



R. Don Oscarson, writer and producer of the *City of Joseph* pageant, 2013.

## ***City of Joseph: The Original Nauvoo Pageant Remembered***

*R. Don Oscarson*

*Editor's Note: From 1976–2004, the City of Joseph played to thousands of Nauvoo's summer visitors. In the following narrative, R. Don Oscarson, the writer and producer of the original musical, shares his reflections of the pageant—a production that educated, entertained, and endeared audiences to the unique history and timelessness of Nauvoo's early years. This is his story.*

The two most often asked questions about the City of Joseph pageant are: “When you started did you ever imagine that it would run for twenty-seven years and be seen by over three quarters of a million people?” and “How long did it take from the first idea to opening night?”

The answer to the first is simple. No! The second is a bit more complex.

### **Beginnings**

It really started in 1954. I was a senior at Brigham Young University finishing my degree in history. One day I went to the library and was reading some early diaries. Because I had pioneer ancestors, and had lived in St. Louis, Missouri, Church history was of particular interest.

One of the diaries I read was by a member of the Mormon Battalion. He told of the party the Saints had the night before the men left on their march. It was very impressive. They had a dance. The women came in their finest clothes, but you could see the holes in their dresses. As the evening ended, someone sang *Down by the River's Verdant Side*, a prayer was said, and the men left at dawn.

A year later I was in San Antonio, Texas, for some training at Lackland Air Force Base. Shirley, my wife, was at home in Portland; I was by myself,

so one afternoon I got a pass and went to town to see the sights and go to a movie. The movie was *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. As I walked out of the theater, the thought came, “*Wouldn’t a scene like the barn-raising scene in the movie make a great scene for the end of the first act of a musical of the Mormon Battalion!*” That was the beginning of the musical *Sand in Their Shoes*.

Hold on, the tie-in with *City of Joseph* is coming.

I had never written a musical (the script or the lyrics), but driven by the idea, I wrote *Sand in Their Shoes*.

The story of how an idea in San Antonio became a major production by Brigham Young University, with a set that filled the football stadium and featured a full symphony orchestra and a cast of five hundred, which played for two years (1959 and 1960) to a sellout audience, is another story.

After the success of *Sand in Their Shoes*, some people at BYU asked me to write another show for the following year, which I did. I locked myself in a dorm room to finish the script by the end of the second year’s performance. The show was about Nauvoo. I titled it *City of the Saints*. The musical was never produced by the university.

Following graduation I moved to St. Louis, where I had grown up, and on Saturdays I would often take my small children and spend the day in Nauvoo. This was before any major restoration efforts were begun. We developed a great love for the city and the Saints who lived there, including some of my own ancestors.

In 1961, with my *City of the Saints* script in hand, I met with Dr. J. LeRoy Kimball on a sunny afternoon in Nauvoo. He was the moving force behind Nauvoo Restoration, Inc. (NRI). My young son slept under a wicker sofa as I presented the idea for a pageant to Dr. Kimball. He listened to the story of the persecution of the Saints, the threats made against Joseph Smith, the martyrdom, the burning of the temple, and the driving of the Saints from their city. What a dramatic story!

After I pitched my idea, he said no. I was disappointed, but he was right. How can you tell an audience, many of whom had ancestors who were living in Hancock County in the 1840s, “Look at all the terrible things your ancestors did to our people. Now come and enjoy a show that tells this story.” What followed were years of visiting Nauvoo, meeting the local folks, getting to know them, being invited to dinner in their homes, or sharing cookies and milk, as they told of the challenges in their lives. As the years passed, the restoration effort grew, and I spent more time in Nauvoo and with Dr. Kimball. A new vision of Nauvoo, and the story that should be told emerged.

*City of the Saints*, with its pain and sorrow, became *City of Joseph*, with its message of hope, faith, courage and industry. It became a pattern

for what was to follow in the mountains of the West, and with a message for the present generations, that is, *“to have the same faith, the same courage, the same strength, and the same dedication in meeting the challenges of our time and place, as our fathers did who left Nauvoo and first plowed these fields.”*

The years passed, but the answer was still, “NO!” Dr. Kimball was a perfectionist. In his efforts to restore Nauvoo he involved the very best, the most qualified in the Church as well as nationally, to participate in the development and restoration of Nauvoo. I was just a shirttail cousin of his (on his wife’s side) from St. Louis. While I had *Sand in Their Shoes* to my credit, along with some seminary films, a guidebook of the Mormon history sites, and a couple of other achievements, in his eyes I wasn’t the one to write or produce a Nauvoo pageant.

However, one thing was accomplished. LeRoy Kimball realized the need for a pageant, and he brought in some of the top writers in the Church to come to Nauvoo and submit story outlines. But they all fell prey to the same temptation I had had with my first script. They all wanted to tell the dramatic, negative story.

Time passed. I kept revising the script, not knowing whether it would ever be produced. I even named the character after my ancestors who lived in the area, the Knights of Nauvoo and the Browns of Ramus.

In the meantime I needed a composer to write the music. After talking to friends at BYU, I was given the names of several who might be interested. Remember, I had no commitment to a performance of any kind, only an intense desire to tell the story.

Among the names I was given was a professor from Western Illinois University at Macomb, Illinois, just fifty miles from Nauvoo. Dr. Maughan W. McMurdie, the director of the opera theatre, choir director, and voice teacher, and he had a magnificent voice. As far as I knew, he was an arranger, conductor, and performer, but he had composed very little.



Dr. J. LeRoy Kimball, date unknown. In 1962, Kimball founded Nauvoo Restoration Incorporated (NRI) and served as president from 1962–1987.

Photograph courtesy NRI.

I called Dr. McMurdie, introduced myself, told him what I was doing, and asked if he would be interested in writing the music, pro bono. He said yes, and thus began a lifelong friendship. Lyrics were sent, music composed, and we were on our way.

One of our dear friends, Dr. Stanley B. Kimball, a professor of history at the University of Southern Illinois, lived in our ward and knew of our work on the show. In 1971, he was involved in putting together the program for the Mormon History Association meeting being held in Nauvoo. I asked if he might like us to put on *City of Joseph* as a bit of entertainment for the meeting. He did.

Maughan McMurdie said he could have the Macomb LDS branch prepare the music, and a local member take the part of Walt, the narrator. It was a cloudy morning the day I walked into a rehearsal hall on campus of WIU. In the bleachers sat fifteen to twenty members of the branch. At the piano sat the accompanist. At this point, I still had not met Maughan, and just like in the movies, I walked over, put out my hand and said, “Maughan McMurdie, I presume. Don Oscarson.” That was our first meeting.

A short version of the show was put on in the auditorium of the Visitors’ Center in Nauvoo. We didn’t move around much, but we spoke and sang with a lot of heart. The individual who was to play Walt had a car accident and wasn’t able to make it. I took over and played the part of Walt for many years to come. This was the first performance of *City of Joseph*. It was in Nauvoo, and it had been ten years since my first meeting with Dr. J. LeRoy Kimball.

The next major event took place two years later. By then much had been done to restore a number of homes in Nauvoo. A big event was planned for May 26, 1973. Four restored homes were to be dedicated. Visitors from Salt Lake City included Elders Spencer W. Kimball, Gordon B. Hinckley, Delbert L. Stapley, and Marion G. Romney of the Council of the Twelve. Knowing this was being planned, I asked Dr. Kimball if he would like us to put on a little “entertainment” for Saturday night. Having seen our presentation for the Mormon History Association a couple of years earlier, he very reluctantly said yes, but was hesitant to allow us to even rehearse and set up the auditorium



Maughan W. McMurdie, composer and musical director for *City of Joseph*. Photograph courtesy Western Illinois University.



Words by R. Don Oscarson  
 Music by Maughan W. McMurdie

"CITY OF JOSEPH - CITY BEAUTIFUL, NAUVOC"

Clap Rhythm (with hands)  
 M.M.: 132-144

Clap (on laps) Speak Words (Clap same rhythm as in opening 4 Measures)  
 Ci-ty of Jo-seph Ci -ty beau-ti-ful, Ci-ty of Jo-seph, Nau-voo.

Sing Words (Unison)  
 Ci-ty of Jo-seph, Ci-ty beau-ti-ful

*Vamp*  
*f* *mf*

Group # 1 (Spoken)  
 Ci-ty of Jo-seph, Nau-voo In the

year thirty nine, on a horseshoe bend  
 of the Mississippi we found a friend

The musical score is written for a single melodic line and a bass line. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is common time (C). The score begins with a 'Clap Rhythm' section, followed by a 'Clap (on laps) Speak Words' section. The lyrics are: 'Ci-ty of Jo-seph Ci -ty beau-ti-ful, Ci-ty of Jo-seph, Nau-voo.' This is followed by a 'Sing Words (Unison)' section with the same lyrics. The score then includes a 'Vamp' section with dynamic markings of *f* and *mf*. The final section is a 'Group # 1 (Spoken)' section with the lyrics: 'Ci-ty of Jo-seph, Nau-voo In the year thirty nine, on a horseshoe bend of the Mississippi we found a friend'. The score ends with several empty staves.

Original musical score of "City of Joseph—City Beautiful, Nauvoo," music composed by Maughan W. McMurdie, lyrics by R. Don Oscarson. The number was the opening song in the pageant. Image courtesy R. Don Oscarson and L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

in the Visitors' Center. That evening we presented a short version of *City of Joseph* to an appreciative audience, including our Utah visitors, who huddled together after the show and talked quietly together.

As we were preparing to leave for home the next morning, word came that Dr. Kimball wanted to see me in the Visitors' Center. It was crowded, and we sat down in a couple of chairs against the wall. All Dr. Kimball said was, "I think we should do it." That was all! We had an unfinished script, no money, no director, no choreographer, no stage, no cast, no musical arrangements, no tape recording—nothing but the desire, and the words "I think we should do it." It had been twelve years since that sunny afternoon in Nauvoo.

Three years later, we did it!

With nothing but the six words of approval, the process began. We decided to plan for a 1976 production to tie in with the national bicentennial celebration. I would be the author-producer, Maughan would be the composer and music director, but that was it. For the next three years, with heaven's help, our needs would be answered by an influence far beyond our own abilities.

We needed a director to be part of the team in those early years of planning, so I contacted some friends at BYU to see if a production like this could be a master's project for someone in musical theater, or if they knew of anyone who might be interested—with no success.

During that memorable May 1973 weekend, when the Church leaders from Salt Lake City saw the show and permission was given, a stake youth group was having an outing in Nauvoo. The rumors were flying that there might be a pageant, and several people offered their help. A few days later I received a call from President James Campbell, a counselor in the stake presidency in the Cedar Rapids Iowa Stake, who had been in Nauvoo with their youth. He asked if there was anything they could do to help. I told him we needed a director. He said he might know of someone and would have him get in touch with me if that person was interested.

About nine p.m. one rainy night in St. Louis, I received a call from F. Gerald Bench (Jerry), who was returning to Wisconsin from Utah with his family and wondered if he could stop by. I said "sure," thinking he was in the area, but he was calling from Kansas City. He drove over, and I talked about my dream. He had experience in the theatre and in directing plays and musicals. I thanked him and said, "We would think about it."

We next met in the fall of 1974 in Nauvoo—Maughan, Jerry, Parley Holiday (the manager of NRI), Dr. Kimball, and myself. We began looking for a site. A few years earlier, NRI had built an amphitheater at the end of the road on Inspiration Point. The stage would have the backdrop of the Mississippi River and it was a beautiful site, but it was too small, with only one

narrow road and no parking or utilities. After looking at several locations, we selected the area between the chapel and the Visitors' Center, a sloping field that could seat thousands and still have the river as a background. At the end of that meeting we asked Jerry Bench to be the director. Now we had the third member of the team. A couple of years later another call came from Lynn Bodily, who asked if we needed a choreographer. We hadn't even thought about it. It was another example of receiving help that we had not anticipated. This occurred over and over in the development of the show. In the meantime, the Church had agreed to provide the sound and lighting equipment used in the Hill Cumorah pageant, en route to its being sent back to Utah. This offer came with a couple of tech people, but we would need to supply the rest.

In the beginning there were no funds available from the Church. We had to raise what we needed. Dr. Kimball gave us our first check, for a thousand dollars. My father gave us another thousand, and I went to friends and asked for help. Elder Ezra Taft Benson wrote a letter to the stakes and missions in the area requesting contributions. Dr. Kimball sent a letter to eighteen stakes asking for support. This was in the early 1970s. Times have changed!

In 1974 Elders Marvin Ashton, Mark E. Peterson, and Gordon B. Hinckley asked for details on our budget. We submitted a budget of \$100,000 for capital improvements and \$15-\$18,000 for annual operating expenses. In December of 1974, the proposal for the show and the budget was to go before the Brethren. In July of 1975, we made an urgent request for official approval. We were plowing ahead anyway, because the Church and NRI were picking up the site improvement costs, for which we were grateful.

### **The Inaugural Pageant**

By July 10, 1976 we had raised \$8,147, which included a \$30 check from the teachers quorum of the Quincy branch. With a bicentennial grant from the state of Illinois for \$5,000 we eventually raised \$19,000. From this we had to pay for the musical arrangements, the taping of the entire show, props, publicity, and site improvements, and one of our biggest costs—the fireworks. After the first year the Church picked up our annual expenses.

The script and music were expanded and polished. Maughan had a friend, a music teacher and a piano tuner named John Phillips who made the orchestra arrangements for a twenty-three piece orchestra from the original piano score at a cost of eight hundred dollars. Years later, the orchestra arrangements would be augmented by Robert Bowden, and a fully professional orchestra, for a more professional recording.

A notice went out to the surrounding stakes that auditions would be held on April 24, 1976 in the Nauvoo Visitors' Center, with a rehearsal from nine



a.m. until four p.m. We anticipated a response of about two hundred, but we ended up with 116, including a set of missionaries, Elders Smith and Graff. Elder Graff had a fine voice and took the part of Martin in the show and on the tape—while obeying all the mission rules. It was a wonderful group, one that I grew to love and appreciate for their sacrifice and dedication. A large number of cast members came from St. Louis and the area around Nauvoo, a few from much farther away. Parts were assigned to friends, family, and the cast members who came to be part of the show, including my wife, father, and sister. All the singing and speaking voices on the original show tape were just regular folks, but they communicated a spirit and feeling that was never duplicated, even by the professional actors and singers used on subsequent recordings. The first-year program contained all their names.

We rehearsed every Saturday in May, June, and July. Some cast members traveled three to four hours getting to Nauvoo, then practiced all day, often in the heat and humidity or the rain, and then returned home late at night. One year, during the gas shortage, Jerry Bench traveled to the various stakes and conducted local rehearsals. We finally determined that we needed to have the cast come to Nauvoo one week prior to the pageant, discontinuing the weekly rehearsals and putting it all together the preceding week, even practicing during the days of performance.

We knew we needed someone to play Joseph. All the other parts we could fill locally. Where do you find a Joseph? We learned about a young man in Utah, named Craig Stephenson, who had played the role of the Prophet in some films and productions. So while in Utah on business I made an appointment to meet him in the lobby of the Hotel Utah. Looking around, I saw someone that might be the person, but he was, at most, only about five feet ten inches tall. As it turned out, with some special shoes he was perfect! Not only did he look like Joseph, but he had a wonderful speaking and singing voice which we used on the original show tape and on the final taping twenty years later. We had our Joseph. Craig and his wife were with us for those important early years.

The large sloping field between the chapel and the east parking lot of the Visitors' Center had been previously selected. Thanks to Parley Holiday and the resources of NRI, workers prepared the site. The original stage was only two hundred feet across. We had to hide backstage from the spotlight until the plantings grew enough to hide us. When the spotlights were on, cast members could not see the surface of the stage, so they had to feel their way to keep from tripping. Hundreds of loads of dirt were trucked in, underbrush was cleared out, and trees and shrubs planted. Even a small bridge was built. Power was brought in, wooden telephone poles were set up to hang lights, scaffolding was used for the spotlight towers, and wooden planks on



R. Don Oscarson and Maughan W. McMurdie overseeing the construction of the *City of Joseph* pageant site, 1976. Photograph courtesy R. Don Oscarson.

sawhorses were provided for audience members who didn't want to sit on the ground, or bring their own chairs. Later we secured the use of several hundred folding chairs to replace the planks. All this was done by the cast and crew.

During a rehearsal in May, we realized that we hadn't made any plans to pre-record the show. One evening, Shirley and I went to our daughter's grade school concert. It was typical elementary school performance, the pride of the parents overshadowing the quality of the performance. The show was taped and orders for the records were taken. Afterward, the person doing the recording passed out his cards in case anyone might need his services. I called him. We met for lunch, and he took me to south St. Louis to a questionable part of town to a small family-owned, gospel-country, sixteen-track recording studio. Parvin Trummel was the son-in-law and the engineer. He agreed to record the soundtrack, music, singers, and voices for two thousand dollars. Our only problem was, we could not afford an orchestra. Fortunately, Parvin knew a number of musicians we could use, but we would have to record them one at a time!

Maughan put down the piano track, a bass player then laid down the beat, and one by one the players came to record their parts. The one violin player played three parts, twice each. Two memorable things happened during the taping. Maughan would sit across from the player, both with headphones on, directing the individual. One night he turned to hear all of us laughing,

R. Don Oscarson (writer and producer), Maughan W. McMurdie (composer and musical director), and F. Gerald Bench (director) recording the original soundtrack for *City of Joseph*, St. Louis, Missouri, 1976. Photograph courtesy R. Don Oscarson.



In 1976, fifteen-year-old Wynton Marsalis recorded one of the trumpet parts for the original *City of Joseph* soundtrack. Marsalis went on to become a distinguished musician, composer, music educator, nine-time Grammy Award recipient, and Pulitzer Prize winner. He is currently the artistic director of Jazz at the Lincoln Center in New York City.

because he had fallen asleep but just kept on directing. Another unusual event happened when the trumpets came to do the taping. They were performers at the Six Flags Amusement Park nearby and could not come until three a.m. in the morning. One of the horn players was Wynton Marsalis, who has since achieved considerable fame as a trumpet player, having received nine Grammy Awards and also the Pulitzer Prize in music. When he had finished playing, he asked if we would like the trumpet part an octave above the score, which we did, and he did it. Twenty-three parts, one at a time! As one can imagine, this took a long time!

We had the singers and the speaking parts scheduled all the same weekend. One good sister traveled four hours just to say one line. Another brother, with a very distinctive voice, showed up to record his part with two broken wrists—before he went to the doctor! John Phillips, our arranger, sat in a room about the size of a closet and made additions and corrections as we needed them.

Because we had so many mothers and their daughters in the original cast, I felt we needed a song just for them, but Maughan refused to do the music. I had the lyrics, and during a recording lull, I got him to the piano in the corner of the studio and asked him to just take a look, which he did with great reluctance. The next thing I knew his fingers were moving across the keyboard. He said, “This sounds like a waltz,” then finished the song in a few minutes. I hurried the pages to John in his closet, and that’s how *Many Flowers* became part of the original show.

There was a small Chinese family restaurant across the street where we ate every meal. We were in the studio for seventy-two hours straight, taking turns sleeping on the floor. We each slept only six hours the entire time. We used the original tape for the first four years until a new one was recorded with the BYU orchestra in 1980, along with a trained chorus from Western Illinois University.

We needed help in getting the word out about the musical. I took pictures, wrote news releases, and produced radio and television spots. We also had additions made to the NRI billboards, and put a banner across Mulholland Street in Nauvoo. I went to interviews with newspapers, radio and TV stations, and had posters made for all the stakes and wards in the area. Publicity was one of our major undertakings once the taping was done and the rehearsals were underway. We bought advertising in print and broadcasting.

During the first couple of years, housing for the cast and crew was very difficult. Some of the few who could afford it, stayed in a motel. Many camped out in tents in the state park, since it had showers, though rather primitive restroom facilities. Mothers would rehearse all day in the heat and humidity and then bathe their children in fifty-gallon drums filled with water, cook their



# TIMES AND SEASONS.

"Truth will prevail."

Vol., IV. No. 19.] CITY OF NAUVOO, ILL. AUGUST 15, 1843. [Whole No. 79.

## CITY OF Joseph

**A Historical Musical  
of Nauvoo From  
1839 to 1845**

**Author-Producer  
R. Don Oscarson**

**Composer-Musical Director  
Maughan W. McMurdie**

**Director  
F. Gerald Bench**

NAUVOO, ILLINOIS  
August 18, 1976

Nauvoo, Illinois was unique in the history of the American frontier.

In April, 1839, when Joseph Smith the Mormon leader, bought the property at Commerce, Illinois as a refuge for his people who had just been driven by persecution from Missouri, it was a swamp with one or two log houses.

By 1845, just six years later, it had grown into a city of 11,000 people, the size of Chicago, and one of the ten largest cities in the United States at the time.

Its homes were made of brick. It had one of the few libraries on the Western frontier. Concerts, plays and cultural events were held regularly. It published two newspapers, "The Times and Seasons" and the "Nauvoo Neighbor." The Nauvoo Legion was one of the largest military units outside of the United States Army. There were no jails, and the city charter granted by the State of Illinois, gave Nauvoo most of the rights and privileges granted to an independent state.

An article in the "Times and Seasons" newspaper dated April 1, 1841 (two years after the original purchase) said this:

"Notwithstanding the discouraging circumstances under which the saints were thrown, shipwrecked as it were, upon this shore, they have indeed wrought wonders."

"Everywhere we see men of industry, with countenances beaming with cheerful content, hurrying to their several occupations and scenes of labor. The sound of the ax, the hammer, and the saw, greet your ear in every direction."

"Habitations are reared for miles in every direction, and others are springing up, and ere we are aware of their existence, are filled with happy occupants. It would do the heart of the truly patriotic and philanthropic good, to witness the industry and enterprise which are already manifest in our beautiful city. Though immigrants are flocking in in multitudes, and have their homes and their wants to be supplied, yet all things move on in their accustomed order and with accelerating force. Hundreds of houses, shops, mills, etc., are expected to go up in the course of the summer, when our city will present a scene of industry, beauty and comfort hardly equalled in any place in our country."

Nauvoo was a unique city.

Then, just as quickly as it all started, it ended. On June 27, 1844 Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were killed by a mob at Carthage, Illinois and soon the Mormons were to be driven from their homes once more.

But Nauvoo was not the end of an era. It was the beginning. Nauvoo was a time of growth, development, confidence and strength, a period of opportunity for the infant Mormon Church to prepare for the time they would need to build again, another city, in the mountains of the West. And then, one day, to reach out of that isolation into all the world.

Originally, the city was called Nauvoo, a Hebrew word meaning "beautiful place." But to those who lived there, and to those who loved it, it was the reflection of just one man. And so our story is affectionately called, "City of Joseph." RDO

### "CITY OF JOSEPH" PRODUCTION

"City of Joseph" was originally produced for the dedication of the NRI Visitor's Center in Nauvoo, Illinois during the summer of 1971. Since then, it has been performed many times for special occasions.

The production staged during August 18 through 21, 1976 was designated an official Bicentennial event by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., State of Illinois Bicentennial Commission and the American Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission.

For the Bicentennial presentation, a special four-acre, 5,000 capacity, outdoor theater site was developed. The 200 foot tri-level stage, in its natural setting, overlooks historic old Nauvoo and the bend of the Mississippi River that inspired the production's opening song.

"City of Joseph" is sponsored by Nauvoo Restoration Incorporated, Dr. J. LeRoy Kimball, President, and is funded by private donation and a grant from the Illinois Bicentennial Commission.

A stereo album of the ten original songs from "City of Joseph" is available. All proceeds from the sale of the album go toward "City of Joseph" production costs.

evening meals on a camp stove, and then be back for the show that night. This was real pioneering. We arranged with the Community of Christ to use the Nauvoo House, where we could put the boys on one floor and the girls on the other. It had a dining room and kitchen on the first floor and nice showers, but no air conditioning.

I wanted the entire pageant experience to be as authentic and historically accurate as possible. For example, the typeface used for the posters and programs was taken from the original wooden type in the *Times and Seasons* print shop. The guide at the print shop was kind enough to let me set the type, ink it, and run the copy. The first program used the original *Times and Seasons* masthead and was set up like a copy of the actual newspaper, dated August 15, 1843. Just some special touches! Even the shirt I wore as Walt was a handmade copy of the shirts pictured in a Caleb Bingham painting of the men on a river barge that hung in a St. Louis Museum. I still have it.

At the end of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, the lighting and sound equipment was packed up and transported to Nauvoo. When it arrived we had two days to set it up and do our tech rehearsal. The early equipment required a separate power line to each set of lights, and it looked like spaghetti! Our tech crew was made up of the very young people. The light board was run by a fifteen-year-old.

I had written all my lines for Walt, the narrator, on three-by-five cards, and I practiced by even counting the seconds between pauses. I was convinced the audience would notice if I missed a beat, even though they were a hundred feet away.

All our prayers, from the very beginning, contained three requests; First, bless the cast and crew; second, bless the audience that they would come; and last, please bless us with good weather. This same prayer continued for twenty-seven years.

On Wednesday, August 18, 1976, *City of Joseph* opened and ran for four days, through Saturday, August 21. *The weather was beautiful, huge crowds came, A DREAM HAD COME TRUE.*

### **The Next Four Years, 1977–1980**

These years were the time of learning, adjusting and continuing to develop the show, the organization and the production itself. The Church, feeling that we had something of value, picked up the annual operating budget of about \$15,000. We produced a 33⅓ long-playing record and a tape of the music, which we sold at the end of each performance, which funds were used to pay other pageant expenses.



The cast continued to be made up of mostly mothers and their children. During the early years we would have a tall teenage boy as the father, with a forty-year-old wife and six or eight children. Soon, we changed the rules to accept only families with fathers. This also helped solve some of our discipline problems. Later, we created a parents' committee to handle these issues. Our cast kept getting larger each year.

In 1978, major changes were made in the script and the music. The part of Walt, the narrator, was limited to the beginning and the end, and Joseph became the central figure. Scenes were moved around, portions were remixed, and a request for a new taping was submitted.

One year, President Ezra Taft Benson came and was so excited about the Fourth of July scene that he stood up and cheered. He then secured a filming company from Kansas City to come and record the show so it could be seen throughout the Church. However, the filming was never used due to the difficulty of shooting the show from so far away.

In 1979–1980, and those years to follow, we had other activities during pageant week. One year we had Leola Green Merrill come and do one-woman shows on Emma and Lucy in the Cultural Hall. The cast, in full costume, paraded down the main street in old Nauvoo with musically talented members playing as members of the Nauvoo Brass Band. For several years, we had stick-pulling contests, and these drew coverage by local radio stations. Players were divided by weight and gender. Each year we had a grand champion in the men's division. Another year a group from St. Louis put on a show titled *An Evening of Grand Moral Entertainment*, which depicted the cultural activities of early Nauvoo. Dancing, music, and a brief scene from the play *Pizarro*, a part originally portrayed by Brigham Young as a high priest in April 1844, were presented on the tiny stage in the Cultural Hall. One year when Elders Mark E. Petersen and L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of

Elder L. Tom Perry and Elder Mark E. Peterson participate on stage in the July 4th scene of *City of Joseph*, August 16, 1980. Photograph courtesy R. Don Oscarson and L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.



the Twelve attended the pageant, they agreed to go on stage and participate in the Fourth of July scene. It was probably the first time since Brigham Young's appearance in *Pizarro* that a General Authority had appeared on stage in Nauvoo.

We also made arrangements with the BYU Symphony Orchestra to re-record the music. Jerry and Maughan went to Provo to coordinate the recording, marking the first time we had a full orchestra playing the music. It was at this same time that Lynn Bodily expressed his concern at the lack of dancing in the show, so we added a section. During that trip, Jerry met with Craig Stephenson, who had portrayed Joseph Smith, and they recorded his speaking and singing voice for the new soundtrack. Later, Maughan brought his university chorus and some well-trained singers to St. Louis, where we secured a sound studio and redid the entire tape, using many of the original local voices. Because of the length of the new show, we dropped *Many Flowers* from the performance.

### **The Organization**

To pull off a pageant of this magnitude it was necessary to bring together a group of people who had the same burning desire as I did to produce a pageant in Nauvoo. And they came. Not surprisingly, many of the right people with the right skills we needed actually contacted us—cooks, costume designers, seamstresses, technicians, those who could build the spotlight towers, applied or who just showed up.

In the beginning, the “pageant presidency” consisted of me, Maughan McMurdie, and Jerry Bench. I was the author and producer. My responsibilities included public relations, budgeting, and coordinating with the pageant committee and Salt Lake City, along with solving the myriad of problems that arise with a project of this magnitude. Maughan put his efforts on the music, and Jerry masterfully spent all year pulling the show together and directing it. We worked harmoniously together. As the show became bigger and bigger, we realized that the three of us could not manage the show so we developed a five five-year plan. In succeeding years, new pageant presidencies were called from the Area Authorities of the Church, giving us the support and assistance needed.

In 1989 the Church requested that the copyright be assigned to them. We complied, but with the following stipulations. First, three years after the close of the show (whenever that might be) the copyright would be returned to us. Second, no changes would be made to the script, music, or the show in any way, without the approval of me, Maughan, and NRI. That was in force until 2007, when the copyright was returned.



Maughan W. McMurdie (composer and musical director), R. Don Oscarson (writer and producer), and F. Gerald Bench (director), mid-1990s. Photograph courtesy R. Don Oscarson.

A major change took place in 1995 when Jerry Bench retired as director. Lynn Bodily became the new director, with Norma Barrows as choreographer and Karen Laney as costume director.

Beginning in 1976, and with the opening of the show that year, the cast and crew were made up of wonderful folks who came and made the sacrifices necessary to make *City of Joseph* happen. From the original cast of 116, by 1985 it had grown to 250. In 1989 there were five hundred applications and a cast of 350. The final year there were over two thousand applications and seven hundred plus in the cast and crew. Housing was the responsibility of the individual or families. They camped out in the Nauvoo State Park, Breezewood Campgrounds, the Nauvoo House, and various hotels in the area.

Eventually we acquired the use of the Community of Christ Campground. The main building included a kitchen and large meeting area. The camping area had electricity, restrooms, showers, and laundry facilities, and the cost was reasonable. Those staying there volunteered and completed major site improvements, which were greatly appreciated. Additional housing was later

secured in the Joseph Smith Academy, which also had kitchen and eating facilities for twenty families. The cast were housed all over the city.

Over the years many returned to be in the cast. Some young people met their future spouses, testimonies were strengthened, and a number of young men decided to go on missions. By the end of the run, the King family from St. Louis had three generations in the show. Those who returned took in the newcomers and showed them what to do, which helped maximize the preparation and rehearsal time.

### **The Pageant Site**

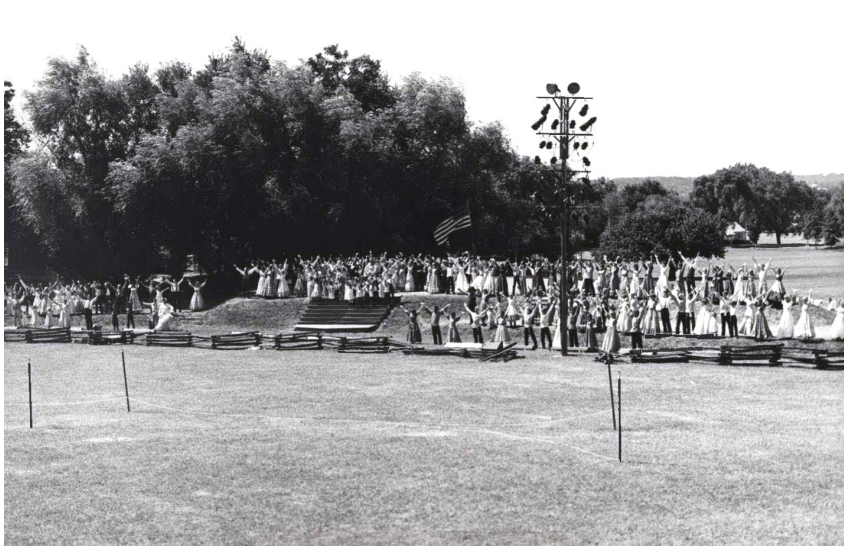
In 1990, the audience area was graded to provide more and better viewing. The original wooden telephone poles used for hanging the lights were replaced with metal poles, all done by members of the cast. Larry Critchfield and Richard Macy did most of the work. The new towers cost \$4,000 each. During this time, the light and sound cables were buried, cement pads for the towers were poured, and a request was made for a backstage building to be used for dressing rooms, offices, and storage. The Church approved the building, but we had to raise the money. Local stake presidents, as well as specific individuals, were solicited for funds. The building was completed in sixty days.

Many changes were made to the site over the years. Eventually, there were five stages, on various levels, extending five hundred feet. In 1993 a new ramp was built from the stage into the audience blanket area. Props were designed and built to represent the city and the temple. In the temple scene a cast member dressed in white rose into the heavens. From a simple beginning, the site eventually developed into a beautiful setting overlooking the Mississippi River which could accommodate an audience of ten to fourteen thousand persons.

### **Publicity**

We knew we had a challenge in getting people to attend. In the early years we did everything we could to attract the crowds, and it was often very difficult. Just to make sure we reached our audience, we put funds in our budget to buy newspaper and broadcast advertising. This met with strong resistance from the pageant committee, since they didn't provide advertising funding for pageants. Nonetheless, we continued to spend on media coverage.

A major improvement occurred when John Mathews came on board as our national press and publicity director. John had been part of the cast from very early on, and for many years played the part of Parley P. Pratt, who be-



1983 cast of the *City of Joseph* pageant. Photograph courtesy R. Don Oscarson and L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

came one of the show's favorite characters. When he took over the publicity, he did it with an intensity and devotion that were outstanding. He compiled lists of media outlets, contacted station managers, and called in reports to radio stations and newspapers concerning the previous night's show. He also instituted a program to have a local community recognized at each of the performances, invited the mayor and other civic officials, held a reception for them before the show, and provided special seats at the performance. As a result of this effort, and the fact that the show was entertaining and inspiring, we had large crowds from the very beginning. The success of the show led us to expand the performance schedule from four days to seven. It was not unusual to have ten to twelve thousand on Friday and Saturday nights, with a total weekly attendance, year after year, of thirty-five to forty thousand! One year we found the audience came from forty-four states and twenty countries, and it was estimated that half of the audience were not church members. In twenty-seven years, over three quarters of a million visitors had seen the show.

### **Missionary Work**

Missionary work was always meant to be an important part of the pageant. In the early years our focus was on getting the show up and

running, and our efforts in this area were not very successful. Initially, the Illinois Peoria Mission supplied missionaries during the performances, but as time went on we got better and better. Our greatest success came the last year, when we offered to supply a copy of the music CD to anyone in the audience who would like the missionaries to deliver it to a non-LDS friend, with their compliment, and a brief message concerning the pageant. That year we collected over six hundred referrals. They were divided by stakes, and the CD's were sent out to the missionaries, with instructions on how to use them when contacting the referral.

There were many instances of nonmembers who came to see the show, and non-LDS cast members who joined the Church and told us it was a direct result of seeing, or being in, *City of Joseph*. A local Catholic priest wrote us that "He felt the spirit of God moving in the show."

### **The Weather**

For an outdoor production, in the Midwest in the summertime, weather was a major concern. When originally planning the pageant, I checked with the National Weather Service and received the weather reports for the previous twenty years in an attempt to find the best time to schedule the show. Growing up in St. Louis, I knew of the severe thunderstorms and tornados that occur in the summer; however, as it turned out, none of this mattered, because our scheduling depended on when the tech truck could come from the Hill Cumorah Pageant. August was the time.

We had our experiences with the weather. There were years when it rained all morning and then would clear up by afternoon. On those days we covered the stage with straw in the morning, rehearsed in the local elementary school, then went out and hauled the wet straw off the stage, and by evening everything was clear. At times, thunderstorms and even an occasional tornado would form in the west during the performance and then skirt around Nauvoo, bringing rain or high winds to the surrounding countryside. One evening a storm hit just as the show ended after the audience left. The winds were so strong that they blew the spotlights off the towers (fortunately without damaging them) and uprooted trees. We had evenings when lightning struck two blocks from the stage and then moved on in time for the show. There were evenings when a light drizzle fell, but not enough to send the audience scurrying for cover. *In twenty-seven years the show was only cancelled one night because of rain!* Even the locals had a saying, "*It never rains on the pageant.*" One day in twenty-seven years was a miracle, but it wasn't by chance. During one of the very early, rain-filled years, a very private and special event took place that assured our prayer would be answered concerning the weather, with a promise never to say more.



## **1993 Cancellation**

In 1993, spring flood waters wracked havoc in the Midwest, especially along the Mississippi River. All the bridges across the river were out from Burlington, Iowa, to St. Louis, Missouri. The ground water in Nauvoo was up to grass level in the wells. As the pageant rehearsal time neared, my wife and I spent a day in the Chicago Temple seeking to know whether or not we should cancel the show. I felt strongly that we should. A few days later, Maughan, Jerry, and I met in Nauvoo, and the decision was made to cancel. It was just a week before the cast was to arrive, and we called every one and told them of the cancellation. We only missed one family who was coming from California and had already left. Those who did show up were the contingent of anti-Mormons who regularly came each year to try to influence pageant visitors. They were very disappointed.

## **Anti-Mormon Opposition**

The pageant experienced opposition. A store, the Nauvoo Christian Center, opened on Mulholland Street in Nauvoo, staffed and supported by an organization from Texas. They sent several members each summer to pass out anti-Mormon literature and to try to engage the cast and visitors in conversation and confrontation. While they were limited to the streets surrounding the site, there were times when they sent individuals with negative t-shirts to stand in the audience. The cast was instructed to avoid even talking to them. At one point they were surrounded and moved along by the youth in the cast, much like the “whistling and whittling brigade” from the early days of Nauvoo. Most of their efforts were harmless. In 1988, when I saw some of the material they were passing out that looked like official pageant programs, we immediately made plans to publish a new program, which included the Articles of Faith as a statement to counter efforts. With one exception, they became less and less effective. We had missionary couples placed next to them to give out the “official” program, with a trash can nearby. At the end, they were hiring locals to pass out the materials; only two or three outsiders showed up.

One year the organization delivered to every home in Nauvoo a 380-page book. The cover had a general Christian theme and appearance, but it actually consisted of two anti-Mormon publications. The reaction of the town and its citizens was immediate and intense. The effort backfired on those responsible, and they were severely criticized for their efforts. It never happened again, and as the years passed their presence became less and less.

## The Final Years, 1996–2004

As the pageant grew in attendance, cast size, and complexity, we felt it was necessary to look at taking it to the next level. Among the things needed were some site improvements, a new pageant presidency, the addition of a temple musical number, and a new and enhanced orchestra arrangement to replace the one we had been using for nearly twenty years. All these things came together with the change in the Area Presidency and the pageant presidency in 1996. That year, Elder Hugh Pinnock was assigned as the new Area President. Joel Orgill was called as the pageant president, with Chris Frogley and Gene Mann as counselors. These men took their assignments very seriously and were intent on taking the show into the future. Because the pageant presidency reported directly to Elder Pinnock, my involvement was greatly reduced, as it should have been.

Elder Pinnock made a long list of suggestions. At the same time, we pressed for the new tape to be produced in the facilities at the BYU Motion Picture Studio. We had talked to Robert Bowden, conductor of the Mormon Youth Chorus and Symphony, and received permission and funding for him to work on a new, enhanced, full orchestra score. The taping was scheduled for 1999. In addition, a new script was prepared, featuring a Nauvoo Temple scene. For the first time in over twenty years, the script had to be submitted to Church Correlation for approval. It didn't seem to matter that three presidents of the Church, half a dozen members of the Quorum of the Twelve, and numerous Church Pageant Committee members had seen it during the past twenty years without expressing concerns. After we submitted the new script, Elder Pinnock requested we drop a Parley P. Pratt segment—a humorous account taken directly, word for word, from Elder Pratt's writings—which had been a huge favorite over the years. We mentioned this, but the request came, and we removed the segment. When the copyright was returned to us, we put it back in. Jay Blair of the Church Pageant Committee was a great friend and help through this period. The script came back with over seventy corrections, most of which were grammatical. Jay cleaned up all but four concept issues. Two were minor and changed, but I declined on the others, which I felt were damaging to the show. In the end, we received the approved, stamped authorization from Church Correlation.

In 1999, the Church Media Department assigned Quinn Orr as our producer, and Arlen Card as music director for the new taping. Schedules, players and singers were lined up. I was serving in the St. Louis Temple presidency at the time, but received permission to attend the recording, along with Maughan McMurdie and Lynn Bodily. A professional orchestra recorded the music, and a group of studio singers were brought in to do the chorus

numbers. We over-dubbed and ended up with a ninety-voice chorus. A soloist and professional actors were also brought in, and several went on to be very well known and highly successful. The actors took the speaking parts, but I redid Walt, the narrator. We auditioned a whole group of men to be the speaking voice of Joseph. I kept suggesting we use Craig Stephenson, the original Joseph, who lived nearby, but my suggestions were not accepted.

The new tape was a great improvement over the one made in 1980. The music was richer, the voices were all very professional, and the new temple scene was a huge addition and success, but the voice narration of Joseph just wasn't right. He had to be replaced. The next year we went back, and I finally persuaded them to get Craig Stephenson. He came over and did the entire show in one take. He was still the right Joseph! Sadly, just a few years later he passed away, at a relatively young age from a brain tumor. In 2000, the new tape was completed and new scenery had been built; the Nauvoo Temple set rose up while the cast, all in white, sang the new song *Come to the Temple*.

In 2003, for reasons never explained to any of us, and without any prior notification, it was publicly announced that 2004 would be the last year of *City of Joseph* and the end of a pageant in Nauvoo. A huge, unexpected, negative response from the city and the local businesses followed. The show nevertheless came to an end in 2004—twenty-seven years of wonderful associations, miraculous events, and fond remembrances.

On the final night of the 2004 performance it was announced to the audience that there would be a new pageant the next year. In fact, permission had just been received that very day to make the announcement. We learned that a writing committee at Church headquarters had been assigned to immediately begin writing a new pageant for Nauvoo. The new pageant officials

had one year to make it happen, and they pulled it off—admirably! In 2005, the site was moved, a small group of professional actors were employed, the pageant was expanded to run for four weeks with a smaller



Susan and Brik Eyre, portrayed Emma and Joseph in the 2002 and 2003 productions of *City of Joseph* pageants, August 2, 2002. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

rotating cast, and a pre-show activity was set up for the children. It's inspiring and entertaining! Perhaps it will run for twenty-seven years. . . .

### Acknowledgements

As I gathered, organized, summarized, and compiled the original six volumes of the history of *City of Joseph*, its twenty-two years of development and the twenty-seven years of performances, a flood of fond remembrances come that are not a part of any formal history. There were so many who gave so much that will go undocumented, but their treasured friendships, and shared experiences will live in the memories of all who took part in a dream.

Without the support of my dear wife Shirley, it would not have happened. She encouraged me during all those developmental times with their frustrations and disappointments. In addition, every year for twenty-seven years our vacation was spent in Nauvoo. She kept the apartment, sewed, repaired, and cleaned costumes; provided meals at various times both day and night; and performed many other tasks that allowed me to be totally involved in the show. There are not words enough to express my love and appreciation for her support all those years.

Our association with Maughan W. McMurdie, the composer, and his family have been among our choicest. His great talents, and his willingness to share them, in this and many other projects we worked on together, are a legacy to be enjoyed for generations to come. We miss him, as we do so many of others who are no longer with us.

F. Gerald Bench, the director, made the yearly productions happen. I was moving all over the country with my employment, and Maughan was tied up with his responsibilities at Western Illinois University, but it was Jerry who worked year-round organizing, planning, casting, and directing the show. For twenty years he made it happen. We watched as his wife Margaret managed and took care of their twelve children in the heat and humidity of those summers in muggy Nauvoo. How grateful I am for his being sent to us.

Lynn Bodily was part of the pageant in one capacity or another from the beginning. When Jerry retired after twenty years, it was natural for Lynn to be the director. He added a new dimension to the show. His background in dance, and his ability to organize, helped him design the scenes to take advantage of the space and the large number of families that filled the multilevel stages. His vision brought spectacular results.

And then there were the hundreds and hundreds of just "folks" who came year after year, living in tents or non-air conditioned facilities. They not only participated in the show, they also worked building fences and sets, digging ditches, trimming trees, making costumes, and working on all the other extra

projects that went unseen by the hundreds of thousands who came. There will always be a special place in my heart for them. They are truly part of our family.

*City of Joseph* was unique in so many ways. Think of it—an outdoor production staged in the middle of nowhere, in a small city few outside the Church had ever heard of, whose resident citizens still held many resentments and hatreds that went back generations. Yet here was a show, supported by the latest high-tech equipment so that the audience could hear every word, even the voice of a single child, and listen to music from a full orchestra and a ninety-voice chorus. Add to that a cast that eventually numbered over seven hundred on a five hundred-foot stage that overlooked the Mississippi River.

In the beginning, aside from the burning desire to tell our story, we wanted to accomplish something more. We wanted to temper those feelings that had existed for so long. We wanted to tell the story in a positive way, even though there was much tragedy and persecution in those early days. We wanted it to be entertaining. We wanted the experience to enlighten our audiences concerning some of the things the early Saints believed in and what motivated their dedication. We wanted it to strengthen the families who participated. We hope we succeeded.

Thanks to those who made it all possible. Our love and prayers will always be with you as we remember with fondness the *City of Joseph*.

Note: In 2007 the copyright was returned. That same year, our dear friend Maughan W. McMurdie passed away. The entire history of *City of Joseph*, now housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, includes several volumes of narrative history, along with all the scripts as they developed, tapes, videos, CD's, photographs, correspondence, financial records, and reports. Since the official closing of the pageant in 2004, *City of Joseph* has since been produced by the Sandy Utah Crescent Stake in the Conference Center Theatre in Salt Lake City; by the Idaho State University 2<sup>nd</sup> Stake in Pocatello, Idaho; and in 2012 in conjunction with BYU Education Week in Provo, Utah.