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Epilogue: A New Century

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Epilogue

A New Century

The Genealogical Society of Utah was one of several genealogical societies that originated in the United States during the last half of the nineteenth century. In 1894 a proclamation by Church president Wilford Woodruff clearly enunciated the obligation of LDS Church members to trace their ancestry and perform temple ordinances in their behalf. Before the year was out, a society was in place to assist in that work. Thus, unlike the other genealogical societies, it was founded for religious purposes.

Two of the Society's most important challenges have always been to reduce the complexities of identifying ancestry and to develop programs that effectively mobilize participation from a broad spectrum of Church members. The solutions have varied as the Church has emerged from relative isolation to broad international involvement. Methodology has undergone several incarnations as the tools of genealogy have evolved from paper to computers. But the purpose has remained constant—to turn the hearts of the children to their ancestors in order to encourage the living to complete the sacred temple ordinances in behalf of the dead.

Two of the Society's most significant contributions have been gathering records and automating them. Prior to the advent of microfilming, most genealogical records lay hidden in countless vaults, archives, sheds, attics, and cellars. The information compiled by unnumbered scribes in many ages was at risk of being

lost forever. Microfilming has provided the means to preserve this priceless information, gather it in a central locale, and make it available for research. Genealogical microfilmmers are still busy photographing vital records from around the world. The master films are secured in the cavernous, steel-reinforced vaults blasted from the interior of a granite mountain near Salt Lake City.

Traditionally focused on helping members wend their way through the complexities of researching their own ancestry, the Society simplified family history research in recent decades with programs reflecting collective responsibility for all ancestors. These programs took advantage of common skills so that family history name extraction and cooperative indexing involved anyone who could read, write, or type. Undergirded by the advent of the computer, these programs have begun to replace paper records with digitized files.

Since its inception, the Genealogical Society has learned from and worked with institutions outside the Church. It has shared its resources with the genealogical community at large, hosted two world conferences on genealogical records, and participated in many national and international meetings of genealogists and record keepers. Society efforts to promote genealogical research were enhanced by the *Roots* phenomenon of the late 1970s, when many people began to more fully appreciate the value of family history.

With the growth of the Church, the number of temple patrons eventually exceeded the supply of names generated through the research process. After attempting a variety of marginally successful programs, the Society received approval for a fundamental change in procedure. In 1961 the Records Tabulation Program, later called Name Extraction, supplemented the arduous process of perusing countless records for a single name with a simpler process of extracting many names from a single document. The delays inherent in research no longer restrained the vicarious ordinance work in the temples. The plethora of names generated by this new procedure enabled an unprecedented increase in temple construction, spreading the opportunity for temple worship to the membership of the Church in many parts of the world. More recently, through a computer program named TempleReady, the

responsibility for clearing names for temple ordinances was transferred directly to the members, propelling the Church into a new era of family history activity.

Nevertheless, the Church does not aim to provide a simple family history research program that replaces all individual research effort. For several decades, collective programs have nourished members who are unskilled in research. While these programs produce the opportunity to do temple work for most ancestors, researchers with pencils in hand must still seek out those individuals missing from their family lines.

The Genealogical Society, now known as the Family History Department of the Church, has helped countless people identify their ancestors as far back as available records permit. At this centennial juncture, the Department looks forward to a second century of identifying and documenting the lineages of mankind for the purpose of completing temple ordinances in their behalf.

Howard W. Hunter, a past president of the Genealogical Society, became President of the Church in June 1994. His long service in family history makes him particularly well suited to give this program renewed emphasis. In November 1994, President Hunter effectively inaugurated the next century of genealogical work in his address at the Centennial Commemorative Fireside:

I look back in wonder at the tapestry woven by the Lord in the furthering of temple and family history work. When I was president of the Genealogical Society of Utah, we had visions of how it would move forward mightily. Now we are observing something glorious occurring throughout the world. The gospel is moving forward to encompass every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. Temples are located throughout the earth, and the Spirit of Elijah is touching the hearts of many members, who are doing family history and temple ordinance work at an unprecedented pace. . . .

With regard to temple and family history work, I have one overriding message: This work must hasten. . . . The great work of the temples and all that supports it must expand. It is imperative!¹

As the Family History Department celebrates its centennial anniversary, almost fifty temples are in operation, and others are either being built or planned throughout the world. Consistent with President Hunter's message, leaders in the Family History Department are planning even greater efforts to make names available for

temple work. They envision more extensive international genealogical activity. They hope for a world in which educational resources on family history will become common in libraries and schools, and community groups will promote and support family history as an activity that strengthens cultural, social, and familial ties. Sources will be preserved from loss or destruction by caring record custodians, who will make protected originals or copies increasingly accessible for researchers. A vast international network of trained volunteers will help the untrained develop their skills in the use of family history resources. Powerful, easy-to-use software programs—all sharing a common format for data exchange—will be widely available from diverse providers. The compiled record of all families, preserved in the Ancestral File or a more refined system, will be valued both in and out of the Church as the repository for the vital records of mankind and as the exchange place for ancestral information.

As a result, Church members around the world will more easily and quickly review large amounts of family history information in their homes. Family history programs will be tailored to the needs of the members in each country. Instructions and computer systems in each language will be clear and simple to understand. As the Saints seek spiritual guidance in genealogical research, families will be strengthened, troubled hearts will be healed, and Church members will be brought closer to the Savior through their service to others. Temples will be spread across the earth, and members will participate regularly in sacred ordinances.² When such a vision is achieved, the Spirit of Elijah will be felt in greater measure throughout the earth as the hearts of the children turn to their fathers.

NOTES

¹Howard W. Hunter, "We Have a Work to Do" (address given at the Family History Department Commemorative Fireside, Salt Lake City, Utah, 13 November 1994), FHD, typescript, 1, 2, 3.

²"Family History Long Range Directives, Proposed April 1994," internal document, FHD, 7-8.