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# Nauvoo—Sunrise and Sunset on the Mississippi

President Gordon B. Hinckley

Nauvoo did not grow in ragtail fashion as did so many cities in early America. It rose like the sunrise, planned from the beginning; then it faded like the sunset after a short day. The season of its glory lasted only from 1839 to 1846. In February 1839, while the Saints were refugees in Quincy and their prophet was a prisoner in Liberty Jail, they first received the friendly attention of Dr. Isaac Galland, who owned considerable property at Commerce and from whom they later made significant land purchases. Seven years from that February, the first group of their people abandoned Nauvoo and began the long journey that would bring them to the mountain valleys of the West.

I have been to Nauvoo a number of times. I have walked its streets, explored its beautifully restored homes, and contemplated the magnificent temple that once crowned the summit of the hill that rises from the river. I have thought much of my own grandfather, who as a young man lived there and left with the Saints.

Ever since the Prophet named the place Nauvoo, we have spoken of it as Nauvoo the Beautiful. It *is* beautiful. May I mention several aspects of that beauty.

First, Nauvoo is beautiful in its location. One day in June we drove from St. Louis to Carthage. We then took the River Road to Nauvoo. We noted again the great sweeping bend of the Mississippi with the city standing as it were on a peninsula eagerly reaching out, pointing to the West, where the people who lived there would go. It was swampy in 1839, but the Prophet had a vision that the swamplands could be drained and a city created reaching from the waterfront up to the higher ground to the east.

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There is something majestic and tremendous about the great river that flows around the Nauvoo point. "Ole Man River" is beautiful and awesome. "He don't plant taters, / He don't plant cotton / An dem dat plants 'em / Is soon forgotten, / But Ol' Man River, / He jes keeps rollin' along."<sup>1</sup> There is something magnificent about the water as it rolls south to New Orleans and the Gulf. There is something inspiring about the great farmlands that reach from the river to the east and to the west, where "the corn is as high as an elephant's eye"<sup>2</sup> and soybeans and other crops are cultivated for the markets of the world. Nauvoo is beautiful in its setting.

Second, for me Nauvoo is beautiful in its beginnings. It was a place of asylum, a refuge, a safe harbor in a terrible storm. Jackson County, Missouri, was to have been Zion, the home of the Saints of God. It became a place of bitterness and hatred. Clay, Daviess, and Caldwell counties provided peace for only a short season. Far West became a place of dreams and hopes: Adam-ondi-Ahman, a place of prophecy. Then came the terrible extermination order.

Missouri is wide to drive across even in a comfortable automobile; it was a very long distance from Far West to Quincy for the fleeing Mormon exiles. Eternal will be our gratitude for the people of Quincy who provided shelter to the homeless. But these thousands could not stay there. They had to find a place of their own. Commerce became the site and Nauvoo became the city. Commerce may have seemed a dismal prospect when, as Joseph described it, a man had difficulty walking across the boggy ground, and it was impossible for a team. But something could be done about this, and something was done about it. Again there were dreams and the peace to pursue them. How inviting is the port, any port that is reached in a storm. How lovely is a place of refuge when there has been oppression and pursuit. How beautiful to the homeless is a home. Nauvoo was beautiful in its beginnings as a place of refuge.

Third, Nauvoo was beautiful in its creation. There is no music like the music of industry. This place fairly rang with the cutting and shaping of lumber, with the chiseling of stone, with the hammering of hot iron on the anvil, with the surveying and building of streets, the plowing of farmland, the planting and tilling of the soil, the gathering of the harvest. Many of the homes of Nauvoo were beautiful with their salmon-colored brick and their interesting, stepped walls. The Seventies Hall was a structure of graceful lines and a place of learning. The printing plant was an expression of a desire to know what was going on, the Temple an expression of

faith, of conviction, concerning the eternity of life and the power of the priesthood of God to reach beyond the veil of death.

I marvel at what those people built during those few short years. There was nothing temporary about it. They built as if they were going to live there for generations. Nauvoo was beautiful in its creation.

Fourth, Nauvoo was even beautiful in its suffering. There can be beauty in suffering when there is faith. There is tragedy, yes; there is sorrow, of course. But there is something sublime in suffering for a great cause. I am not saying that the Saints enjoyed it. It was terrible. But there was something magnificent about the way they held up their heads and kept on going notwithstanding the travail through which they passed, much of that suffering painful and personal. Some of it was similar to the suffering of other peoples on the frontier. I have read the lists of names of those buried in the old Nauvoo cemetery. Many of them were children who died of illnesses now quickly cured through the miracles of modern medicine. Such diseases as whooping cough took a terrible toll. One can sense only in some small degree the sorrow in the loss of a beautiful child after there had already been so many other painful losses. A bronze monument has been erected in the old cemetery. It represents a father and a mother who have buried a child. The monument is beautiful in the pathos it represents.

Finally, from our viewpoint of almost a century and a half, Nauvoo is beautiful in its death. Notwithstanding tragedy, there is beauty in heroism, there is beauty in faith, there is beauty in devotion to an ideal and a principle. All of these are exemplified in the exodus from Nauvoo. The suffering was indescribable, the disillusionment difficult to bear, the hopelessness overpowering. It is difficult to imagine the emotions that must have been felt when for the last time men, women, and children walked out of those beautiful homes, closed the doors, looked upon the fields they had cultivated and the stature of the trees they had planted, climbed aboard their wagons, and drove down to the river, there to cross and move slowly over the soil of Iowa, looking back now and again at what they were leaving and would never see again.

Most desperate were the circumstances of the sick, the aged, and the poor who were late in leaving. All of you know of the miracle of the quails that came as food when there was no other food. But with all of this suffering, there was a certain beauty in the solemnity of it, in the sublimity of the faith of the Saints, in their resolution to

leave Nauvoo behind and re-create it on a grander scale somewhere in the West.

Sunrise and sunset on the Mississippi, with a brief day between—such is the capsulated story of Nauvoo the Beautiful.

I am happy for all that has been done to rebuild a portion of it as a tremendous reminder that a century and a half ago a homeless people came to that ground and found a refuge even if for only a short season. I am grateful that they built not shacks for temporary shelter, but homes and other structures of beauty and permanence, and that as the crowning flower of their creation they constructed a temple as a witness of their faith in the eternal purposes of God. I am grateful that Nauvoo today stands remembered and restored, reaching up from the Mississippi with planned streets, with homes that are as beautiful now as they were then, with the place of the Temple properly fenced and protected, deserving of our gazing upon it and meditating on its purposes. I am grateful for what Nauvoo does for me, in giving to me a sense of gratitude, a sense of respect, a sense of worship, a sense of love for those who loved the Lord and served him through sunshine and storm. I am grateful for the city by the river—the city which was known as Nauvoo the Beautiful.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, *Showboat*, vocal score (New York: T. B. Harms, ca. 1928), 20.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!* vocal score (New York: Williamson Music, ca. 1943), 17.