceive a building that was somewhat original in church design. I think he succeeded in that. If I were to try to identify a type of architecture, I would say that I see a similarity between the building here and the architecture of the Nephites, who got their architectural influences from the Israelites, and that would seem familiar to me in looking at some of that ancient Incan and Mayan architecture.

The building itself was poured mostly of concrete and was poured sensibly. Now what that means is that the builder avoided the usual joints and axes and blemishes that are found in concrete construction by being very, very careful. When we poured concrete, for example, we poured from many to random to try to avoid having to cold joint or joint any of the pour. I think as you look at the building today that still you cannot find any lines of demarcation from one pour to another. Dr. Burton especially said so that it would not be necessary for plastering contractors to come back in and create the embolisms and the little details, the designs that were drawn into this building. All of these little forms that you see, all the little shapes and recesses were all poured in place and were therefore reflected in the forming that was especially put together for this building. The roll-in sections in the corridors, for example, were made out of steel so that the forms could be reused and so that they would impart to the concrete a degree of smoothness that they would not have to come back and polish up. So what you see now is the building as it came out of the forms. It is without any question the outstanding single example of concrete construction in the state of Hawaii. There hasn't been a concrete job before or since that has exceeded this one. It was truly an labor of love and an engineering feat. In part of the building the wood furnishings that are built into the building are all Philippine Apitong wood, a very hard wood. Fortunately it's a
hard wood because we've had, almost since its construction, a termite problem here on the property. Many of you remember that our older buildings, foundations of older buildings that were here, had been badly termite damaged when the Church acquired the property.

I mentioned a beautification effort by the Church at the time that this was all put together. In the $300,000 budget there was allocated for the construction of this and other buildings were provisions for a chapel at Papakōlā and at Kākā'ako. Of course we know about the Waiʻaleʻale Ward chapel that was an integral part of this building, so all four of these buildings were announced and presented to the public at the same time. Unfortunately, the Kākā'ako chapel was never built and subsequently the Waiʻaleʻale Ward, I believe that's correct, because the equivalent of that chapel. Shortly after that time, ward buildings were planned for Kahana, for Pāla, Hālau, for Wahiawa— as a matter of fact, the Wahiawa chapel became an emergency project because of the ongoing war. The Church felt it necessary to provide facilities for servicemen at Schofield Barracks so Wahiawa was given a high degree of priority. The chapel and recreational halls were put together for Kākā'ako, Hilo and Hōkūleʻa, Hōkūalani along about the same time. The welfare program was implemented under the state leadership at that time too, and there was a brief period when a cannery and other welfare facilities were installed on the property next to us.

Going back to the property aspect of things, just for the historical record, I should note that the property on the corner we have here is the property and was once the cannery that I mentioned was one. There was, on weekends, nothing much more than a parking lot for this building. There was a big old house on it that was immediately pressed into service as a soldier's home during the war years and was identified as Waiʻaleʻale. It subsequently became mission headquarters for the Hawaiian Mission. It became the Japan Mission headquarters for a brief period of time and then became the headquarters of the Hawaiian church mission. It was used in a variety of ways before it was finally razed. Now you know that the property has become a condominium and reverts to the Church at some distant point in time under the terms of the lease agreement. The office wing is planned to revert to the Church when the building is completed. It was subsequently put to very good use in various forms. It served as the site for an E.K. Fernandez circus that was oriented toward raising money for the Church and the Church realized about $250,000 in profit from that big circus or carnival, whichever it was. Brother E.K. Fernandez, as most of you know, was a member of the Church and a very successful businessman of his day. When the circus was subsequently taken over by the Coral of Engineers and used to house or to park vehicles and one thing or another, and was subsequently released. President Hooley leased it back from the Church after World War II, had his automobile dealership working there and subsequently built the Fordland building and the auto dealership that is on the other side of it which are less than five years at the present time. These buildings will subsequently revert to Church ownership.

By August of 1941 the construction of this building came to an end. Matter of fact, construction was completed the night before the dedicatory ceremonies were to begin, so there was a very close call. The cornerstone that I mentioned earlier was laid on Saturday the 16th of August, 1941 and contained some thirty-seven items for future generations. Among those was a list of 2780 names of people who had contributed to this building. These were tractor tires, there were coins in use at the time, there were the standard works of the Church; a list of the General Authorities that were in office at that time, and so forth. The dedication was held on Sunday the 17th. President David O. McKay was here at that time, and it was rather unique that President McKay in his dedicatory prayer blessed this edifice that had missile equipment in the event of any war. Now this took four months before Pearl Harbor, so that had some one of the prophetic statements uttered in this part of the world. Earlier, in 1939 or 40, I'm not clear which, the land was dedicated to the construction of this building. Elder Hoover of this Church and Elder Cutler of the same Church, Elder Cutler conducted the ceremonies and it was said that some of the saints who were then in attendance at that groundbreaking ceremony had seen British ships standing behind Elder Cutler as he uttered the dedicatory prayer.

I've used up most of my time, but I would like, if it's all right with Sister Pratt, to share with you a few vignettes that I have surfaced during the research that I have put into this piece of work this morning that I think have a great deal of human interest. One of them concerns Brother Tom Rhyerson. Brother Rhyerson whose wife was a staunch member of the Church, had maintained an arse many years. But he was so moved by the beauty of this structure and by the plans for the development of the Oahu State that he entered into an agreement with President Clissold that if he could be the first person baptized in the new baptismal font he would join the Church. President Clissold agreed to that and, in fact, performed the ceremony. This led subsequently to a mandate in Tom Rhyerson will that President Clissold conduct the funeral services. So there was the the origin of a very intimate relationship between these two men.

Then the property bears some reference. The land to the town side or end of the little area that runs down here has been the site of the Kapilolani Maternity and Gynecological Hospital which was the site of a cluster of帧ite at the beginning when the Church first acquired it. It was subsequently put to very good use in various forms. It served as the site for an E.K. Fernandez circus that was oriented toward raising money for the Church and the Church realized about $250,000 in profit from that big circus or carnival, whichever it was. Brother E.K. Fernandez, as most of you know, was a member of the Church and a very successful businessman of his day. When the circus was subsequently taken over by the Coral of Engineers and used to house or to park vehicles and one thing or another, and was subsequently released. President Hooley leased it back from the Church after World War II, had his automobile dealership working there and subsequently built the Fordland building and the auto dealership that is on the other side of it which are less than five years at the present time. These buildings will subsequently revert to Church ownership.

Another little vignette concerned my father who on December 7, 1941 was comfortably ensconced in that little chapel that adds on to this building. On that morning all church services were canceled for obvious reasons, but the cancellation notice came well after Dad had arrived, which was his usual routine on Sunday mornings. He got there early. When the word went out that the services were to be suspended for that day and he was able to secure the seat immediately headed across the street to Wong's Market; maybe some of you remember that. It was called Central
Houses, wires ran right as which DLI were also getting dutout that matter distance this ibis and them through and are beginning assembled mania.管理 was imposed. The building was designed to have natural acoustics, just as the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City is famous for its natural acoustics. Well, as the science of acoustics has developed, as most of you know, a building that is sensitive to sound is very difficult to acoustically control, particularly when we now have electronic acoustics. So this building, like the Tabernacle, became a real challenge to bring under electronic control because it was so sensitive to sound. But I can remember standing in the doorway one evening when the choir was in the loft there, in back of me, reharmonizing. Romania Woolley, Ralph's wife, and I were standing here together and we had our heads bowed because the choir conductor had assembled the choir and was then having an opening prayer before beginning choir rehearsal. His back was to us, he was facing the choir, and we could hear every word he said. As soon as the prayer was over she turned to me and said, "Isn't that marvelous. This is just like the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. The acoustics are perfect." Subsequently, as you know, the acoustics became a problem and subsequent Church groups have grappled with this problem ever since. It seems to be working very well right now, but that degree of sensitivity is no longer sought in the design and construction of buildings.

The tower which rises 41 feet above this building was designed to provide a beacon for all the towns near these three days. In 1941, the tallest building in town was the Aloha Tower. So this literally was a beacon that could be seen from a great distance. Not only did I understand that the Coast Guard valued that as a reference marker for their ships coming in and out of Honolulu. It gave them added reference point before getting down to the entrance to Honolulu Harbor. The tower was also designed with a sound system and it was originally conceived that through the use of loud speakers the Church could publish music or the substance of what was going on in their meetings to the general public. This never worked, unfortunately, so the idea was abandoned. The tower became a constant problem. Apparently there was some amount of water leakage. The conduit the electric wires ran through would rust out, the wires would short out and they were all kinds of problems related to that. At one point in time the Boy Scouts conceived that that would be an ideal place for them to have a meeting room, out of the way, up and secure in their own little element. So they petitioned President Woolley for the use of that tower, and he allowed for a brief period of time, and then decided that it was not safe. He did not want those kids scrambling up and down those ladders which was necessary to get up and down, so he banished them.

The land adjacent to the little mall that was acquired last, and as you recall, there were six separate single family houses strung along this stream and part of it was covered with a box culvert. The Church was able to buy four of these six houses right at the beginning, but two of them were kept in private ownership for a period of time. One belonged to the Shone brothers. The brothers were a rather unique pair—one was a good guy and one was a bad guy. The good guy wanted to sell the property to the bad guy, and the bad guy and the land and the building the Church would use the property for some purpose. Some mysterious thing would happen—water lines were cut in half or the lights wouldn't work or something—some mischievous act was performed by the bad guy. This went on until finally the brothers were persuaded to sell the building to the Church. The other remaining house belonged to Mrs. Williams who sold the house to her maid, and so fortunately the Church was able to deal with the maid and subsequently bought it.

The last little vignette that I have and then I will close had to do with an excerpt from President Castle Murphy's memoirs. As you recall, he was mission president at the time that the Oahu Stake was formed. The first donation for this building came from the leper saints at Kalapapa, Molokai and he notes that in his book. The second donation came from a nonmember, a serviceman who was touched with the idea of what was about to happen. The mosaic that adorned the front of the building was designed and put together by a man named Savage, who was head of the art department at Columbia University. It's considered an outstanding piece of mosaic art. He did it without fee because he was touched with the beauty and splendor of this building and wanted to be part of it. Unfortunately, the mosaic didn't make it in time for the dedication because the shipping was congested on the West Coast. All of the war intervened in 1942 and a couple of years later, I believe in 1944 or even as late as 1946, that was finally installed and dedicated.

So there are the reminiscences of this building that I enjoy. I think that it is unique. I want to go back to a point that I made earlier about the destiny of the man Ralph E. Woolley. He has the distinction of having been the builder of two of the most dramatic and impressive buildings in Hawaii—the Mormon Temple and the Mormon Tabernacle. It's certainly no mere coincidence that he also built what I regard as perhaps the third most attractive and distinctive building, the Alexander and Baldwin Building downtown. This man was destined to leave his imprint on the fabric of life in Hawaii, and I think he succeeded in that. I'm proud to be related to him and proud to be a descendant of Samuel E. Woolley who really, as much as anyone, helped to move this work along and to give us these marvelous buildings that we have today.

I thank you for allowing me this time to address you in this manner and to share this pulpit with you. I pray that this society will continue to look back in history and to enjoy and feast on the lessons and incidences of history that enrich our lives today and I ask for all of this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.