

Introduction

Davis Bitton

How did John L. Sorenson become the person he is? Tall, thin, and gray-haired, he is a courtly gentleman, a model of kindness and consideration. As bishop of a student ward at Brigham Young University, he patiently guided young married couples, recalling in the process his own years as a virtual “professional student.” Friends testify of his unflinching helpfulness. Many colleagues, especially his junior ones, have benefited from his unasked dispatch to them of clippings or articles that he thought might aid their projects or spur a new line of effort from them.

Yet one is always aware of his mind, and some who do not know the whole man encounter only this. An extraordinary mind it is, formed and disciplined by an uncommonly dynamic and fecund combination of native intelligence and varied experience. Its formation has included lengthy formal education and the vigorous exercise of academic skills, as well as stimulating interaction with other good minds. Yet, as we shall see, John Sorenson’s intellectual development has not been limited to the classroom or academic study.

Drawing from an extensive oral history and from a personal friendship of more than thirty years, I will summarize a dozen periods of notable growth in John’s life. What we discover is the result of a layering process by which a succession of rich experiences combined to produce a man of remarkable ability. At a certain early stage, John was perhaps not strikingly different from any number of other young males, but before long no one else had exactly his combination of background and expertise. As his life has continued and deepened, personal and work experiences have forged the unique, extraordinary person we honor in this volume.

Childhood and Youth

Born in 1924 to poor parents in the small northern Utah community of Smithfield, John L. Sorenson would seem to have been a poor prospect for advancing very far in life. The youngest of six children, he remembers his parents as always being elderly and in poor health. Even before the Great Depression of the 1930s, they could do little more than keep food on the table and clothing on their children. The family depended heavily on the classic pioneer resources of a large garden, fruit trees, a cow, a pig, and chickens. Survival rather than bright expectations characterized the family’s hopes.

Yet John’s memories are positive. For one thing, his family was close-knit: the parents were always there for their children, and older siblings away from home provided a reinforcing network while John was growing up. The accomplishments of the preceding five children against heavy odds had garnered them some sense of pride in family. To be a Sorenson was to hold some promise and also to feel some responsibility to society. In addition, the community offered security and calm. Residents could walk in safety anywhere they needed to go, and few felt the need to lock their doors. “Smithfield was a three-ward town,” John recalls, noting that such a designation not only communicated the size of a community but also implied the dominance of Mormonism in the fabric of community life.

Much of life in Smithfield revolved around the ward. One beloved bishop presided over the ward during most of John’s childhood and youth, a time when John enjoyed attending the children’s Primary class and, later, Sunday School. Ordained a deacon at age twelve, he faithfully fulfilled his priesthood responsibilities. As president of his deacons and teachers quorums and as secretary in the priests quorum, he proved reliable. With rare exceptions he

attended all his meetings in a day when regular church attendance among Latter-day Saints was far from the norm. John found the church to be a source of security. "For me church did take," he remarks, "and I took to it."

In school John was consistently an excellent student, an accomplishment he attributes to the pattern established by his older siblings and to excellent teachers. "Smithfield was a town where the schools and education were held in particularly high esteem," he remembers. His report cards throughout his primary and secondary schooling would show essentially nothing but A grades.

In contrast to his academic success, John remembers feeling socially rather marginal. Sensitive to the poverty of his family, he avoided involvement with children from wealthier homes. He liked neighborhood sports, especially hoop-on-the-barn basketball, but never excelled in them. Having skipped the second grade, John was always a year younger than his classmates, a fact that probably exacerbated his sense of distance from many of them.

Yet the teachers certainly knew of young John Sorenson. Because the classwork was relatively easy for him, he spent a good deal of time helping those who struggled to learn. Many students must have come to know him as a valued friend or pleasant and capable acquaintance, for he was elected student body president of his junior high school. In high school his social life expanded: he was business manager of the yearbook, and he participated in debate and wrote for the school paper. He was also active in seminary, where he had "outstanding teachers." "I hope I avoided snobbery," he says, revealing a continuing concern with something he considers to be a reprehensible social sin.

Even though church, school, and home chores filled his days, John always made time to read. The local library, which was constructed with the help of funds from Andrew Carnegie, provided treasured books and magazines such as *Boy's Life* and *National Geographic*. When the *Deseret News* published a series of profiles entitled "Know Your World," John clipped and filed them. This early interest in the wider world helped establish a basis for his later interest in cultures and geography.

Utah State Agricultural College

At age seventeen, having graduated from North Cache High School, John entered Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University) in Logan. A brother and two sisters of his had already graduated from there. With the campus located only seven miles from Smithfield, John could pursue a higher education while living at home. "It was a foregone conclusion that I would attend college," he says. "There was simply no other prospect."

His older brothers, Curtis and Randall, had become electrical engineers, and John followed their example. Taking courses heavy in mathematics and physics, he also prospered in general education courses such as anatomy, writing, drafting, and metal shop. Because the school was a land-grant college, all male students participated in ROTC.

During his first quarter at Logan came the attack on Pearl Harbor and America's entry into World War II. Some form of military service was inevitable for him, for despite his sickly childhood, he was now in generally good health. (Until middle age, though, his six-foot frame almost never carried more than 135 pounds.) Because John and his friends in the sciences would complete a year of classes before they became eligible for the draft, they set about to turn their education to their advantage in the military. John and his hometown buddy Grant Athay (who eventually became a rather famous astrophysicist) signed up to be trained as meteorologists in the Army Air Corps. They became reservists awaiting call-up, and this enabled them to complete a total of five quarters in college before they were drafted.

Military Life

Like many other young Americans in the military, John Sorenson found himself a minor actor in something much larger than himself. As a rural youth, he had little experience of a broadening nature beyond what he had learned through school, books, and the radio. He had never traveled more than 150 miles from his home.

At first his military service meant simply more college education. His six months of pre-meteorology training was in Albuquerque at the University of New Mexico, in what could be termed a semimilitary setting. The students in his group—most of them from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and California—were housed in college dorms and ate at the campus cafeteria, but they wore privates' uniforms and went through daily physical training and close-order drill to give them a soft version of the basic military training that most servicemen endured. Taught by regular University of New Mexico faculty, they studied English, geography, and courses featuring the primary menu of mathematics and physics. Because all the students had been chosen for their outstanding college records, competition was fierce, and the usual A grades they expected occasionally came out as disappointing Bs and Cs. Part of the incentive to succeed was the rumor that dropouts would be sent to tail-gunner school!

After their training in Albuquerque, the class members became aviation cadets (a rank between enlisted man and officer) and were sent to the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) in Pasadena for formal training in meteorology. Regular faculty taught the courses, and Air Corps officers served as laboratory assistants. The classes carried regular Caltech graduate-level credit. Facilities were again a far cry from those in the regular military, for these cadets lived in a large hotel with maid service. Once more only a minor military component was incorporated into the heavy academic grind. This course work added a more intensive dimension to John's previous studies at Utah State Agricultural College and the University of New Mexico.

Probably more educational, however, were the occasional weekends John spent exploring the southern California ambience. Hitchhiking on Los Angeles's recently opened first freeway, visiting the Hollywood Canteen and the Rose Bowl, shopping in the glittering Wilshire district—all this was a formative experience for a rural Utahn. During John's time in California, a coterie of four Latter-day Saints in the group gave him comfort and support.

When John completed his military training in mid-1944, he was commissioned a second lieutenant. He fulfilled one short assignment at a base in Nevada, his only one as a regular forecaster. "I didn't think anyone could really forecast the weather," he notes. "I certainly couldn't do it with any confidence." Because of his electronics experience, John was soon sent to Air Corps weather headquarters in North Carolina for special training as a communications facilitator. For the next year and a half he instructed and encouraged those in the Air Corps communications field to more speedily transmit weather data from bases on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic and from Natal and Fortaleza, Brazil. These locations were fueling stops for bombers being ferried from Brazil to Africa, the Middle East, and India. "We always said that those of us in the South Atlantic didn't go overseas," John notes wryly; "we just went abroad."

John was discharged as a first lieutenant in the spring of 1946, long after the war in Europe had ended. Thirty-nine months had passed since he left Cache Valley.

Missionary in Polynesia

In the summer of 1946 John enrolled for another quarter at Utah State Agricultural College but found himself at loose ends because the sciences no longer seemed attractive to him. Like many other service people trying to settle down after seeing the world, he was restless.

John told his bishop in early August that he would like to serve a mission. It was not generally assumed in those years that every young man should serve a mission; in fact, in his hometown during the 1930s, John had seen only a handful of young men leave for missions. Many returning veterans, however, were eager to serve missions immediately, and John was part of that wave. His savings from the military made a mission feasible. When he opened the letter from church headquarters, he found that he had been called to serve in the New Zealand Mission. His departure date was in question, however, because of the lack of civilian transportation.

While waiting to leave, John met Kathryn Richards of Magna, Utah, who was living temporarily with her married sister next door to the Sorenson family. The two fell in love in short order and decided to marry immediately rather than wait until after John's mission. They were wed in the Salt Lake Temple in November 1946. There was never any question that John would still serve his mission, and although marrying in such circumstances was unusual, it was not unknown in the wake of the war. After John's departure in early January, Kathryn lived first with her sister and later with her parents, in whose home Kathryn and John's first son, Jeffrey, was born in 1947. Kathryn supported herself by working in Salt Lake City because she did not want to deplete John's savings. The couple would not be reunited until mid-1949.

The LDS Church was then still very much a local phenomenon, not the worldwide operation it now clearly is. Conditions in the crowded mission home on State Street in Salt Lake City were indicative of that intimacy. Almost half the General Authorities could take time to speak to the departing missionaries during their three or four days in the mission home. One day when John and two companions were walking past the LDS Church Office Building while returning from the temple to the mission home, someone approached them from behind and put his arms around their shoulders. "Well, boys," he said, "I hope you enjoy your mission as much as I enjoyed mine." It was white-bearded George Albert Smith, president of the church.

After a long ocean voyage on a crowded converted troopship, Elder Sorenson arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, where he was greeted by his former stake president who also was a member of his home ward in Smithfield: mission president A. Reed Halverson. President Halverson immediately assigned John to a new field of labor in the Cook Islands, fifteen hundred miles northeast of Auckland. After laboring for some weeks in the New Zealand metropolis while awaiting transport, Elder Sorenson finally boarded a tiny six-passenger ship for the week-long voyage to Rarotonga, the capital island of the isolated Cook group.

For the next two years John would live in this little island paradise. With a formerly volcanic peak in its middle and a ring of coral enclosing its lagoon, the ten-mile-long island was occupied by some fifteen thousand Polynesians and a handful of Europeans. The inhabitants lived in six villages situated around the shore of the island. The rain forest, the abundant flowering trees, and the picturesque beach and lagoon provided an environmental experience for John that could hardly be further from familiar Cache Valley. The people were friendly, smiling, and apparently carefree. The entire scene was, in John's words, "absolutely gorgeous—no place in the world is more beautiful."

Mormonism already had a foothold on the island. In the village of Muri Enuu a small branch met in a whitewashed meeting-house, a thatched-roof structure that contained three tiny rooms for the missionaries adjacent to a little chapel. Elder Sorenson and his companion, Elder Donlon Delamare of Salt Lake City (also a war veteran), were, along with a New Zealand couple, the first American missionaries on the island. The elders' language study depended mainly on the Bible, the only published item in the Rarotongan Maori language; the translation had been done by missionaries of the London Missionary Society who had arrived on the island 125 years earlier. The elders had no grammar or dictionary of significant value. Despite this lack of resources, John was able to give what he terms a "reasonable" talk within two months. Perhaps a spiritual gift, his mastery of the language was also

undergirded by a strong desire and incessant study. Before John's two years on Rarotonga were over, with local help he had translated two tracts and written a Rarotongan grammar for the benefit of subsequent missionaries.

Working as a missionary among a native people to whom the church was new provided John and his companions an intense experience in adaptation. Far from mission headquarters (only two planes per month brought mail, and the mission president visited only once a year), they had to depend on inspiration and the faithful support of loving and admiring but inexperienced members. Another challenge was that relations with the New Zealand government and the country's dominant church were not always smooth. But the missionaries kept their focus on the gospel. They emphasized service to the young in their teaching activities, taught informal English lessons, and organized Primary groups in several villages. In two years more than a hundred new members had been baptized.

Although John Sorenson the future anthropologist did not realize it at the time, this was an incomparable field experience, for it forced him to recognize and deal with cultural differences.

The University Years

In mid-1949 John returned home from New Zealand via a forty-four-day voyage on a freighter and was able to see his son for the first time. John and Kathryn made their first home in Provo, and with the help of the GI Bill's education subsidy, John enrolled at Brigham Young University. During his mission he had read articles by Sidney B. Sperry, Hugh W. Nibley, and M. Wells Jakeman in the *Improvement Era*. "What those men were doing with scripture studies, comparing them with external sources, using scholarly methods, seemed very much worth my doing," he recalls. Consequently, John gave up the idea of pursuing a degree in science or engineering and instead enrolled in BYU's new archaeology program.

Brigham Young University

It was a special point in time for John, whose interest in applying scholarly methods to Book of Mormon studies was about to be nourished into a lifelong passion. M. Wells Jakeman, a new professor at BYU with a Ph.D. in ancient history, had studied the Mayan language and the civilization of the area of Central America where he was convinced the Book of Mormon events had taken place. He was eager to promote his version of "Book of Mormon archaeology" and had grand hopes of being able to confirm the scriptural accounts once the proper overall geographical location was determined. After starting classes with Jakeman in the rudiments of archaeology and its application to the Book of Mormon, John explored the library, where he discovered dimensions of the discipline—some progressive or even avant-garde—that he did not encounter in the classroom. He quickly established himself as a mature student and within a year became a student teacher.

"I feel that I received an excellent education at BYU," John says. Courses in the humanities and social sciences broadened his understanding in ways that his previous focus on the hard sciences had not permitted. Some of the master teachers he remembers with fondness and respect include Russell Swenson (history), Tommy Martin (bacteriology), Gerritt de Jong (linguistics), Reed Bradford (sociology), Wayne Hales (physics), and Hugh Nibley (ancient history and philology). By working hard and reading voraciously, John graduated in 1951 with a bachelor of science degree in archaeology. With that degree in hand, he could apply for the master of science degree at Caltech that he had already earned. He did so and was awarded his master's degree in 1952.

Because his acquaintance with archaeology was still very limited, John decided to stay at BYU to pursue a master's degree in that field. He and his growing family were still supported by the GI Bill as well as by John's regular student teaching appointments. His master's thesis, finished in 1952, was entitled "Evidences of Culture Contacts

between Polynesia and the Americas in Precolumbian Times.” The choice of this topic reflects a convergence of John’s missionary experience in Polynesia, his familiarity with and critical attitude toward speculation surrounding the Hagoth account in the Book of Mormon, and the excitement of Thor Heyerdahl’s 1949 voyage. The thesis was the start of an interest in transoceanic diffusion that Sorenson has pursued ever since. He quotes Thoreau: “Know your own bone; gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw it still” (*The Correspondence of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding and Carl Bode [New York: New York University Press, 1958], 216).

While a student at BYU, John realized the importance of publishing in academic and intellectual life. He began work on articles that in the next few years demonstrated that he was a rising young scholar. Well-read, meticulous, with a mind of his own, and with unusual multidisciplinary breadth, he seemed primed to make his mark. What was not yet clear was how he would do that.

Expedition to Mexico

Working toward a Ph.D. was the next logical move for John, but in 1952 he had no financial resources. To provide him a bare survival income, Professors Sperry and Jakeman cobbled together some teaching tasks for him that fall. Then a break came. Thomas Stuart Ferguson of Orinda, California, an amateur enthusiast in Book of Mormon archaeology, had, with support from leading non-Mormon archaeologists interested in promoting more digging in the remains of ancient cultures in Mexico and Central America, organized the New World Archaeological Foundation. With more faith than money, Ferguson planned an expedition to southern Mexico in order to work from January to May 1953. John and fellow BYU student Gareth Lowe committed themselves to go along, and a pittance from Ferguson’s scarce funds helped their wives keep groceries on the table.

John’s experience in Mexico was a powerfully formative one. Some of the non-Mormon archaeologists were heavyweights in the field: Dr. Pedro Armillas, a Spaniard well-known for his Marxist-influenced “materialist” position as well as for competent fieldwork; William Sanders, a star Harvard graduate student who has since become one of the deans of Mesoamerican archaeology while on the Pennsylvania State University faculty; and Roman Pina Chan, who was later recognized as one of the top Mexico archaeologists. Gareth Lowe later became director of the New World Archaeological Foundation and a noted authority on Mesoamerican cultures. (In the 1970s John encouraged BYU’s awarding Lowe an honorary doctorate.) The actual excavating of sites and the interminable discussions of data, method, and theory that the crew engaged in during their four months in the field near Huimanguillo, Tabasco, provided a marvelous antidote to the idealistic but arid discussions about archaeology in the classroom at BYU.

The area the group studied was chosen according to Ferguson’s ideas about the Book of Mormon. The field investigations, for reasons explained by Armillas and Sanders, showed that Ferguson’s hopes were ill-grounded. No great “Book of Mormon city” awaited discovery in that area of Tabasco. In a last-ditch effort to find something that would impress donors to fund a second expedition the next year, Ferguson listened to John’s reasons for continuing their investigations in the state of Chiapas to the south.

John and Ferguson flew to Chiapas just as the rainy season was beginning. In ten days of jeep trekking over obscure roads, they located more than seventy-five archaeological sites that John believed he could directly relate to the Book of Mormon. Although the Chiapas reconnaissance did not yield the kind of “quick-proof” artifacts (figurines of horses, for example) that Ferguson sought, John’s position—an interest in the overall cultural and geographical context of the area as it may relate to Book of Mormon peoples—has prevailed in the field. The work opened up in Chiapas in 1953 was renewed three years later under the patronage of the LDS Church. Under BYU

administrative control for the next forty-one years, the New World Archaeological Foundation has carried out high-quality archaeological research in Chiapas that has earned its team of scientists professional accolades.

In 1953 a position as an archaeology instructor opened up for John in Provo. Over the next two years he taught many classes, published significant professional pieces, and saw his family grow to include five sons.

University of California at Los Angeles

The next year John applied for a National Science Foundation predoctoral fellowship, which was being extended to anthropologists for the first time. Only three fellowships were awarded, and John was delighted to learn he was one of the recipients. With that prestigious prize in hand (full college costs and family subsidy renewable for three years), John evaluated where he wished to pursue a doctorate. He intended to specialize in Mesoamerican archaeology, and eschewing the stodgier though more famous departments, he chose the University of California at Los Angeles, where anthropology was vigorously breaking new ground and where Maya ceramist George Brainerd was a key faculty member.

Although the fellowship stipend represented an increase in compensation over John's previous salary as a BYU instructor, the family faced the problem of finding affordable housing in Los Angeles. A generous personal loan from BYU president Ernest L. Wilkinson (one of scores he made to students without seeking publicity) solved the problem. In his later years at BYU, John disagreed vigorously with some of the president's public pronouncements, but he could never forget the man's private grace.

Older than many of the graduate students he encountered in his department, John found himself generally well prepared even though he lacked some of the curricular requisites. Because he lived far from campus and was not a teaching assistant, John missed out on much of the informal banter between students, but he excelled in his course work. "My education there was really top rate," he is quick to affirm.

Two months into the fall 1955 semester, Professor Brainerd, with whom John had formed a positive relationship, died of a heart attack. This situation could have placed the renewal of John's National Science Foundation fellowship in serious jeopardy because he had been counting on Professor Brainerd's letter of recommendation. Fortunately, however, John had been taking courses in ethnology and social anthropology from Walter Goldschmidt, Ralph Beals, and William Lessa, all first-rate anthropologists. Goldschmidt, who was on the verge of assuming editorship of the *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the discipline, agreed to supervise John's work. John's impressive performance in several classes and the resulting strong letters of recommendation led to a renewal of John's fellowship.

Among John's research projects during his graduate days were those about American (including Mormon) funerals, Japanese-American Buddhist funerals, and Japanese language schools. A paper John wrote on the extension of "emic" analysis from its home in linguistics to ethnography was stimulating enough to linguistics teacher Harry Hoijer that he urged its publication and nominated John for associate membership in the international scientific research society Sigma Xi.

Goldschmidt's research had once dealt with the sociocultural accommodation of "Okies" into central California agricultural towns, and he had become one of the exponents of anthropological study of American culture, a specialization most anthropologists carefully avoided. John and Goldschmidt agreed on a dissertation study that would examine the change of a community from an agricultural base to an industrial one. As it turned out, the most promising example that seemed treatable was in Utah. Lowry Nelson, a rural sociologist, had studied American

Fork more than twenty-five years earlier, and now a study was designed to examine the consequences of the Geneva Steel plant completed in 1942. Santaquin, a “control” community, was included to represent the unimpacted agricultural town that American Fork likely would have been had the steel plant not been constructed. Doing the study meant moving to American Fork in the summer of 1957 to begin a fifteen-month stay. The dissertation, completed in 1960, was accepted.

Return to BYU

While he was in American Fork, John Sorenson, *pater-familias*, needed a job to support a wife and eight sons, but the pickings were slim. At the last minute, S. Lyman Tyler, a friend and historian who was the director of the library at BYU, came up with a job for John. For the 1958–59 academic year, John was appointed social science librarian. His charge was to stock the new library, still under construction, with expanded, quality holdings. John also arranged to teach an anthropology class in the sociology department. By the next year the sociologists had accepted him as a full-fledged faculty member teaching anthropology. Before John’s second year as a teacher was over, a major was being offered in anthropology (including work in archaeology) and the name of the department had been changed to include both sociology and anthropology.

Until 1963 John was *the* anthropologist at BYU. During a two-year cycle, with the help of a few faculty members in other fields, he taught all the essential courses. A number of students completed the anthropology major and went on to graduate school or into varied employment. Eventually a second anthropologist came aboard: Merlin Myers, a recent graduate of Cambridge University. Anthropology had taken its place in the intellectual spectrum at BYU.

When John first started teaching anthropology, the salary schedule at BYU was not strong. With Kathryn working hard to manage the household, the family of ten (all eight sons had now been born) was barely able to survive. They bought a large old home in Springville, and before long, Kathryn’s remodeling efforts provided an additional room. Meanwhile, John nursed an ulcer at home, promoted the cause of anthropology at work, read papers at professional meetings, and served on a committee for the American Anthropological Association.

Applied Anthropology

John always thought anthropology was too stimulating to be limited to the esoteric reports that seemed to satisfy most ivory-tower academics in the profession. A chance to make the discipline useful came in 1959 when Lyman Tyler asked John to help him support the attorney for the Hopi tribe’s land-claim lawsuit. They examined early documents to try to pinpoint when the Navajo settled on Hopi lands.

Another opportunity for John to apply his anthropological skills came when Paul Hyer, Asia historian at BYU and an old friend, drew him into a project on South Vietnam. A U.S. Navy office had contracted through David Pack, a Latter-day Saint employee of the Navy, with BYU professors to construct an in-depth profile of South Vietnam. Hyer insisted that a broad anthropological view would be essential, and John, along with political science and economics faculty members as well as student assistants, worked on the study through the summer of 1961 and part-time through the following academic year. The detailed picture they developed addressed military, social, political, and economic organization in Vietnam; its ethnic and religious groups; and its key public actors. John’s anthropological view proved to be key to integrating the myriad data, and he ended up codirecting and cowriting the monographic report. Pleased with the results, the Navy commissioned another study of the same kind on Venezuela, where a guerrilla movement was then operating, for the summer of 1962. Again John essentially wrote the report.

The income from these projects eased the family's financial strain and permitted them to add on to their Springville home. They hoped that in 1964, the start of a sabbatical year for John, they could arrange to get away from their regular grind, but limited funds made that seem unlikely. In the spring, however, a providential telephone call came. People at the Defense Research Corporation in Santa Barbara, California, had come across the Navy studies on Vietnam and Venezuela and were impressed. They were looking for a social scientist to lead them through new contracts with the U.S. government on counter-insurgency. John flew to Santa Barbara for an interview, and soon after his return he was offered a job at two and a half times his BYU salary. "I'll talk to my wife and get back to you," John said, trying to sound cool and detached. Within a few days he started consulting work with the corporation, leaving Kathryn to sell the house in Springville and move the family to California.

The Sorensens settled in an old ranch-style house on three-quarters of an acre on "the Mesa." Using their rooftop telescopes, the boys could see the beautiful Santa Barbara Channel and its whales. The home had been built in the 1920s by a Czarist diplomat who, with much of the embassy's funds and all of its wine, fled Washington at the time of the Russian Revolution. With large citrus, palm, live oak, and avocado trees and a forty-acre azalea nursery next door, the homesite was a veritable paradise for growing boys. In time, as the higher salary made a dent in the family's debts, John's ulcer disappeared.

As always, John and Kathryn were active in their LDS ward. She worked with children in the Primary organization and later became Relief Society president, and John taught gospel doctrine to the adults in Sunday School, as he has done for much of the last forty-five years. The Sorensens enjoyed the climate (including the fog) and walking on the beach, growing their flowers, and many other activities associated with the amenities Santa Barbara afforded. John's mother lived with them for part of the time they were in California.

They also made many dear friends. Meeting on the beach at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with brown-bag lunches, John and one of his friends, a historian, discussed starting a periodical for LDS scholarly interchange. Unknown to them, a group at Stanford was already preparing to launch *Dialogue* a few months down the road. John and Kathryn participated in a new Sunday evening study group that read and discussed a different book each month. Now, more than thirty years later, branches of the group still function in Santa Barbara and in Provo and Salt Lake City.

The Defense Research Corporation (soon renamed General Research Corporation) primarily studied intercontinental ballistic missile strategies by using simulations and gaming. The general intellectual mode of operation was that of a think tank: proposed programs and strategies were subjected to exhaustive critical questioning in every aspect, from axioms to logic to outcomes. All this was normally done under the pressure of urgent deadlines. It was a far cry from the leisurely life of academe.

The company's principals, who were scientists or engineers wanting to make a profit and go public with their stock, sought to diversify and expand their market. In the 1960s counter-insurgency was a research growth area among their clients, who were military or quasi-military agencies. Discovering that it would need a person knowledgeable in social science, the company hired John as the first and nominal head social scientist. His first responsibility was to direct a study on urban insurgency, with political scientists, economists, military people, and operations research experts all contributing their expertise.

The biggest challenge for John was to transcend the conceptual frameworks and languages of the company's existing "scientific" experts. He found that he would need to adapt anthropological and other social science models

and terminology to the ongoing in-house discussion, and although this forced him to question some of the details of his own discipline, he appreciated more than ever the power of its overall approach.

It was not simply a competition between disciplines, for the key questions always came down to nondisciplinary matters. Rather, the aim was to get at the real questions behind the obvious ones. Military analysts routinely asked questions such as how guerrillas might attack a village, but the systems critic had to probe further: Will village defenders risk death if they do not trust their leaders? Who can be bribed and with what? The process was intense, never ending, and intellectually subversive of every casual assumption. John realized that most of the academics involved in these discussions asked rather tame, artificial questions whose answers had little relation to the real world. He also came to realize that for some problems there are simply no adequate answers. For example, when this think-tank mode of critical analysis was used in a massive study of urban transportation for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the panoply of data on vehicle speeds, subway capacities, freeway pollution, and the social costs of failing to fix the current systems made only marginal difference. The overriding fact was that only very expensive, high-tech changes would make marked improvement in traffic flows, and because of the political economy, they were impossible to implement.

John also realized that relatively few clients—private as well as government—do research to find out the real answers. Rather, research is mainly cosmetic, a political ploy used to delay an uncomfortable decision or to justify why an already-determined course will be followed. Huge studies are often shelved if they do not fit the predisposition of those in high places. As John observes, “It was interesting, but highly discouraging, to see the mind-set of the bureaucrats.”

John welcomed the high salary he received at the General Research Corporation, but as time went on he began to enjoy less and less the challenge of that kind of work. Under the high stress of dealing with government clients, he began to long for what he recalled (perhaps inaccurately) as the quieter pace of the university. In 1969 company management agreed to John’s forming a subsidiary, the Bonneville Research Corporation, which he would operate from Provo and which would handle the social science end of the General Research Corporation’s contracts. John planned to utilize BYU faculty members and other LDS experts as consultants.

Moving the family back to Utah was not entirely pleasant. Kathryn wondered why they had left behind what she considered paradise, and John did not really want to be a businessman pressured to locate funds and projects mainly on his own now that the heyday of government support for such contracts was over. Yet the advantages of the move seemed to outweigh the disadvantages. After the Sorensons relocated to Provo, John had two years of relative success as the large Bonneville team developed new language programs for the Army Language School in Monterey, California. But eventually the General Research Corporation, under its own pressures, withdrew support and the Bonneville Corporation folded.

Final Years at BYU

While working for the General Research Corporation, John had maintained many connections with Brigham Young University. Some faculty members had worked on research projects, including Martin Hickman, dean of the College of Social Sciences, who had served on Bonneville’s board of directors. When the company dissolved, Hickman invited John to take an open faculty position at the rank of full professor.

John taught classes in political science and sociology, but not in his old department, which had been renamed the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology. “I have never taught anything but Sorenson,” John maintains,

“whatever the department label.” His primary responsibility was to work with the dean’s office in facilitating research proposals made by the college’s faculty.

For the next academic year (1972–73), Hickman assigned John to serve on the staff of a university-wide committee attempting to reform the general education curriculum and simultaneously appointed him chair of the university studies department. The general education staff—chiefly John Sorenson, Arthur Henry King, and Marion Bentley, all under the advisement of Dean Terry Warner—strove for two years to arrive at a new curriculum that was both innovative and acceptable to the faculty. However, disciplinary vested interests forced painful political compromises. The result was so far below the visionary hopes of the staff and the reform committee that even now John is not pleased to recall the effort.

Working with the university studies program, on the other hand, was a pleasure for him. The program helped students design a personalized curriculum aimed at meeting a specific graduation need they felt strongly about and could defend. John counseled hundreds of students. Part of his role was to screen out any efforts by individual students looking to complete their programs via an easy set of courses. The unwillingness of some departments to cooperate with the program was a more difficult problem, one caused by the notion that everyone must fit into an already established major or not receive a degree. “I learned a lot I didn’t want to learn,” John recalls. Eventually the university studies program was restricted and then discontinued.

In 1978 Hickman appointed John chair of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology. John was to deal with particularly hard questions involving faculty retention and a general stasis in the program, but because he had not been on the inside of the department for fourteen years, he faced a difficult task. He worked prodigiously to resolve these issues for the next eight years.

John’s first step was to move his people from obscure basement quarters into the new Kimball Tower, where they could be integrated into the university environment. Eventually he succeeded in having the department name shortened to the anthropology department. Also, a number of changes were made in faculty positions, including hiring the first non-Mormons in the department.

Conceiving the little departmental museum collection more broadly as a semiautonomous entity, John renamed it the Museum of Peoples and Cultures and found it new quarters in the old Allen Hall, where it became the center for BYU’s archaeological research. For some years the department’s archaeologists had contracted to do a limited amount of archaeology for government agencies and utility companies. Now John sought to promote and regularize that kind of service. The Office of Public Archaeology was established within the museum, a shoestring operation that grew under the leadership of Asa Nielson, a master’s graduate of the department. Within a few years a steady flow of projects was under way, resulting in the hiring of additional full-time staff. BYU archaeology students received hands-on experience at archaeological sites in Utah and the surrounding states and then went on to take professional positions in a network of government agencies. A newsletter subtitled “Anthropology at BYU” was produced at and circulated from the museum.

Students in sociocultural and archaeological anthropology learned to attend and give presentations at professional meetings. Africanists Tom and Pam Blakely’s lobbying for one such trip saw success when, in 1983, a contingent of two dozen BYU students and faculty traveled to the national meetings of the Society for Applied Anthropology, an organization in which John was a fellow for a quarter century. “Well, I’ll be damned,” said an older lapsed-Mormon anthropologist from Colorado, surprised that BYU had brought its anthropology program to such

a scale. Field schools of archaeology were developed in several venues in the intermountain West, and Professor John Hawkins held a BYU ethnographic field school in southern Mexico.

In the midst of his administrative work, John taught five or six classes per year. Sensitive to his colleagues, he never tried to teach “their” courses, even though he was qualified to do so in many cases. He instead filled in around the edges of the curriculum and developed new specialties of his own, including modern American culture. He particularly enjoyed teaching a course in psychological anthropology, a class he came to consider crucial to the synthesis of the field that anthropologists always claimed to be seeking.

Because he was experienced in the wider world of applied anthropology, John was not one to remain confined within rigid departmental boundaries. He branched out to serve as consultant to the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, the BYU Language Research Center, the Thrasher Research Fund, the LDS Motion Picture Studio, and a committee studying the LDS missionary program. For more than twenty-five years, he labored consistently to build the anthropology collection within the BYU library system to the point where it is now one of the best collections in the western U.S., and on the subject of Mesoamerica it has few equals anywhere. During his twenty-five years on the faculty, John took only one leave, a semester he spent in St. George in 1985 doing research on the local school system for the BYU College of Education.

In 1985 John suffered a heart attack. Angioplasty treatment limited the organic damage, but the psychic shock proved greater than the physical trauma. He suddenly realized that stress caused by his overambitious agenda was the prime contributor to his condition. Moreover, he realized that nobody really cared about his plans and that most of his concerns at BYU were actually of small moment. Lying in the intensive care unit, he thought about his life. A sympathetic visit from a friend, an apostle in the LDS Church, urged him to believe that he still had a long, productive life ahead. He just needed to correct the course his ship had been sailing. It was a time for major reassessment of what really mattered.

Book of Mormon Scholarship

Retiring from BYU at age sixty-two, John never looked back with longing to either his department or his field. What he had always wanted to do but had never been professionally positioned to accomplish was to pursue research on the Book of Mormon. Now, perhaps, the chance had arrived.

Since 1949, the year he realized the importance of what he could contribute to Book of Mormon studies, John had accomplished a great deal in that area through spurts of effort. Although heavily involved in other commitments, he had tried each year to devote at least a few weeks to intensively reading about Mesoamerican archaeology. He was rarely able to travel in Mexico and Central America, where he was sure the Nephite lands lay, but he did master a vast array of primary and secondary materials on ancient life there. In 1969, while working at the General Research Corporation, he had prepared a landmark paper comparing ancient Near East and Mesoamerican cultures. First presented a year earlier in a symposium in Santa Fe, New Mexico, it was published in 1971 in *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*, an important volume assessing what was known of ancient voyages to the Americas.

John's views on Book of Mormon geography had taken early form under M. Wells Jakeman's tutelage, but the definitive solution to the long-argued problem occurred to him during the 1953 New World Archaeological Foundation season, when, as he recalls, he studied the scriptures at night as intensively as he did the ruins during the day. It was clear to him that, as Jakeman and others had insisted for years, the text itself demands that its setting be restricted to a relatively small territory that does not include the Hill Cumorah in New York. Rather, the

picture of geography and culture in the Nephite account fits at point after point into the setting of ancient Mesoamerican civilization. More specifically, John believed, the “land of Zarahemla” comprised mainly the drainage area of the Grijalva River in southern Mexico, while the “land of Nephi” was mostly in highland Guatemala.

But geography was only one aspect of the correlation that had to be worked out, in John’s view, and archaeology provided only partial data. For the correlation between the Book of Mormon lands and Mesoamerica to be convincing, historical traditions, languages, racial types, the whole range of culture, and every other aspect of ancient life had to relate as well. Fortunately, John had always taken the broadest possible approach to studying Mesoamerica, and everything he learned fit with and filled out the picture that had crystallized for him in 1953. Only a few friends and students, however, were aware of the details of his position.

In 1974 David A. Palmer of Naperville, Illinois, a chemical engineer and Book of Mormon buff, urged John to make public his views along with the substantial supporting materials. To overcome John’s reluctance to publicize what John considered work in progress, Palmer proposed that students of Book of Mormon geography confer by mail about a written presentation of John’s basic views and a contrasting interpretation by V. Garth Norman. Most of the commentators accepted John’s views and urged publication of them. Palmer then opened the way for John to give weekly lectures at the LDS Church Office Building in Salt Lake City for several months. One of the listeners was Jay M. Todd, managing editor of the *Ensign*, who not only accepted Sorenson’s views but strongly urged that they be published.

But like all new theories, John’s proposal encountered opposition. A few people in key church positions felt comfortable with the traditional view that the Nephites had occupied North America and had been exterminated in New York, an impossibility according to the limited geography model and John’s reading of the scriptural text. “Don’t challenge tradition” was the viewpoint that prevailed. John strove to be patient with the decision not to publish his articles, because he did not want to be seen as a troublemaker, especially a futile troublemaker. He would bide his time.

Finally, circumstances combined to make church authorities realize that the status quo about Book of Mormon geography was actually harmful. For Latter-day Saints to accept ill-informed traditions allowed critics of the Book of Mormon to have a field day. John was asked to produce two articles conveying the gist of his interpretation, and their appearance in the *Ensign* in September and October 1984 constituted a fundamental breakthrough in LDS Church publishing on the Book of Mormon. While the editor’s introduction carefully avoided any claim of church approval for these landmark articles, the limited approval that could be inferred from their publication in the *Ensign* opened up new vistas for public discussion of the subject. The chapters that had been blocked from the magazine for so long were quickly published by Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) in mid-1985 as *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*.

Coincidentally or not, John’s heart attack occurred early in the fall of 1984, just as John was putting all this work to bed and as the new school year was starting. He had also recently finished serving as a bishop.

Meanwhile, John had been heavily engaged in pushing forward the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. John W. Welch founded the organization in 1979 and soon afterward left his southern California law practice to join the faculty of the J. Reuben Clark Law School at BYU. From the first time he heard about FARMS, John Sorenson was an enthusiastic supporter of it. He had been active in Jakeman’s Society for Early Historic Archaeology but had given up on it because of the narrowness of the approach and the dominance of personalities

in what should have been a more scholarly activity. Since then he had tried to bring Book of Mormon scholars together but was unsuccessful. Now Welch's dynamism, scholarship, and legal and fiscal skills promised a different level of success. FARMS quickly became a cooperative, if not communal, effort. Support and resources mushroomed. Like everyone else at FARMS, John Sorenson helped with the nitty-gritty details. As the organization has tried to bring reliable research on the Book of Mormon and its setting to a wide audience, John has contributed much because of his unique knowledge and perspective. He has written and edited in the FARMS publication program, and for several years he was chairman of the board. Although no longer a member of the board of trustees, John has recently been selected as the editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*.

With an unrivaled breadth of experience in fields and skills ranging from dirt archaeology and anthropological theory to systems analysis and the history of science, and having learned to function in an atmosphere of relentless questioning and mutual criticism, John is not easily cowed. He does not, as the saying goes, suffer fools gladly. With either a brief or a lengthy response, he dismisses critics who have not invested neither time nor attention to issues surrounding the Book of Mormon. He tries to give the benefit of doubt when judging the motives of critics, although he cannot grasp the basis of anti-Book of Mormon diatribes, which he finds invariably poorly informed. At the same time, however, he recognizes that his own answers are tentative and that study is an ongoing process that should never cease. He is also eager to supply those willing to learn with facts and viewpoints intended to invite them to seek further truth. One can anticipate that John will continue to contribute significantly to the stream of Book of Mormon scholarship that, thanks partly to FARMS, now depends more on the cooperative efforts of many rather than on the isolated efforts of individuals.

Personal and Family Life

Throughout his years as a scholar, John Sorenson was a husband and a father. Although he and Kathryn pursued different interests according to their different talents, they did many things together and gave each other love and support. While they lived in Santa Barbara, longing for the daughter that they could not conceive, the Sorensons took in Stacy, first as a two-year-old foster child and eventually as an adopted and sealed daughter. As the boys grew up and left home, they showed an independence of spirit sometimes painful to their parents, but the increasing covey of grandchildren lightened John's and Kathryn's lives.

Following John's heart problem and retirement, the couple gave heavy priority to spending time together. Because Kathryn was diabetic, her future health was in question. She and John wanted to enjoy together what they could of their remaining good years. Money was no longer an issue, for their income was comfortable. A measure of the wisdom that comes with age told them both to relax and simplify their lives, and in response they managed to put some of their concerns about their children out of their minds as well.

The flexibility of retirement allowed them to spend a month or so in the winter of 1989 on the lower Colorado River in Arizona. John took his computer and did some writing, but mainly they simply relaxed. The next year they spent a longer time at the beach in Carpinteria, near their beloved Santa Barbara. That respite was so pleasant that they wanted to repeat it. Arriving on New Year's Day 1991, they took a late walk on the beach and then retired. During the night Kathryn passed away of a heart attack, thus being spared the slow, painful decline from diabetes that she had always dreaded.

All the children and many grandchildren gathered for a funeral in Provo that reflected the creativity, humor, service, and unselfish support to John that had characterized Kathryn's life. She was buried in a plot they had

jointly chosen in the cemetery in Smithfield, near where their four parents lay and where John's father had planted many of the towering trees sixty years before.

Immediately after the funeral, John traveled alone to Zion Canyon and Springdale, its gateway, one of his favorite spots. For weeks he walked the trails and climbed the ridges and found peace in that gorgeous place. Before long, however, he was back at work on his computer. Peace without work was hard for him to imagine.

In March 1993 John married Helen Christianson, a widow from his ward who had been a close friend of Kathryn and had spoken at her funeral. Their eighteen children (then ranging between forty-seven and fourteen years of age) are the backbone of a joint clan that now numbers more than seventy-five, including three great-grandchildren. The couple's loving relationship is a blessing not only to them but also to hundreds of relatives and friends around them.

John has continued his habit of hard work, and his health is excellent. Nearly every day he walks or buses from his and Helen's home on Canyon Road to his office in BYU's Amanda Knight Building on University Avenue, where he continues the same kind of research and writing that he long prepared to do. He believes life is good to him.

Scholarly Contributions

The incessant flood of scholarship in many languages throughout the world sometimes prompts John to describe himself as an ex-scholar or an ex-anthropologist. The fact is, however, that his determined effort to keep abreast of research in the areas of his interest has paid off. Those who tangle with him will not find him pontificating on his own authority; rather, he calls attention to false assumptions, flaws in reasoning, and articles or books whose premises are weakened by easy generalizations. A well-known Maya scholar has been heard to say that he was reluctant to face Sorenson: "He is too intimidating." This intimidation, if that is the right word for it, comes not from impoliteness or name-calling but from the simple fact of superior preparation—knowing the scholarship combined with having carefully thought about it.

Bibliographical Contributions

A bibliographical contribution sure to have a lasting impact is the two-volume *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography* (1996), which John prepared in collaboration with Martin H. Raish. The bibliography contains some fifty-one hundred entries. No one considering the possibility of transoceanic contacts can afford to ignore what Betty Meggers of the Smithsonian Institution has described as an "impressive bibliography and monumental effort." Those who deny that any such contacts ever occurred, unwisely presuming to prove a negative, could profitably peruse what anthropologist George F. Carter of Texas A&M University calls an "unbelievably useful" and "magnificent" work.

Epistemological Approach

Unlike almost all people and a surprisingly large number of scholars, John has considered carefully what can and cannot be known and what can and cannot be proved. Because he knows the limitations of scholarship, he possesses a salutary humility. In the scholarly arena everything is subject to change. John is quite comfortable with the tentativeness of human inquiry, realizing that some questions simply stand outside the unaided human mind's capacity to solve. But another result of this awareness of the limits of scholarship is John's impatience with the pretense of some scholarly claims. His paper "'Understanding' the 'Real World'" summarizes his recognition of the tentativeness of human concepts and theories. His natural inclination is to quickly reduce a controversial issue to

its rudiments: What are the presuppositions? What evidence should we expect? How thorough have the investigations been? Willing to subject his own work to these same questions, John is not always patient with those who forge ahead and yet are ignorant of their assumptions and the limitations of all human inquiry.

Internal Textual Analysis

In Book of Mormon studies a standard Sorenson rejoinder is to ask how familiar someone is with the text. If the person has not read it carefully, John asks why the opinion should be granted much weight. Even ecclesiastical leaders are not immune from this question. John believes that the authority on what the Book of Mormon claims is the Book of Mormon itself.

Although he is not the only person involved in textual analysis of the Book of Mormon, John has carefully scrutinized a variety of specific questions. His methodical mind manifests itself through his preparation not only of articles on such subjects as the Mulekites and the relationship of warfare to the seasons of the year but also of thorough compilations. What are the Book of Mormon's own geographical references and requirements? One had better consult Sorenson's *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (1992). What animals are mentioned in the Book of Mormon and how might they correspond to what we know of pre-Columbian fauna in the Western Hemisphere? One had better consult Sorenson's *Animals in the Book of Mormon: An Annotated Bibliography* (1992). And on and on.

If John has written little on the religious ideas or theology of the Book of Mormon, this does not reflect his lack of interest in this area. Rather, it simply shows that his chosen area of contribution is elsewhere.

External Comparisons

To appreciate John's unique contribution, we must remind ourselves of the two extremes that seemed to dominate Book of Mormon studies when he came on the scene in the late 1940s. On one hand, there were flat denials by all the "big scholars" that anything like the Lehite migrations could have occurred. On the other hand, some Mormons made extravagant claims on their own. Paying little attention to geography or chronology, and ignoring complexity and context, they jumped to the strained conclusion that photographs of ancient ruins confirmed the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Between these extremes, a small number of Mormon scholars sought to proceed more carefully, and John quickly identified with them.

Rather than look for specific "proofs," however, John raised different questions: What do we know about ancient Mesoamerica? What can be said of the cultural world of the Book of Mormon? Are there compatibilities? Are the apparent incongruities truly irreconcilable, or should they be considered more carefully? No one seems to have been raising these questions when John, as a brilliant graduate student in 1955, delivered a series of lectures titled "The World of the Book of Mormon." Such an approach, buttressed by much additional detail and a willingness, finally, to advance a possible geographical locale for the events of the Book of Mormon, resulted in John's magnum opus, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (1985).

John is willing to cite specific parallels between the setting of the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica, but he does so with proper tentativeness. Who other than John Sorenson, we might ask, was in a position in the 1940s or 1950s to write "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex" (1976)? John claims no monopoly on this idea, but although others have made important external comparisons, John's extensive files on parallels and specific comparisons continue to make him a leader in discussions of the Book of Mormon in its external setting.

Mormon Studies

Not well-known to those familiar only with John's Book of Mormon contributions are his analytical and empirical studies of Mormon culture. His important doctoral dissertation comparing American Fork and Santaquin has already been discussed, and fourteen of his essays on Mormon culture and personality have been reprinted in *Taking a Closer Look: Four Decades of Essays on Mormon Culture and Personality* (1997). Although Mormon culture is not the center of his scholarly and teaching interest, John has nevertheless given it significant thought. A kind of capstone of this thought is *Mindful of Every People: Anthropological Perspectives on Mormons* (1997), a work he coedited with University of Maryland anthropologist Mark P. Leone. Although John wrote only one of the chapters, the project, which grew out of sessions he organized in 1980 on the topic "The Anthropology of Mormons," is intended to lay a foundation for future anthropological studies of Mormon culture.

* * *

As professional colleagues, fellow scholars, and friends, we present the following token of our esteem—articles of varying content that all connect with John's interests.