



Brigham City Temple, June 2014. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

Spires and Sycamores: The Brigham City Temple Controversy

Roger P. Minert

“Those trees are seventy or eighty years old and are a big part of Brigham City history,” declared one of the many irate citizens at the Brigham City Council session held March 29, 2012. “Those trees are not ugly or nuisances,” argued one woman. Another added, “After all, you need them to block the sounds on Main Street from disturbing the temple grounds.” In a politically correct attitude, another local resident stated, “We taught our Brigham City students to think green; we are teaching our youth the opposite if we remove the trees; you are setting a poor *precedent*.”¹

Eight speakers accepted the invitation of Brigham City Mayor Dennis Fife to voice opposition that night to the removal of six of the ten sycamore trees from the western side of Brigham City’s Main Street—the eastern border of the block on which the construction of the new temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was nearing completion. The two hundred attendees at the public city council session filled all seats in the assembly room, and many more people stood outside in the hallways. It appeared that the number of opponents to the removal of the trees was slightly greater than the number of supporters of the action.

ROGER P. MINERT (roger_minert@byu.edu) is a professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University, specializing in family history. He received a BA in German language from Brigham Young University, an MA in German Literature and a PhD in German language history and second language acquisition theory from The Ohio State University. He is a member of the editorial board of the *Immigrant*, published by the Palatines to America Society. He has authored more than eighty publications on German family history and German language pedagogy. He is also the author of *In Harm’s Way: East German Latter-day Saints in World War II*, and *Under the Gun: West German and Austrian Latter-day Saints in World War II*, published by BYU’s Religious Studies Center.

For nearly fifty minutes, resident after resident stepped to the microphone to express what were often emotional sentiments. Council members intervened now and then to request clarification, and several city employees (the city forester, attorney, and clerk) also made comments or answered questions.

Residents speaking in favor of the removal of the trees indicated that the temple would otherwise be blocked from view on Main Street. Proponents also stated that other sycamores had been removed at other locations on Main Street for various purposes over the years, that sycamores produce a serious foliage mess in the fall, and that 160 trees would be planted on the temple block; hence the sycamores eventually would not be missed. As one proponent put it, “trees come and trees go, but this temple will be unique.”²

Several opponents reiterated a secondary theme: “We weren’t told that the LDS Church had requested permission to remove the trees, so we didn’t have a chance to give our input. This was all done behind our backs. We should have been told! Now it’s a done deal.” Mayor Fife responded with a lengthy description of the process that had begun in January 2012, reminding the audience that all procedures had been followed with care and that announcements had been made in the city’s website and in the *Box Elder News Journal*. He indicated that the removal of the trees had been scheduled for March 26 (three days prior to this meeting), but that he had asked the construction company to delay the action until the public had debated the issue.

Brigham City, Utah, was not the first place that the construction of a temple by the LDS Church had given rise to negative feelings among the neighbors. In Tokyo, Japan, neighbors had protested the height of the building, insisting that sunshine laws would be violated. In Boston, Massachusetts, a similar complaint delayed the placement of the tower for several years. When a site was chosen in Denver, residents did not want the temple in their neighborhood, so the site was changed—twice! Residents of northwest Chicago feared that the flight path of birds making their homes nearby would be disrupted by the towers planned for the temple. In Friedrichsdorf, Germany, the ruling that no part of the temple could be higher than the highest existing structure resulted in the placement of the tower on the ground in front of the main entry to the temple. Sometimes the concerns of the local residents brought about changes in the plans for the structures, while in other cases the questions were resolved through ongoing negotiations. The Church’s plans for the erection of a tower on the Boston Temple were finally approved by the court. In all of these cases (and in several others), a peaceful resolution was eventually achieved.³

The announcement regarding the construction of the LDS temple in Brigham City was made in the Church’s general conference on October 3, 2009. This took Brigham City residents totally by surprise, as was evident



Artist conception of the Brigham City Temple and temple block. Note that none of the then existing sycamore trees are depicted.

in television and newspaper reports of the ensuing weeks. Speculation was rampant among local residents regarding possible building sites for the structure, but that came to an end on October 26 when the Church announced that the empty lot across Main Street from the famous Box Elder Tabernacle (between 200 and 300 South Streets) had been purchased.⁴

Following the announcement, it became clear to many Brigham City residents that the sycamore trees on Main Street posed a unique challenge to the proposed temple location. The artist's conception of the new temple made it clear that the solid line of ten sycamore trees would block the view of the east façade of the temple, so if the temple were to be visible from that angle, some trees would have to be removed.

The Sycamore Trees on Main Street

Hoping to add clarity to the debate over the fate of the sycamore trees on the temple block, I spent two days combing the minutes of the city council. The prime goal was to establish when the trees were actually planted and explain why the sycamores were planted in the first place.

The discussion concerning the development of Main Street beyond 100 North Street on the north and 300 South Street to the south began in 1919.⁵ Many citizens called for curb and gutter, sidewalks, and the paving of the street, but none of this work could be done before the official width of the street was defined and water and sewer lines had been laid. It was much later, on December 16, 1933, that Dr. D. H. Marble addressed the city council and suggested that a uniform planting of trees be undertaken on Main Street. A few months later, on March 15, 1934, several individuals and small groups of citizens petitioned the city for help in improving their streets (not just Main Street), and the following proposal was adopted: "Councilman [A. M.] Hansen moved 'that the City plant European Sycamore trees this spring on North Main St. in curb and gutter district no. 3 to conform to the plan on South Main Street.' The motion was seconded by [E.] Whitworth and carried."⁶ From various references in the city council minutes in 1934 and 1935, it is clear that the first improvements took place between 300 and 500 South Streets, and the last from 500 to 700 South Streets and from 100 to 600 North Streets.⁷ A lengthy article published in the Box Elder News on October 29, 1935, reported that all improvements on Main Street were completed. More than eighty percent of the total cost of \$133,000 had been funded by agencies of the federal government, and the work was performed by local laborers. A total



Brigham City's Main Street looking north from 700 South Street, October 2012.
Photograph by Roger P. Minert.

of 257 trees were planted.⁸ By 2012, approximately two hundred of the trees had survived, making them at least seventy-seven years old.

The First Conflict Regarding the Sycamores

The first major controversy involving the sycamore trees occurred in 1953 when leaders of the Box Elder Stake of the LDS Church had all of the trees on the Tabernacle block along Main Street removed. The reasons for this action are unclear, but the reaction of the populace was so negative that the city council petitioned the Church to allow some of those trees to be replaced.⁹ It was decided that four sycamores would be planted, two to the north of the sidewalk and two to the south of the sidewalk running east to the Tabernacle's front portal.

On May 6, 2011, I attended a seminar hosted by the Department of Religious Education at Brigham Young University. President Boyd K. Packer, president of the Quorum of the Twelve, and one of two speakers, invited questions from the attendees. I mentioned to President Packer that the front façade of the new Brigham City Temple would not be visible through the sycamore trees along Main Street and asked if the Church was planning to request the removal of some trees. Elder Packer smiled broadly as he responded: "I was on the city council in 1953 when the trees on the Tabernacle side of Main Street were removed. I have no intention of being involved again in such a firestorm!"¹⁰

Construction of the Brigham City Temple

The decision to build a temple in Brigham City had been made by the First Presidency of the LDS Church early in 2009. Some members of the Church assumed that President Boyd K. Packer, a native son of Brigham City, had played a role in this decision. According to his nephew, Jeffrey Packer, a local Brigham City realtor, President Packer had heard nothing about the plans until LDS Church President Thomas S. Monson and second counselor Dieter F. Uchtdorf drove with him to the site.¹¹ They asked President Packer if he believed the site to be a good location for the new temple. As a former pupil in the Central School that stood alone on that very block from 1900 until its destruction by fire on August 9, 1947, Elder Packer knew the lay of the land well.¹² He offered his approval to the plan with these words: "I think this is a perfect place for a temple."¹³

What was known as "Central Square" is almost a square city block measuring three acres between Main and 100 West, and 200 and 300 South Streets. In 2000, Jeffrey Packer, the broker of All Pro Real Estate, was retained by property owner O. J. Call to sell the property. Improvements

costing \$600,000 were made at the site in preparation for the construction of professional offices, but by 2009, no binding offers for any of the seven lots had resulted. In May of that year, a “Brother Davies” approached Jeffrey Packer regarding a sale of the property to the LDS Church; Packer was instructed not to speak of the transaction. When Packer heard the October 3 announcement of a temple for Brigham City, he logically put two and two together and approached his uncle, President Boyd K. Packer, on the matter. The latter declined to confirm his nephew’s theory. The Church purchased the Central Square block on November 5, 2009, and an official public announcement was made regarding the location of the temple. Soon the new owners petitioned the city to have the property classified as one lot (it had previously been divided into seven lots). The matter was discussed in a public session of the city council on December 3, 2009, and approved.¹⁴

Significantly, President Boyd K. Packer was the object of slander regarding the sale of the property. Several messages on the Internet suggested that he was the owner of the property and that he had made enormous profits from the sale of the land to the Church. He was in fact never involved financially. The rumors may have been based on the surname he shared with



View of the Brigham City Temple, March 2012. Even without foliage, it was evident that the ten sycamore trees would block the east side view of the new temple. Photograph by Roger P. Minert.

his nephew, Jeffrey Packer, who logically received remuneration for his involvement as the previous property owner's broker.

During the early months of 2010, the site of the new temple was cleared in preparation for a ground-breaking ceremony scheduled for July 31. Construction contractors moved offices and equipment to that location and carried out the excavation work that made room for the foundation. The remainder of that calendar year passed with steady progress on the building and without comment regarding the ten trees along Main Street. The same was true for the most part the following year, but as time went on, more and more passers-by began to sense what might take place—the trees would likely be removed. Nevertheless, the matter was not discussed in public—if at all.

The LDS Church Requests Removal of the Trees

In a letter sent to Mayor Dennis Fife on March 12, 2012, Tom Lindhardt of the LDS Church's Special Projects office requested permission to remove four sycamores along Main Street on the temple block. In doing so, he acted on a request from the team of temple designers and landscape architects who had discussed the matter on several occasions. The letter offered the following reason to justify the removal of the trees: There was not enough room for ten trees to prosper (an attached photograph was provided to show the contrast between the ten crowded sycamore trees on the west side of the street and the four well-spaced and much larger trees across the street). The LDS Church would landscape the parking strip and be responsible for irrigation, and professionals would be employed to remove the trees so that damage to surrounding trees, sidewalk, and curbs would be avoided. Also, the Church would maintain the trees and the parking strip along Main Street on the temple block. The definitive line of Lindhardt's letter read: "This will allow visibility of the temple and temple grounds, enhancing the atmosphere of Main Street." Lindhardt also indicated that 160 trees would be planted on the Temple block.¹⁵ The request was forwarded by the mayor's office to the city's Shade Tree Commission. The latter group convened on February 15 and were joined at the temple property by Greg Rasmussen, who represented the LDS Church in the absence of Lindhardt. Rasmussen later recalled that he was not an active participant in the onsite discussion, but was simply there to represent the Church should questions arise.

After the members of the Shade Tree Commission carefully considered the proposal and the impact of removing any of the trees, they decided it would be best to remove not four, but six trees. The four remaining would be those that mirrored as closely as possible the position of the four sycamores across the street on the Tabernacle block.¹⁶

The minutes of the City Council sessions (both public and closed sessions) show no discussion of the sycamore trees on the temple block for the first two months of 2012. On March 1, public discussion was invited, but only one citizen appeared: Leroy Ward, a local resident for fifty years and a former member of the Shade Tree Committee, suggested that all ten trees be removed. Ward described traffic hazards that might exist after the completion of the temple. A response was offered by Shade Tree Committee member Mike Phillips, who mentioned that the LDS Church had requested the removal of six trees. Phillips felt that the surviving four trees would preserve the aesthetics of the Main Street tree scheme and that the Church proposed to trim and treat the remaining four trees, as well as to plant 160 new trees on the temple block. This short exchange was followed by a formal discussion of the issue. The council minutes read as follows:

Harley Pittman and Mike Phillips joined Mr. Pugsley at the table [as members of the Shade Tree Committee]. Mr. Pugsley explained that the Mayor received two letters from the LDS Church requesting that 4–6 trees be removed from the temple site. The Shade Tree Commission met with a LDS Church representative and the Mayor on February 15, 2012. It was determined that trees on the tabernacle site are healthier because they are spread out. There are four trees on the tabernacle site and ten trees on the temple site. The Commission made a motion that the Church be allowed to remove six trees in front of the temple site, leaving trees that mirror the trees on the tabernacle site. The Church requested that they have responsibility for future maintenance of the trees and park strip in front of the temple site, including mowing and irrigation.

MOTION: Councilmember Thompson moved to accept the Shade Tree Commission's recommendations to remove the six trees as discussed. Councilmember Rex seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.¹⁷

It was not until a report about the removal of the trees appeared in the *Box Elder News Journal* on March 7, 2012, that many local and former residents of Brigham City became aware of the decision to remove the six sycamores:

As the Brigham City Temple nears completion the Special Projects Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is focusing attention on the grounds. Permission from Brigham City Council was sought last week to remove six of the 10 trees on the east side of the temple block between 200 South and 300 South. . . . The city council unanimously approved the request.¹⁸

Another “firestorm” did indeed ensue and the “Opinions” section of the *Box Elder New Journal* of the March 14 issue featured the first response of disappointment. Diane Kulkarni wrote of her “sense of helplessness” and complained that “there is no recourse for citizens who do not wish destruction for our beautiful trees.”¹⁹ A Facebook page, established on March 19 under the title “Save the Brigham City Trees!” soon had more than two hundred

members.²⁰ Visitors to the page were encouraged to vote on the issue, and within just a few days the *Box Elder News Journal* reported that 778 persons had voted—295 in favor of the decision and 483 against.²¹

The *Ogden Standard-Examiner* weighed in on the issue for the first time in an article headlined “Brigham City Officials Hope to Improve View of New Temple,” which appeared on March 19. Reporter Charles F. Trentelman had spoken with Kulkarni and repeated her concerns. The article takes a fair tenor, but two errors did not make matters easier for the people of Brigham City: First, the mayor is quoted as originating the idea to remove the trees; and second, the proposal to remove six trees is attributed to the LDS Church.²² In any case, this article went a long way in making the matter more widely known among residents of the region. Several Brigham City residents later indicated that they learned of the tree operation only through this newspaper.

A review of the Facebook entries shows a surprising amount of hostility expressed by writers against the Church (“no average business would be given permission to remove sycamores”) and the city leaders (“I wonder how much they were paid”).irate writers invited like-minded persons to call Tom Lindhardt of the LDS Special Projects office, as well as the mayor and members of the city council to voice their dissatisfaction with the decision. Writers on both sides of the issue encouraged their friends to attend the next city council session, because Mayor Fife had offered the citizens an opportunity to express their opinions.

The heated discussion on the Facebook page may be why Lindhardt received several death threats via emails and phone calls during the last week of March. The problem became one of some concern, as he recalled: “The police were called in to investigate those threats and I had to change my cell phone number.”²³

As indicated above, the city council session on March 29, 2012 was an agitated event. Due to the political caucus meetings held statewide on March 15, the session scheduled for that evening was cancelled. By the time the meeting was finally held, four weeks had ensued since the council voted to support the decision of the Shade Tree Commission to allow six trees to be removed. It should be noted that city codes allow the commission to make such decisions without the consent or ratification of the mayor or the city council; in this case it was exclusively the commission’s decision.

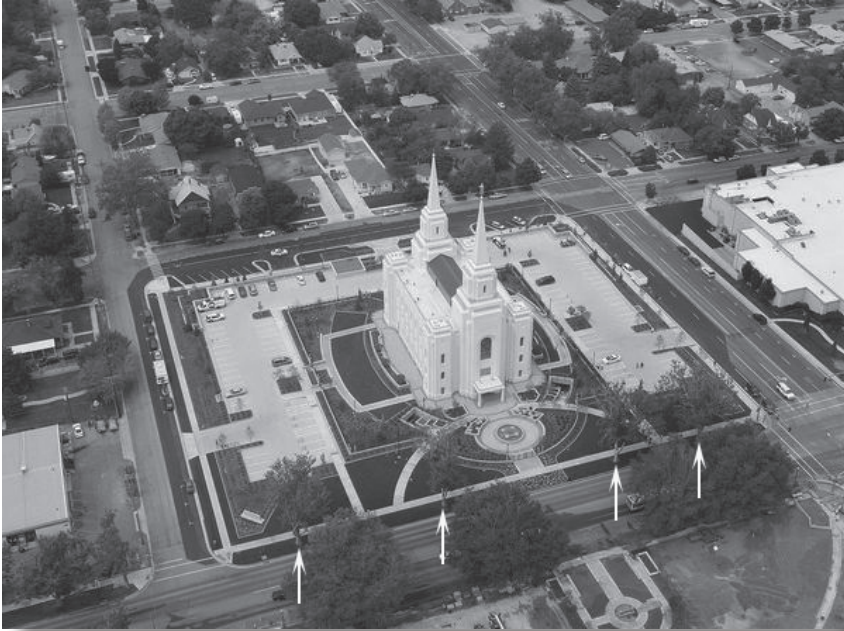
Following the statements proffered on March 29 by supporting and opposing citizens, Mayor Fife sought first to counter any suggestions that the decision had been made in secret. “It was brought before the Council so it would be publicized and people could attend the meeting. It was publicized again in the *Box Elder News Journal* and very few people came forward. It was not until there was a story in the *Ogden Standard Examiner*, which

distorted many of the facts, that people started knowing about it.” The mayor informed those present that by statute, the city council did not need to vote on such actions, and the city attorney confirmed this statement. Mayor Fife then explained that “the LDS Church had not been treated any differently than any other developer. They had to go through the same process in applying for an application and go through the same procedures.” He then took issue with the claim by several citizens that no sycamores had been removed along Main Street before and that this case might serve as a regrettable precedent: “There have been many trees removed for businesses along Main Street [over the years]. To say that the Shade Tree Commission has never removed a tree cannot be true. The Utah Department of Transportation removed nine trees a few years ago.” At this point in the discussion, Jolene Crockett, administrative assistant and secretary of the Shade Tree Commission, remarked:

The Shade Tree Commission is a very dutiful and thoughtful Commission. Some of [the members] have been on the Commission for over twenty years. They do not take trees lightly. The commission does not favor one [petition] over another. She added that she prepares the agendas in advance and posts them on the Utah Public Notice website and anyone can attend these meetings. All the minutes are also posted for public view. The Commission went to the tabernacle lawn and discussed this for a long time. For those concerned with the LDS Church getting preferential treatment, she stated that there is only one member of the Commission that is LDS.²⁴

Tyler Pugsley, the city forester, then stepped to the microphone, explained the process again, and emphasized that all procedures were followed to the letter in the case of the LDS Church. He also expressed the opinion that removing six of the ten sycamores would allow the remaining four to flourish. The city council session ended in a calm atmosphere, but it was clear many of those in attendance rejected the decision to remove six trees from the temple property.

The trees had but a few days of life remaining. On the morning of Tuesday, April 3, 2012, the Nye Tree Removal Company began the work of cutting down six trees. During the operation, which lasted until nearly six p.m. that day, many spectators came and went, but there were no signs or voices of protest. Nobody chained themselves to trees to stop the destruction.²⁵ Some brought lawn chairs and sat in the shade on the Tabernacle block to watch the process, approaching Main Street now and then to take pictures. The workers were so exact in their work that only one southbound lane of Main Street needed to be closed. Drivers heading both directions often slowed down to watch for a few seconds. Minutes after each tree was dissected and loaded into dump trucks, a machine moved in to grind out the stump. The wood was taken to the city’s composting yard where it could be preserved for specific use by both amateur and professional wood-workers.



Aerial view of the Brigham City Temple and temple block, August 14, 2012. The arrows point to the four sycamore trees that were not removed. Photograph courtesy Stuart Johnson, *Deseret News*.

The four surviving sycamores as they appeared when the temple was dedicated, September 2012. The trees on South Main Street lean to the west due to the winds that sweep out of Sardine Canyon. Photograph by Roger P. Minert.



By the time the open house for the new Brigham City Temple of the LDS Church began on August 18, 2012, landscaping crews had installed new sprinklers and planted new grass around the surviving four sycamore trees on the temple block. The positions of those four trees are approximately opposite the four planted across the street on the Tabernacle block in 1953. The letters to the editor of the *Box Elder News Journal* no longer discussed the matter. Peace prevailed on the temple block throughout the open house, which was enjoyed by more than 300,000 people, as well as during the dedication of the temple on Sunday, September 23, 2012.

Today, no stranger could know that the front façade of the Brigham City Temple can be seen and photographed only because six trees have been removed. Perhaps the many people who objected to the action will be mollified eventually by the general beauty of the site. I myself watched the removal of three trees on April 3, having already expressed the following sentiments in a letter to the editor of the *Box Elder News Journal*: “I believe that wise and considerate residents placed the trees in specific locations back in 1934–1935 and that current wise and considerate residents may find it necessary to remove a few on occasion.”²⁶

Notes

1. Roger P. Minert, notes taken during the city council session held in Brigham City, Utah, March 29, 2012. The statements quoted here were made by Maggie Nawan (first), Heidi Gates (second and fourth), and Gary Bywater (third) respectively.

2. Thyson Packer made this statement on the same occasion.

3. The author expresses appreciation to Richard O. Cowan of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University for details regarding the temples mentioned.

4. On October 10, 2009, I visited Brigham City. Having lived there twice for a total of seventeen years, I knew the community well and had heard the age-old rumor that Brigham Young had once prophesied that a temple would be built on the foothills above the city. I drove up to the foothills, but I could see no available property large enough for a temple. On the way out of town I drove past the famous Brigham City Tabernacle. It was clear to me that if a temple were constructed on the empty lot across the street, it would face the Tabernacle and present an imposing picture. At the same time, it appeared that the Church could also acquire a major portion of the block south of the empty lot and raze the existing structures to provide parking space, but I was wrong in that second speculation.

5. Roger P. Minert. “Former resident details origin of sycamore trees on Brigham City’s Main Street.” *Box Elder News Journal*, May 2, 2012, 9.

6. Minert, “Former resident details origin of sycamore trees on Brigham City’s Main Street,” 9. It is very likely that the “plan on South Main Street” was already being carried out at that time.

7. The only physical evidence dating the reconstruction project exists in the form of two stones marking the opposite ends of the new bridge over Box Elder Creek at 450 North

Main Street. Each reads simply “Erected 1934.”

8. “Local Recovery Activities Said to be Unusual.” *Box Elder News*, October 29, 1935, 1–2.

9. This action appears to have attracted little attention. No reports or photographs are found in either the *Box Elder News* or the *Box Elder Journal* (published separately) during the year 1953 and there were no letters to the editor published in that era.

10. In 1953, young Boyd K. Packer was a teacher in the LDS seminary program at Box Elder High School in Brigham City. He had been sworn in as a member of the city council in January 1952.

11. Kathleen Bradford, interview with Jeffrey Packer in Brigham City, Utah, June 13, 2012, printed in part in the *Box Elder News Journal*, August 22, 2012, 7.

12. I was a pupil in the second Central School that stood on the same bock from 1950 until its removal in 2000.

13. As cited by William R. Walker, *Church News*, August 7, 2010, 13.

14. See www.ldschurchtemples.com/brighamcity.

15. Tom Lindhardt to Dennis J. Fife, March 12, 2012. An image of the original letter (although not dated) is posted on the Facebook page “Save the Brigham City Trees!”; and Tom Lindhardt, Interview by Roger P. Minert, October 3, 2012.

16. Shade Tree Committee, Brigham City, Utah, minutes, February 15, 2012.

17. Brigham City, Utah, City Council, minutes, March 1, 2012, <http://brighamcity.utah.gov/agendas--minutes.htm>.

18. “Trees to be Culled.” *Box Elder News Journal*, March 7, 2012, 1. The report is incorrect in several details.

19. Diane Kulkarni, “Letter to the Editor,” *Box Elder News Journal*, March 14, 2012, 3.

20. “Save the Brigham City Trees!” Facebook page. The founder provided two reasons for establishing the page: (1) to make known to Brigham City area residents of the plans to remove the trees; and (2) to provide a place and a voice for those who opposed the plan.

21. *Box Elder News Journal*, March 21, 2012, 1.

22. Charles F. Trentelman, “Brigham City officials hope to improve view of new temple,” *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, March 19, 2012.

23. Lindhardt, Interview. Lindhardt stated that after the trees were removed, there were no more threats.

24. Brigham City, Utah, City Council, minutes, March 29, 2012, <http://brighamcity.utah.gov/agendas--minutes.htm>.

25. Several members of the Facebook page suggested that they might tie themselves to the trees, but none did.

26. Roger P. Minert, “Letter to the Editor,” *Box Elder News Journal*, April 4, 2012, 3.