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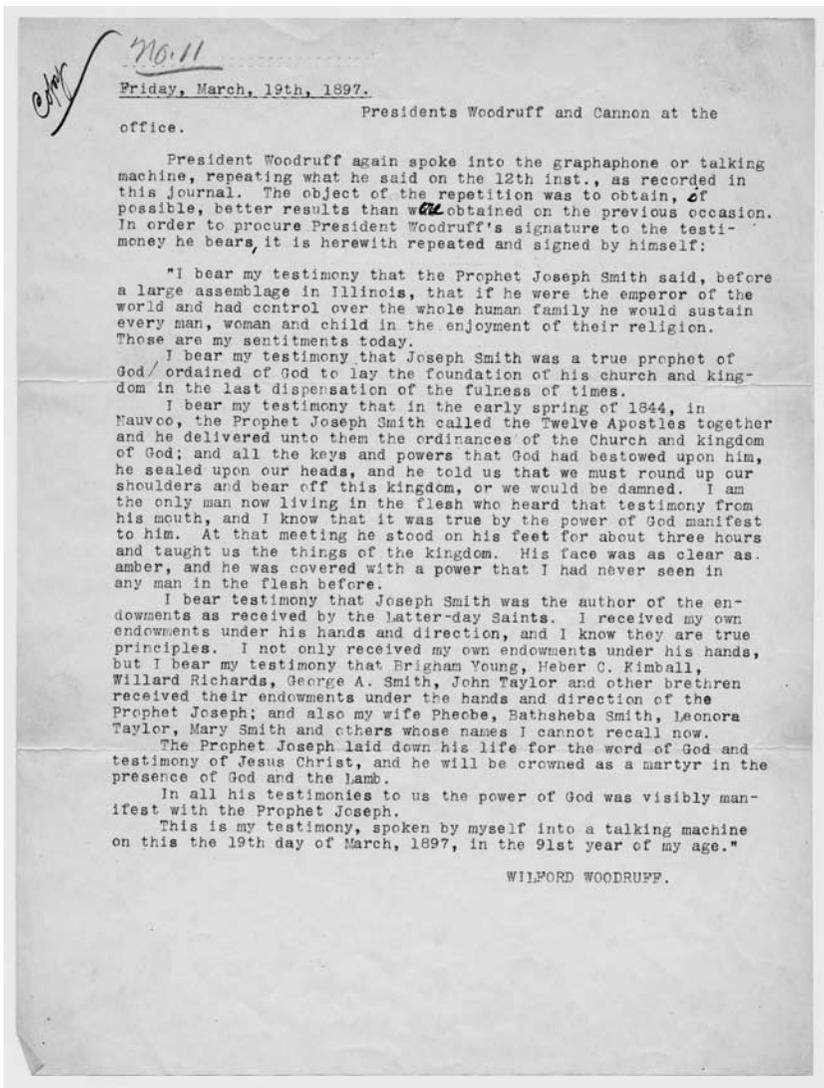
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Transcript of the words Wilford Woodruff spoke into "Edison's talking machine."
Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

To listen to Wilford Woodruff's audio recording, go to byustudies.byu.edu.

“This Is My Testimony, Spoken by Myself into a Talking Machine”

Wilford Woodruff’s 1897 Statement in Stereo

Richard Neitzel Holzappel and Steven C. Harper

In March 1844, just weeks before his martyrdom, Joseph Smith “called the Twelve Apostles together and he delivered unto them the ordinances of the Church and kingdom of God.” Wilford Woodruff noted the events of the day in a terse journal entry. March “26th A rainy day. I met in council with the brethren.”¹ Perhaps the sacredness and magnitude of the meeting called for the brief, cryptic note. Or perhaps it would take hindsight for Wilford to recognize the momentousness of the day’s events. In either case, fifty-three years later at age ninety, President Woodruff recorded his spoken testimony of the historic meeting.

Two decades earlier, in late 1877, while working to improve the efficiency of a telegraph transmitter, Thomas Edison noticed that the tape of the machine gave off a noise resembling spoken words when played at high speed. Wondering if he could record a telephone message, Edison experimented with the diaphragm of a receiver by attaching a needle to it. He reasoned that the needle could prick paper tape to record a message. Experiments led him to try a stylus on a tinfoil cylinder, which, to his great delight, played back the short message he recorded, “Mary had a little lamb.” Phonograph was the trade name for Edison’s device, which played cylinders rather than discs. Sound vibrations generated by speaking into the mouth-piece were indented into the cylinder by a recording needle. This cylinder phonograph was the first machine that could record and reproduce sound.

Joseph J. Daynes, husband of President Woodruff’s daughter Winifred and president of Daynes Music, brought a phonograph to his father-in-law’s office on March 12, 1897, “for the purpose of showing its workings, and to get Pres. Woodruff to talk into it.” President Woodruff

In his early years, Wilford Woodruff paced his mill, often late into the night, praying “for light and truth and for His Spirit to guide me in the way of salvation.”¹ He looked forward to the day when he would meet someone who could say like Isaiah or Peter or Paul, “I know the Lord Jesus Christ.”

In due time, he met such a man. More than that, he became one. He became, in the fullest sense of the word, a modern Apostle, a special witness. He was associated intimately with Joseph Smith, not on the outskirts but at the very center of the movement.

Wilford Woodruff’s calling as historian and recorder came to full flower in a journal with a daily entry for sixty-three years. He promptly recorded the singular early events of the restored Church. His minutes of crucial meetings and the spoken word are as close to verbatim as his shorthand could make them.

When President Woodruff was in his nineties, he addressed a youth group about the “last charge” meeting. President Joseph F. Smith arose. He urged those present to write careful notes, “that hereafter in the generations to come they could testify that they had heard him bear witness of these truths.”²

Notes are often misplaced and forgotten. But this recording preserves indelible firsthand experience. With transparent clarity, he blends Joseph’s words with his own. This, Joseph’s last testimony to the Twelve, became his own.

We hear the record of Christ’s redemptive power, his keys of authority, his organization, his pure and transforming doctrines, his spiritual gifts, and, above all, the empowering promises of his holy temple.

Here is a capsule of eternity, a prophetic vision of the manifest destiny of the kingdom of God on earth and in heaven.

—Truman G. Madsen

1. Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 18.

2. “Our Work: The General Annual Conference of Young Men’s and Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Associations,” *Improvement Era* 1 (August 1898): 781–82.



These wax cylinders contain the audio recordings of Wilford Woodruff's testimony made in Salt Lake City in 1897. Engraved by a stylus on the outside surface, the hollow phonograph cylinder was the most popular medium for recording sound during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Courtesy LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

agreed on the condition that he retain possession of the cylinder to prevent it from being used for advertising. He “spoke into the phonograph, which afterwards repeated back quite audibly and satisfactorily [to] all of the First Presidency.”²

One week later on March 19,

Pres. Wilford Woodruff spoke again into the graphophone, or phonograph, the same words which he uttered into the instrument on March 12th. They were repeated in order to obtain better results than were secured on that date. After reading his testimony as recorded on the 12th inst., he signed it with his own hand, that it might go on record.³

Wilford Woodruff painstakingly prepared the words he wanted to ring in the ears of his posterity—his enduring witness of the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, who conferred priesthood keys upon the Twelve

and commissioned them three months before his death. Arthur Winter, Church reporter, noted in his journal on March 19:

Several days ago President Woodruff dictated to me his testimony on several points connected with the work of God, his intention being to get his testimony written down just as he wanted it and then he could speak it into the phonograph. Today he repeated it into the talking machine, so that in years to come, long after he shall have passed away, one may hear reproduced by the phonograph, the words he spoke and the very tone of his voice.⁴

We are awed by that voice. It flows from a man whose ears heard Joseph teach the fulness of the gospel, whose eyes saw him “covered with a power I had never seen in any man in the flesh before,” who “received my own endowments under his hands and direction,” and who lived to record a witness that resonates in our ears.

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1. Wilford Woodruff, Journal, March 26, 1844, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives).

2. Journal History of the Church, March 12, 1897, Church Archives, microfilm copy also available in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

3. Journal History of the Church, March 19, 1897.

4. Arthur Winter, Journal, March 19, 1897, Church Archives.

*To listen to Wilford Woodruff's audio recording, go to
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