



4-1-1978

Recollections of “Old Nauvoosers” Memories from Oral History

T. Edgar Lyon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Lyon, T. Edgar (1978) "Recollections of “Old Nauvoosers” Memories from Oral History," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol18/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Recollections of "Old Nauvooers"

Memories from Oral History

T. Edgar Lyon

In the early years of the twentieth century I lived with my parents in Salt Lake City, Utah. Of a Sunday morning in the Kindergarten I have a vague recollection of hearing stories about Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, the Hill Cumorah, the pioneers, etc. At that age my recollection of places and people beyond my own immediate dwelling and neighborhood had little meaning and practically no interest to me. The names of Joseph and Hyrum Smith had little meaning as I did not know them as I knew living people in my family and neighborhood. "The Prophet" had little meaning to me except as a sort of vague concept of an old man with a long beard who had lived before my time, as I had seen in our illustrated Bible. Cumorah and New York were as meaningless to me as London, Brigham City, and Logan—I hadn't been there.

Then one Sunday afternoon at 2:00 P.M., my father took me to a fast meeting in the old Twentieth Ward chapel on Second Avenue and D Street in Salt Lake City. What I experienced there was my first meaningful acquaintance, even though vicariously, with Joseph Smith and the story of the restoration of the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ on earth. This was the most exciting meeting I had ever attended. The people who bore their testimonies had known Joseph and Hyrum Smith personally, and related their recollections of them, their love of Joseph Smith as a decidedly human being, and their appreciation of the religious and spiritual understanding he had given them. I think I missed but few fast and testimony meetings after that introductory one.

Gradually I became aware that there were two distinct groups in the fast meeting. One numbered about twenty or twenty-five people who seemed very old to me, and the other group was made up of those of a younger age, such as my parents. In the older group were women in black dresses trimmed with white collars and cuffs. They wore small black bonnets tied under their chins with black silk ribbons. The men were dressed in black suits and ties, and practically all had full beards and gray or white hair.

T. Edgar Lyon is a research historian for Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., and a member of the *BYU Studies* editorial board.

When the meeting was opened for testimony these were the ones who rose and bore their testimonies, and were still at it when the bishop closed the meeting. Gradually I became aware that they were known as "The Old Nauvooers." Among the younger members of this group was my Grandma Lyon, who was a girl of five at the time Joseph Smith was murdered.

A few years later, when my understanding was a bit more mature, I expressed an opinion to my mother that what was said in fast meeting indicated that if one had not known Joseph Smith personally and lived in Nauvoo, one did not have a testimony. This was a youthful observation as these people were the only ones I remembered who bore testimonies. Her reply was that there appeared to be an unwritten law in the Twentieth Ward that if you had not lived at Nauvoo and known Joseph Smith, you could not bear your testimony until all the Old Nauvooers had borne theirs. As there were so many of them they seldom all got through and hence one heard few testimonies of other people.

Young as I was, I was impressed by the love and respect these people had for Joseph Smith, based on an intimate relationship with him and a closeness to him. Although these people had known Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, and Joseph F. Smith, who was then president, these leaders were referred to as "president of the Church," while the Old Nauvooers referred to Joseph Smith with two more endearing names: "The Prophet," or "Brother Joseph." What impressed my young mind about Joseph Smith from their talks was his concern for people and their problems, and the personal contacts they had experienced with him.

What follows is oral history, and is hence suspect as all oral history must be. As it has a subjectivity to it, it may not always be reliable. Nevertheless, it records significant personal impressions, both of those who experienced the events and the present writer who heard the original people repeat their personal reactions to Joseph Smith.

One man related that one day at Nauvoo he and another boy were having a fistfight in front of the Mills City Hotel on Main Street, which still stands a block north of the Mansion House, the Prophet's second home at Nauvoo. The City Council was in session on the second floor of Joseph Smith's store, which was a block west of the Mansion House. Joseph, then mayor, was presiding at the meeting. Looking through the window toward the northeast, he saw the two boys fighting. Turning the meeting

over to one of the aldermen to conduct, he ran down the stairs, crossed the street, vaulted over a fence, and ran diagonally north-east toward and arrived just as the two antagonists had pulled pickets from a fence and were about to continue their quarrel with the pickets. The speaker said Joseph grabbed them each by their shirt collars, ordered them to throw down their weapons, then releasing his grip on them asked, "Don't you know that no one in this town is allowed to fight except me?"

Sheepishly they admitted they did not know it, and then, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, the mayor of the town said, "Next time you feel like fighting come to my home and ask for a fight and I'll fight you, and it will be legal."

The narrator then continued, "That ended our fighting. We certainly didn't want to fight 'Brother Joseph.'"

Another related that one day a group of boys and girls were playing "Anthony-Over" (usually corrupted into "Anti-I-Over") in which two teams of children on opposite sides of a house, having one ball, throw it over the roof. The team on the other side waits for its arrival and if anyone catches it, the entire team then tries to get to the other side of the house without being tagged by the opposite team. Having no soft rubber ball, they were using a wooden ball, but the owner of the house ordered them away, fearful that the hard ball would split the dry shingles. Joseph Smith passed by, saw the discouraged look on the children's faces, and said, "Let's walk over to Brother Hancock's carpenter shop." There Joseph picked scraps of wood from the waste box and asked Brother Hancock to make some tippies for the children on his foot-powered lathe. While Brother Hancock was doing that, Joseph secured more scraps and asked the children to whittle paddles to strike the tippies. Then he took them to Main Street—the widest street in town—and showed them how to strike the tippy with the edge of the paddle, and then as it flew upward, try to bat the airborne tippy with the paddle toward a distant goal. Joseph Smith set the goal for the rock quarry at the head of Main Street. The children then played with the tippies, trying to whack them toward the goal each time they came to rest on the ground. The narrator said it gave them good exercise, tested their muscular skills, and kept them busy for an hour or two, thereby keeping them out of mischief.

Another elderly sister related that their home was about two miles east of Nauvoo, out in the country, near Joseph Smith's farm. One day her mother sent her to Nauvoo for a paper of pins

and a paper of thread—it wasn't sold on spools at that time. The day was sunny and sultry, and as she trudged home in the heat a carriage drove alongside her and stopped, and the driver offered her a ride home. He assisted her into the seat beside him and talked with her about what she did to help her mother and other members of the family.

Arriving at her house, the driver hopped down from the carriage, assisted her to the ground, walked her to the house, and said to her mother: "You have an excellent daughter. Continue the excellent training you have given her and she'll grow up to be a good wife and mother, and know how to give service to those who are unfortunate."

This experience she had never forgotten and always remembered Brother Joseph as a kind, considerate man.

A man with a long, white beard testified to a great lesson the Prophet had taught him. As a teenager, he and another boy had gotten into some sort of devilment, unthinking of the seriousness of what they were doing. He failed to state exactly what they did, but they had destroyed some property. They might have done what was common sport in those days, setting fire to a rail fence, or tearing out a few panels of such a fence so that cattle, sheep, horses, and hogs could get out of the enclosure and wander for miles; perhaps some of the cows bloated and died from eating too much of the wrong kind of forage. The owner of the farm where they had committed their destructive act was furious. He found out who they were, swore out a warrant for their arrest, and the sheriff took them to Carthage before the county judge. They were found guilty and sentenced to six months in the Hancock County jail, and fined \$50.00. (This may not seem a heavy fine to an affluent society, but when one considers that skilled craftsmen and mechanics at that time earned a dollar a day, it was a heavy fine for youths in the 1840s.)

The father of the boys complained to Joseph Smith about the severity of the sentence, the need of the parents for the help of the young men with the harvest and fall planting, and the fear of boys spending six months in an unheated stone jail. Wouldn't the Prophet intercede with the judge for a reduction of the sentence?

Joseph Smith went to Carthage and talked to the judge, whose answer was, "They did wrong and I'm going to teach them a lesson never to do such a thing again."

Joseph Smith's reply was, "I'm afraid you won't teach them that lesson by an imprisonment. After six months they'll come out of that jail hating you and the sheriff and the man whose

property they destroyed, and perhaps antagonistic against the ordered society we stand for. With nothing worthwhile to do they'll spend their time planning how they could do the same thing again and not get caught. They might even be persuaded to join one of the gangs of outlaws who infest this country and become professional criminals."

The judge asked Joseph Smith what he could propose as a better punishment to which he replied, "Release them to my custody for six months. Our Nauvoo streets are difficult to travel because of mud holes. We'll employ them to haul stone chips from the temple quarry and gravel from the river banks to improve our streets. We'll pay them fifty cents a day to reimburse the man whose property was destroyed. This will save the county money as they won't have to be fed for six months at county expense. Let them pay the costs of the court procedures and all will be better off than a jail sentence would achieve."

Contemporary Nauvoo notes show that from time to time Joseph Smith, the mayor, or Brother Sherwood, the city surveyor and supervisor of streets, checked on the boys. Once they found them loafing, another time not on the job, and docked them a day's pay for their indolence.

Then the narrator said something to this effect: "That was the greatest training I ever had not to wantonly or willfully destroy property of another. It was the best training to work consistently and earn an honest day's pay I ever had. Here I am advanced in years and I've never done anything since that episode that brought me into a court for misconduct." To this man Joseph Smith was a man of warm feeling, great compassion, and wonderful insight into the minds of youths in training them to avoid delinquency.

Another man, who was nine years old shortly before Joseph Smith was killed, related this account: It was Temple Tithing Day (they had two tithings in Nauvoo, the regular tithing on one's increase or earnings, and the other on time, so that each person was expected to work every tenth day on the temple without pay). This boy's father had hitched his team to his wagon and with his son had gone to the quarry to load a large stone into the wagon; then, they started for the temple. Pulling out of the quarry with its stone floor was no problem, but when they started across the "Flat" their wagon became stuck in a mud hole. The father whipped the horses and they lurched forward against their collars, but this sudden pull merely jiggled the wagon and made it sink a bit deeper in the mire. The father handed the reins to his son, telling him to stay with the team while he went up to the

temple and secured someone to come down with a team or two of oxen and pull his wagon out of the mud.

His father had just stepped off the wagon when a man walking along the side of the street (where they had planned sidewalks, but had not yet constructed them) called to him and said, "I see you are having trouble, Brother Bybee."

"Yes," replied the latter, "I'm going to the temple to get someone to pull me out."

The man waded into the mud and said to the father, "Brother Bybee, you get by that left rear wheel and put your right shoulder under a spoke. I'll get my left shoulder under a spoke of the right wheel." Then to the nine year old boy he said: "Get your whip ready and when I say 'Lift' we'll lift with our shoulders, and don't you spare the horseflesh."

So saying, each in position, the man said "Lift." Each did his part. The horses jumped at the sting of the whip, the wagon moved a bit, and the horses were able to keep it going. After going about a hundred feet onto dry ground the boy let the team rest. The two men caught up with the wagon and as Brother Bybee climbed up to the driver's seat and took the reins from his son, the father called out, "Thank you, Brother Joseph."

The boy had been greatly impressed that a prophet of the Lord, probably on his way to pay his temple tithing in labor, was not above wading in mud halfway to his knees and getting his shoulder covered with mud to help another man in distress.

One lady related the coldness of the winter of 1842-1843 when the Mississippi was frozen over for several months. One freezing day Joseph Smith did not go to his office. Instead he remained at home to play with his children on the ice. They were sliding down the sloping lower end of Main Street near the Homestead where enough momentum could be gained to send the loaded sleigh out onto the smooth ice of the river. Joseph Smith III, Alexander, and Frederick G. were engaged in this activity. Soon other children gathered and the Prophet taught some of the older children how to slide on the soles of their shoes, balancing their bodies erectly. Others he taught how to steer the crude wooden sleighs of the day with their feet.

Another lady mentioned she had worked as a servant girl in Joseph Smith's home. One day when the Prophet's mother was quite ill, he remained home and nursed her all day.¹ She men-

¹See Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 5:290.

tioned that Joseph often read to his children from a special children's magazine he had in his home.²

There was a coal miner from Wales who had been converted and migrated to Nauvoo. At the time he bore his testimony he was about eighty-five years of age. He related that when he was a young married man with a child or two, he and a companion had been employed to work in an abandoned coal mine, removing small pockets of coal. One day as they were working a slab of stone fell from the ceiling and smashed their oil lamps, leaving them in total darkness perhaps a mile from the entrance to the mine. Only slightly injured by the falling stone, the two sought their way out of the mine by feeling with their feet the small iron rails on which the mine cars rolled. But there were frequent side tunnels and as they came to these switches, they tried to remember which of the side tunnels they must follow. Sometimes at such an intersection they would feel the walls of the tunnel, searching for a familiar marker which might indicate where they were.

Several times they made wrong turns: when they came to the end of a side tunnel, they had to retrace their steps back to the main tunnel and try again. At last, after much anguish of spirit and prayers to God, they chose another turn and after the tunnel itself had made a turn, they saw far ahead of them a glimmer of light. With hurried pace they soon were at the portal and saw below them the beautiful green valley where they lived.

Then this aged man made a comparison. He had been a member of one of the Protestant churches, had become disillusioned when he read his Bible and found his church neither preached nor practiced many things which characterized the early church. He compared his searching for a truly Christian church to the time he was groping in the mine trying to find his way out into his home valley. Then two Mormon missionaries came to his village and held a meeting on the public square as they could not use the local chapel. He and his wife heard the message, accepted the gospel, and migrated to Nauvoo. They attended meetings in the grove and heard Joseph Smith explain the restored gospel. He labored on the temple, and he and his wife received their endowments and were sealed for eternity. The religious and spiritual teachings of Joseph Smith's restoration had produced a world as strikingly wonderful and soul-satisfying as the sunlit valley they saw from the entrance of the mine. He had experienced a spiritual

²Ibid., 6:133.

rebirth. He now knew the true nature of God, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. He had learned who he was—a spirit begotten by his Heavenly Father, and now clothed temporarily in a mortal tabernacle, bequeathed to him by his earthly father and mother. He understood his relationship to the eternities, to his earthly parents, and also his heirship to his Eternal Father. He had learned the doctrine of free agency, which had enabled him to throw off the shackles of predestinarianism and salvation by election. Priesthood had come to mean a power granted by God whereby he could become a blessing to himself, his wife, his family, the Church, and all mankind. And so he enumerated what the gospel light revealed through “Brother Joseph” had done for him. He had received a testimony of who was to succeed Joseph Smith by a miracle in the grove when he saw and heard Brigham Young preach and his voice sounded as the voice of Joseph Smith. So he had followed Brigham Young and the Twelve into the Salt Lake Valley. Here he had built a house of his own on land which he owned—something he never could have done in Wales—and had raised a good family of faithful Latter-day Saint children and had many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As with David of old he could exclaim, “My cup runneth over.”

Month after month I heard such incidents related—how Joseph Smith visited unannounced in the homes, had children sit on his lap as he told them stories, admonished them to be honest, to love and obey their parents, not to quarrel with each other, and to be helpful to those who were sick or in need. They related his eagerness to arm-wrestle, pull sticks, or participate in other contemporary games of physical prowess. They recalled how “The Prophet” dropped by their homes at mealtime, ate with the family and kept a lively conversation going, or how some of them had been guests at his table with Emma Smith as hostess.

Such were the components of my first meaningful introduction to Joseph Smith—a very human being, engaged in doing the kinds of things which would appeal to children, young people, and those of mature years and thinking. I’m certain these Old Nauvooers bore testimonies to the divinity of Joseph Smith’s work as a spiritual leader. Although I was not old enough at that time to understand the meaning of abstract faith and principles of the gospel, I did learn to love and admire him, as many of those testimony-bearing Saints of my childhood years had done, as a very much alive and alert and loveable and human person.