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J. LeRoy Kimball, Nauvoo Restoration Pioneer: A Tribute

James L. Kimball, Jr.

My dad, James LeRoy Kimball, was born December 8, 1901, in Cardston, Alberta, Canada, in the log-cabin home of Charles O. Card. Despite being named after cherished family members, from the outset he was always called Roy. The family moved to Raymond in 1909, where Roy attended the Knight Academy. As a boy, he astonished family and neighbors with his physical endurance and capacity for work. More than once, he outdistanced mature men in the number of acres of new Alberta soil he could clear, plant, or harvest in a single day. From 1921 to 1923, he used this capacity for work to serve as a missionary in the southern states under the redoubtable Charles A. Callis.

He elected to become a physician after a chance talk with a friend. To finance his medical studies at the University of Utah (then offering only a two-year medical course) and Northwestern University at Chicago, he sold woolen goods to the farmers and townspeople of Nebraska and South Dakota for several summers. These years, he often told his family, were choice years and implanted in him a greater feeling for his American heritage. Little did he dream at the time that he would return to leave a lasting monument himself on the landscape of Illinois.

He settled in Salt Lake City, where he practiced general medicine for thirteen years. He and his family then moved to New Orleans for two years so he could prepare for specialty boards in internal medicine and cardiology. When he returned to Salt Lake City, he pioneered the use of the electrocardiograph machine in the area.

During his forty-three successful years in medicine, Dad's church responsibilities were not neglected. He usually attended

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James LeRoy (Roy) Kimball (1901–)
Photograph taken 1971, when Roy was president of
both the Nauvoo Mission and Nauvoo Restoration Inc.

priesthood meetings with his sons, and with his whole family, he attended sacrament meeting. Dad served as a president in two seventies quorums and later served for over twenty-five years as a sealer in the Salt Lake Temple.

While a successful medical career would have been enough to crown his life, his destiny included yet another major contribution: the restoration of historic Mormon Nauvoo. At a time of life when most people at least think about retirement, he added a new venture that would last for another twenty years.

Every one of my father and mother's six children carries childhood memories of the special significance of the terms *Nauvoo* and *Heber C. Kimball* (my father's great-grandfather and an Apostle in Nauvoo and Utah). Those words were as common to us as breakfast and cod liver oil. We never tired of hearing the story of how our parents visited Nauvoo in the early 1930s and first saw the Heber Kimball residence and how Dad wanted to purchase it as a summer home. He felt a need for a quiet place where he could rest without being summoned by telephone and house calls.

In 1954, after twenty years of negotiations, my parents bought the Heber C. Kimball home. One of my father's patients and a family friend, the late Christine Hinckley Robinson (a sister to President Gordon B. Hinckley), who was schooled in interior design, accepted the offer to guide the remodeling of the home. The intent was not a total historic restoration, for the home was to be lived in as well.

The house was slowly remodeled and restored. In 1960, during a Kimball family reunion, the house was dedicated by Elder Spencer W. Kimball, who was Heber's grandson. When Dad saw how interested both Church members and nonmembers were in touring the house during the reunion, he started mulling over the idea of opening the house to the public. Ironically, such a demand to see the house developed that not one of our family ever spent a night in it.

Further musings led Dad to wonder if with the aid of others a whole block could be restored for visitors. As there were two other historic brick houses on the four-acre block where the Kimball house stood—the Wilford Woodruff and the Winslow Farr houses—Dad considered purchasing these houses as they became available; meanwhile, because the opportunity arose, he bought the Brigham Young house in 1961.

At about that time, however, through the kind auspices of J. Reuben Clark, a member of the First Presidency and a long-time friend and medical patient, the potential of Nauvoo officially came



Official signature of the incorporation papers creating Nauvoo Restoration Inc. on July 27, 1962. Seated left to right: Elder Henry D. Moyle, Dr. LeRoy Kimball, President David O. McKay, and Elder Hugh B. Brown. Standing left to right: A. Hamer Reiser, Harold P. Fabian, and J. Willard Marriott.

to the attention of the First Presidency. After much discussion, during which my father shared his now enlarged vision of completely restoring Nauvoo and telling its story through its culture, crafts, and institutions, the Church organized Nauvoo Restoration Inc. (NRI) on July 27, 1962. My father was asked to be the first president. In the articles of incorporation, the nonprofit organization was charged with this mission:

To acquire, restore, protect, and preserve, for the education and benefit of its members and the public, all or a part of the old city of Nauvoo in Illinois and the surrounding area, in order to provide an historically authentic physical environment for awakening a public interest in, and an understanding and appreciation of, the story of Nauvoo and the mass migration of its people to the valley of the Great Salt Lake.

The task seemed daunting. From the outset, the project was to be professionally researched and built. No completion time was set, for time was not to be a predominating factor. Historical accuracy was to be the most important consideration. At the suggestion of the First Presidency, a board of trustees containing non-Latter-day Saint as well as Latter-day Saint experts was formed to oversee the whole process. The first board members were Harold P. Fabian, a member of the Citizens' Advisory Council to the National Park Service; A. Hamer Reiser, a retired businessman and a secretary to the First Presidency; David M. Kennedy, secretary of the treasury of the United States; and J. Willard Marriott, chairman of the board of Marriott Corporation, of Washington, D.C. (see the facing photograph). Added to the board at various later times were A. Edwin Kendrew, senior vice-president of Colonial Williamsburg Corporation of Virginia, and Elders Delbert L. Stapley, Mark E. Petersen, and L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve. Other General Authorities who joined the board were Thorpe B. Isaacson, Derek A. Cuthbert, and John H. Vandenberg.

Contact was made with many Illinois State officials, who were pleased with the approach and direction of the huge effort. Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, as well as state and national park officials, came to watch the restoration and to marvel at its progress. Over the years, Dad cultivated friendships with various Nauvoo merchants and town leaders, keeping them informed about NRI activities. He felt that "warming people" was more important than warning them. Making friends was more important than conversion to the Church, for the second could result if the first were sincere. NRI spruced up

town property and helped pay for a town sewage treatment plant and street signs. Dad was well aware that many feared a big corporate takeover by the LDS church, and he did not wish to tread heavily on the toes of the townspeople. No one was to think that NRI was a western carpetbagger coming in to impose its will on the community. Moreover, because of Dad's business acumen and his personal wisdom, he was consulted by many people about their future ventures, both public and private. People on all levels sought him out for counsel.

He also helped mend fences by encouraging the young guides to meet their RLDS counterparts, and Dad himself treasured amicable relations with other church leaders in the area. My father's personal charisma on a one-to-one basis was amazing and is difficult to describe. Perhaps it was, in part, because of his professional competence that people respected him as if he were their family doctor.

One of my father's favorite sayings was that NRI "is no crash program." Allied with that statement was "don't rush, don't rush." I can still hear him say, "Rome wasn't built in a day." Dad often quoted the couplet

Do what you do, do with your might
Things done by halves are never done right.

This belief was a part of his basic philosophy and was a key factor in making the restoration of homes more accurate and authentic. Dad felt it would have been inappropriate to rebuild Nauvoo with what he called a Disneyland approach; proper historical, architectural, and archaeological research was needed to drive the final results. This concern was typical of his life; my father had a great reputation as an uncanny and astute diagnostician among the Salt Lake medical community. Coupled with that reputation was the fact that he was not afraid to call in a second opinion.

During the twenty-three years of Dad's service, under the direction of the First Presidency, Nauvoo Restoration Inc. purchased approximately one thousand acres of property, including part of the original platted city. Except for a few pieces (including the Nauvoo Temple block) on what is known as the Bluff, the chief concentration of purchases is located on the Flat, next or closer to the Mississippi River. Over forty structures were identified as either partial or complete Mormon homes or buildings. With the vast knowledge and expertise of Preston W. Kimball, whose ancestors had lived in the Nauvoo area before the arrival of the Mormons, my

father set out to buy land. Many owners were eager to sell in order to obtain better residences either in town or elsewhere. Others were willing to sell because they were aware of the historical significance of the project and the economic impact it would have on the community. A few sellers were allowed to remain on their property for their lifetime. Today the Church owns more Nauvoo land than it owned in the 1840s.

During the period of my father's active involvement with Nauvoo, twenty-four LDS structures were historically restored totally or in part. Of this number, seven were totally reconstructed on their sites and seven were restored only on their exterior and are currently in use as missionary residences. In addition, a large visitors center was constructed complete with theaters and display areas to orient visitors to historic Nauvoo, and a monument entitled "Exodus to Greatness" was erected at what was the Parley Street ferry site. Complementing these structures was the placement of the Relief Society Nauvoo Monument to Women near the Visitors Center.

Dad always preached (and that is the right word to describe it) that Nauvoo should provide both a historic and a spiritual context for learning. He proclaimed to all who would listen that the Temple Block was the "great centerpiece" of the project: "People will come to the frosting of Nauvoo but will return home full of the cake of the gospel." None of his missionaries were permitted to apply high-pressure conversion tactics. He felt assured that as tourists visited Nauvoo for its history they would grasp in a way that was "better than scripture or verse" the faith and commitment of those who built there; then they would want to learn more of the doctrine that impelled the Saints. Dad's approach was low key, and he intuitively met people on their own terms. His testimony of the gospel was strong and practical, built more on a lifetime of experience than study. "Things should take as long as needed," he continually said. His family got the idea that Dad felt the gospel was no crash program either.

No matter how costly or correct the restoration would be, Nauvoo needed real people to interpret it and give it meaning. At the start, Dad was authorized to call individuals on his own to serve as guides. A plan was devised to recruit returned missionaries who were seeking university degrees to serve as guides or "interpreters." They paid for their own transportation, but while in Nauvoo, they were given bed and board and put to work. Some acted as guides on a daily basis, riding with visitors in their cars to show them the town. Another group would help the professional archaeologists,

J. C. and Virginia Harrington, as diggers for Monday through Saturday and act as guides on Sunday. Three mornings a week before work, college classes were held on Church and U.S. history. Examinations and papers were required, and Brigham Young University credit was awarded to the guides upon completion of each course. Several wonderful older couples, many of whom were patients, neighbors, and friends of my father, accepted his call to supplement at their own expense the young people for several summers.

From 1971 to 1973, my parents were called to lead the newly created Nauvoo Mission. My father still served as president of NRI. Even at that, Elder Spencer W. Kimball sincerely suggested that Dad practice medicine one week in Salt Lake City and return the next to Nauvoo. But it was not to be! The work in Nauvoo became his full-time preoccupation. From that time on, missionaries, usually older couples, were called by the Church and were duly set apart. For a period of time, these senior missionaries were supplemented by regular missionaries who were transferred to Nauvoo during the summer.

As he had served his patients without regard for his own comfort, Dad spent hours and hours, years and years, to make friends, mend enemies, and enrich and rekindle Mormons and non-Mormons alike to the value of their temporal and spiritual heritage. I, along with his family and friends, am grateful for his love of the gospel, his legacy of work, and his strength of character.