4-1-2003

Salt Lake Tabernacle Interior Photograph: Sabbath School Union Jubilee, July 1875

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Most early photographs of the Salt Lake Tabernacle depict a huge, architecturally curious building with relatively few adornments on its exterior or interior. Its oddity sparked the delight of many and the chagrin of many more, causing some travelers and observers to remark that it resembled a large turtle that had lost its way in the desert.\(^1\) However, any disagreement about the exterior of the tabernacle would be mediated by the view of the interior—Mormons and non-Mormons, residents and tourists alike agreed that in its first years the inside seemed gloomy and bare. One visitor described entering the Tabernacle as “entering a vault,” and several members of the Church remarked on the stark, colorless paint and the maze of lumber for the pews.\(^2\)

However, in July 1875, the Tabernacle interior was transformed for a celebration of the twenty-eighth anniversary of the pioneers’ arrival in the Salt Lake Valley. Although a jubilee is often a fiftieth anniversary, the Saints called this celebration the Sabbath School Union Jubilee. The Tabernacle’s decorations for this event are shown in this rare and previously unpublished photograph (fig. 1). The photograph shows a distinctive and inventive decor that contrasts with the usual plainness of the Tabernacle interior. Specifically made for this jubilee, many of these adornments were in place for several years following.\(^3\) This photograph was probably taken only a few days before the July 24 jubilee.

The Discovery of the Photograph

A few years ago, the family of late BYU professor Stewart L. Grow approached Richard Neitzel Holzapfel about resurrecting Dr. Grow’s
Fig. 1. Tabernacle interior, July 1875, 7 7/8" x 9 13/16", photographed by Charles R. Savage. This photograph, originally printed in sepiatone, depicts the decorations for the Deseret Sabbath School Jubilee commemorating the twenty-eighth anniversary of the arrival of the pioneers in Salt Lake Valley. Although the Tabernacle was usually stark, this view of its interior shows a rare festive atmosphere. Note the evergreen trees hanging from the ceiling.
historical research on the Tabernacle in an effort to update Grow’s important contribution on the history of this building. This update includes collecting a comprehensive nineteenth-century photographic record of the Tabernacle. While identifying important nineteenth-century images for this collection, Holzapfel found this beautifully preserved Charles R. Savage image of the interior (fig. 1). The image was purchased from an undisclosed owner with funds provided by the Grow family, which now owns the image.

Prominent Features of the Tabernacle Interior in the Photograph

Besides the decorations, the Tabernacle’s two most prominent features in this photograph are the organ and the three-tiered stand, or pulpit. Although the organ was huge for its time, it did not yet have the two expansion wings on each side that can be seen today. The position of the organist is also different in the modern Tabernacle; in this photograph, the organist sits directly under the pipes with his or her back to the congregation in what appears to be an organist’s alcove. This alcove was probably moved later so that the organist could see the conductor from where he or she was playing. This photograph was taken while someone was actually sitting at the organ keyboard; the organist is the only person visible in the image.

The other prominent feature of the Tabernacle’s interior shown here is the three pulpits on three different levels of the stand (fig. 2). Some claimed that only Brigham Young and his counselors spoke at the top pulpit, that the Apostles and common Church members spoke at the second pulpit, and that the lowest pulpit was used for prayers and announcements. However, we are not certain whether this rule was followed strictly, and there was no official Church statement regarding it. The seating on each of the three tiers may have been organized in a similar manner, with the President, his two counselors, and speakers on the white couch on the top tier; the Apostles on the second tier; and the Seventies, bishops, and others on the two bottom levels. This configuration of pulpits and seating likely reflected a sense of authoritative hierarchy.

The 1875 Deseret Sabbath School Union Jubilee

To commemorate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the pioneers’ entrance into the Salt Lake Valley, the Deseret Sabbath School Union Jubilee on Pioneer Day was held at 11:00 A.M. on Saturday, July 24, 1875. The jubilee was heavily advertised in the newspapers of Salt Lake City, and people came from all over the area. The youth and children of the Church
made up most of the congregation during the celebration, but the Tabernacle was reportedly filled with people of all ages after the doors were opened at 10:30. The First Presidency of the Church were present, including Brigham Young, and the event was to “consist of singing, reciting, and speeches, to be participated in by several thousand children, and some grown people.” Records show that over 12,000 children were in the audience. After the opening chorus, entitled “Come Join Our Celebration,” Elder John Taylor gave the opening prayer. A martial band then played several hymns, including “America,” during which a six-foot-two-inch tall woman dressed as the “Goddess of Liberty” arose, armed with the sword of
Justice, “making a majestic and imposing appearance.” The rest of the meeting consisted of two poetry readings written for the July 24 celebration and other minor speeches.

However, the buzz after the celebration centered around not the performances and speeches but around the decor. Elder Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal that he was impressed by the 750,000 artificial roses strung upon three miles of cord in the Tabernacle. The Deseret Evening News remarked before the event that “the interior of the building has been decorated in a manner far surpassing in elaboration and beauty those arranged for a similar occasion last year,” and that a “large body of children [would render] a more attractive interest to extensive assemblages than any other element.”

The Jubilee Decorations in the Tabernacle

The elaborate jubilee decorations were widely and publicly praised following the event. The subsequent articles about the event in the Deseret Evening News and the Salt Lake Herald devote the majority of their coverage to descriptions of the decorations. The Herald gloated, “The arrangement and execution of the decorations are simply perfect, and the magic-like grandeur of the mammoth interior peculiarly striking,” while the Deseret News gave a detailed description of the peculiar arrangements, exclaiming that they were “far ahead of anything ever seen in this part of the country.” Apparently the decorations were admired so much that most of them remained for several years following, and certain decorations later served functions other than aesthetics. A closer look at the many decorations from top to bottom yields interesting anecdotes.

The Ceiling Adornments. The high-domed blank ceiling was adorned with wreaths, garlands, cut-paper flowers, and real evergreens to appear like an “inverted garden.” Streamers and ribbons were festooned across the walls from one end to the other, and the “mammoth centerpiece artistically formed of deep evergreen and bright flowers” hung like a kind of chandelier from the apex of the ceiling (fig. 3). Ribbons were draped from the ceiling to form bows at the tops of the organ pipes, and a banner announced, “1847. Welcome to our Jubilee. 1875.” The last part of the banner is obstructed by the large garland centerpiece in this photograph. The many ceiling decorations were popular with the locals; perhaps this popularity explains why the decorations were apparently left in place for more than a decade. The pine trees and garlands on the ceiling were described almost ten years after the jubilee as “old and whithered,” but they may have been left to muffle the echoing acoustics of the building.
The Statue. Almost nothing is known about the angel statue that stood between the two major organ pipe towers during the jubilee (fig. 4). So far, no other Tabernacle interior photograph taken before or after the jubilee has been found that contains the statue. The Deseret Evening News described it as a “gilded and shaded figure of an angel sounding the gospel trumpet, to ‘every kindred, tongue and people.’” The paper also reports that during the jubilee, several children from each of the countries where the gospel had been preached sat on the stand directly underneath the angel statue, signifying the spreading of the gospel. The angel statue has a trumpet in his right hand and a Book of Mormon in his left, much like the Moroni statue that later adorned the top of the Salt Lake Temple. No certain connection has been made, but perhaps this jubilee angel served as a model for the later Moroni statue.

The Fountain. One of the most spectacular decorations for the jubilee was the fountain placed in the center of the main floor (fig. 5). This white fountain rose high above each bench; its base was probably fifteen to twenty feet long on each side. It was said to have represented the “living water” of the gospel. The fountain “attracted great attention” for its unusual look and placement. Water sprayed upwards and landed in the large basin, which contained live water lilies. Surrounding the fountain on each corner lay four sculpted lions, evoking President Brigham Young’s reputation as the “Lion of the Lord.”
The *Herald* claimed the lions were “chiseled from Utah stone,”18 but the lions were actually plaster of paris and probably prone to damage by the spraying water.19 During the jubilee, four children dressed to represent the four quarters of the globe (Europe, Asia, Africa, and America) straddled the lions. The *Deseret Evening News* called two of the children “genuine specimens” of

**FIG. 4.** Angel Moroni. Detail from a photograph by Charles R. Savage, July 1875. Apparently, this statue of Moroni was created and placed atop the central organ pipes in the Tabernacle specifically for the Sabbath School Jubilee. So far, no other Tabernacle interior photograph taken before or after the jubilee has been found that contains the statue. Like the golden figure of Moroni so familiar now, this statue holds a trumpet in his right hand and a Book of Mormon in his left hand.

**FIG. 5.** Fountain, Tabernacle interior, July 1875. Detail from a photograph by Charles R. Savage. Part of the decorations for the 1875 Sabbath School Jubilee, this large fountain amid the pews in the Tabernacle featured live water lilies and four lion statues made of plaster of paris. During the Jubilee, four children dressed to represent Europe, Asia, Africa, and America straddled the lions. This fountain remained on the floor of the Tabernacle for several years.
their ethnicity, black and Native American. The unusual fountain remained on the floor of the Tabernacle for several years after the jubilee. Although the reason is not evident, perhaps the mist’s cool air or the charm of the fountain influenced its longevity there.

**Importance of the Photograph**

Because of this unusual photograph, we can now determine several features of the 1875 Pioneer Day Sabbath School Union Jubilee. Even more importantly, we can identify evidence of the Saints’ creativity and interest in the Salt Lake Tabernacle. The Tabernacle has always been remarkable; the fountain of living water, the angel with the gospel trumpet, and the inverted garden only add to its colorful history. Through the preservation of old and modern photos, significant historical and sociological phases can be recorded and illustrated for the future. This photograph of the Tabernacle interior in July 1875 gives us a unique glimpse of the culture of the early Church.

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5. Journal History of the Church, July 24, 1875, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, microfilm copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
