



President Thomas S. Monson, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, speaking at the Wilford C. Wood banquet, May 28, 2009. Photograph courtesy Scott G. Winterton/*Deseret News*.

Wilford C. Wood

President Thomas S. Monson

The following remarks were given by President Thomas S. Monson, President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, at a banquet held in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building on May 28, 2009, honoring the life and contributions of Wilford C. Wood. The event was sponsored by the LDS Church History Department and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation.

How pleased I am to be here this evening with members of the Wilford C. Wood family; with Elder Marlin K. Jensen and Elder Paul K. Sybrowsky and their associates in our Church History Department; with the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation members; and with all of you present this evening. I have appreciated the tributes which have been paid to a unique individual, a pioneer in his own right, and a true friend—Wilford C. Wood. I express appreciation, as well, to Brother Kenneth Cope for the beautiful musical numbers he has performed.

I first became acquainted with Brother Wilford C. Wood when I was the Assistant General Manager of what was then called the *Deseret News* Press. At that time I had the privilege of working with Brother Wood when we printed two books for him—volumes one and two of *Joseph Smith Begins His Work*.

I learned that Brother Wood was a furrier by trade. His wife Lillian would stitch the linings of the fur coats made from the mink Brother Wood raised. Lillian Woodbury Wood was the sister of a lovely woman in my ward, Nettie Woodbury Miller, and both were the daughters of Frank Woodbury, the patriarch who gave me my patriarchal blessing. One of Brother Wood's sisters, Lorena Wood Anderson, served for many years as the president of the Relief Society in my stake—the Temple View Stake here in Salt Lake City.

To all who met Brother Wood, it soon became apparent that he had a deep love for Church history—a love which began early in his life.

Wilford C. Wood was born May 22, 1893, in Woods Cross, Utah, the son of George Cotton and Adelaide Ridges Wood. He was set apart as a missionary



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to the Northern States Mission in February of 1915, and he served as a missionary for almost four years, returning home in September of 1918. Shortly after coming home, he married Lillian Woodbury in December of 1918. It was during his mission to the Northern States that Wilford first developed his love for Church history—a love that would influence the course of his future life. His fur business provided him with a good income and gave him the opportunity to travel by automobile throughout the country, generally visiting historic sites connected with the Church. His car was a large Chrysler, and he had something of a reputation as a fast driver.

Fortunately for the Church, Wilford felt the need to preserve the things of the past, both the places where significant events in the early Church had occurred and the documents that told the story of the Restoration. His personal stationery carried the phrase “Lest we forget.”¹

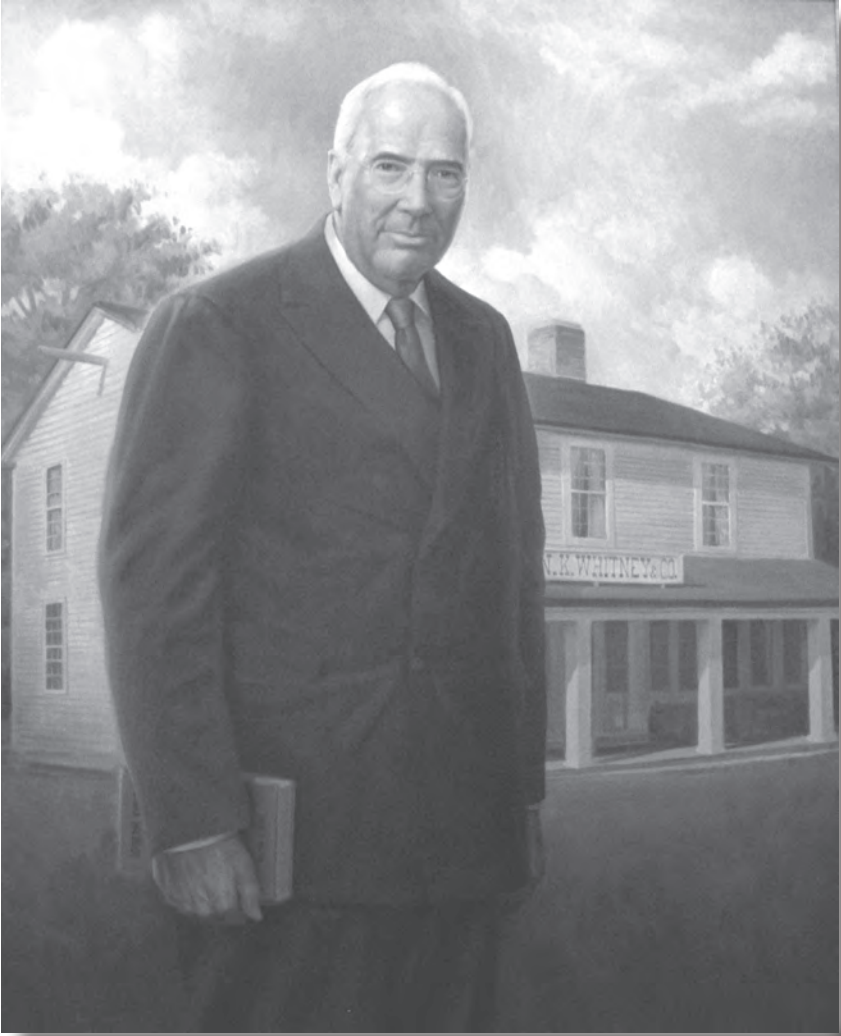
Historic sites were a special love. Some of his major purchases included eight out of the ten plots of ground that constituted the original temple block in Nauvoo, Illinois; the Liberty Jail in Missouri; property at the Aaronic Priesthood restoration site in Harmony, Pennsylvania; property at Adam-ondi-Ahman in Missouri; the John Johnson farm in Hiram, Ohio; the Newel K.

Whitney store in Kirtland, Ohio; and the John Taylor home and print-shop in Nauvoo. Many of these property transactions resulted from Wilford Wood's friendships with people across the country. His wife Lillian commented that "he would take fruit such as strawberries or melons to his friends and then mention how valuable the property would be to the Church. When the property owners were finally ready to sell, they would call him first."²²

The story of Wilford's acquisition of the temple site property in Nauvoo reveals his determination, his creativity, and his bargaining skills. The Bank of Nauvoo had taken public bids on the property several times but could not find a buyer who was willing to pay what it felt the property was worth. In February 1937 the property once again became available, and the First Presidency authorized Brother Wood to represent them in the bidding, with the understanding that he would pay no more than one thousand dollars for the property. Since the bank had already informed Brother Wood that they would open the bidding at one thousand dollars, he faced a problem. Determined to pursue the purchase, he drove the twelve hundred miles from Salt Lake City to Nauvoo, arriving on February 18, 1937.



President Thomas S. Monson admires the painting of Wilford C. Wood unveiled at the banquet. Photograph courtesy Scott G. Winterton/*Deseret News*.



Wilford C. Wood, oil on canvas, portrait by Ken Corbett, 2009. The painting was commissioned by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation in honor of Wilford C. Wood's contributions in acquiring numerous early LDS historical sites and properties. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

The following day he met with bank officials and advised them that he could not pay their asking price. He suggested that if they sold to the Church at a more reasonable price, Nauvoo's economy would benefit because the Church would likely build a Bureau of Information that would attract tourists to the town. When the discussion seemed to reach an impasse, Wilford

received the impression to ask the bank officials, "Are you going to try to make us pay an exorbitant price for the blood of a martyred Prophet, when you know this property rightfully belongs to the Mormon people?"

At an auction the next day in Carthage, Wilford Wood was the sole bidder and bought the property for nine hundred dollars.³ His prediction that Church involvement in Nauvoo would benefit the town economically proved accurate.

Brother Wood was an active member of the Utah Trails and Landmarks Association. An amateur photographer, he took valuable photographs of the Church's historic sites and shot film footage of the General Authorities dedicating the monuments at Winter Quarters, Nebraska, and at the Hill Cumorah in New York.

In addition to real estate, Brother Wood purchased a number of significant documents, including an original handwritten manuscript of the Book of Abraham, some handwritten court documents connected with the trial of the men accused of participating in the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and the uncut sheets of the original 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon.

As I have mentioned, I had the privilege of printing two books for Brother Wood. When he would come into town so that we could discuss matters pertaining to the books, he would bring eggs to sell to any of the employees who might want them. I believe he also sold eggs to several restaurants in Salt Lake City.

I shall ever remember taking our son Tom out to see Brother and Sister Wood. Brother Wood kept ten or twelve mink in individual cages behind his home and had named them after the early Twelve Apostles. He would talk to them. "Now Peter," he would say, "you speak up. And James, you quiet down." The dialogue was most interesting.

In his backyard he kept an old broken-down circus car that had collapsed when the Ringling Brothers Circus had come to Salt Lake one year. Brother Wood had it hauled out to his place.

During the printing of Brother Wood's books, the pages were stacked and would be left in the plant over the weekend, with only one side having been printed. The plant was securely locked, and we had security assigned to guard it. Brother Wood, however, did not want anything to happen to those pages. He suggested that members of his high priests group should come to the plant and stand guard over the large stacks, fearing that something might happen to them before they could be printed on the other side. Initially he wanted these high priests to bring guns with them, just in case. I told him he could bring the high priests, but not their guns!

He had Lou Jacobsen, the general manager, and me sign some press sheets from the book, indicating that we had indeed printed the pages. Later, when

he invited us to his home and showed us his masterpiece, “Mother’s Home of Learning,” which was situated on his property in North Salt Lake, we discovered that he had used press sheets from the books to wallpaper one wall of the building. The sheets that Lou Jacobsen and I had signed were on the wall as part of the wallpaper.

“Mother’s Home of Learning” was itself a unique building. The columns for the building came from the tearing down of the old Cullen Hotel in Salt Lake City. Among the items housed in the building was a huge safe in the basement which came out of Zions Bank when one building was demolished and another built in its place.

Brother and Sister Wood treated me very well and were most kind to me and my family. When I was called to preside over the Canadian Mission, they hosted a lovely dinner for Sister Monson and me in their home.

Brother Wood spent fifty years collecting and preserving everything he could that was connected with the life of Joseph Smith. Some of the artifacts he collected included the ivory handle of a whip used by Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Legion, a belt buckle from Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo Legion uniform, a rocking chair owned by Emma Smith, a watercolor of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, and casts from the death masks of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Many artifacts were acquired in response to small ads he placed in Midwestern newspapers asking for items of historical interest to the Mormons.

Unlike many of today’s collectors, Brother Wood was not motivated by money. He purchased numerous properties with his own funds and then sold them to the Church for the price he had paid for them. Lillian commented that “none of the things he collected were money-making ventures. In fact,” she said, “he would never tell me what he paid for anything. He did it for one purpose—he loved the Prophet Joseph and the Book of Mormon, and he wanted to help preserve the things and places that had been a part of [Joseph’s] life.”⁴

Following my call to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, I received a lovely letter from Brother Wood. He was, at the time, working at Susquehanna and mentioned in the letter that he was sorry he would not be able to attend an open house being held for me at the *Deseret News* Press prior to my leaving there to devote my full time to my new responsibilities. In the letter he included a poem entitled “To A Special Friend.” I won’t quote the entire poem here, but I would like to share with you the last stanza, for it reflects my feelings for my friend Wilford C. Wood:

There [are] more than wishes in the greetings that I send
To someone I’ll be always glad and proud to call my friend.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Notes

1. Julie A. Dockstader, "Foresight Preserves Historical Legacy: Wilford C. Wood Museum Allows Touch with Early Church History," *Church News*, June 1, 1991, 4.
2. Janet Thomas, "Tracking the Mormon Relic," *This People: The Magazine About Latter-day Saints* 2 no. 3 (1981): 33.
3. "Church Acquires Nauvoo Temple Site," *Improvement Era* 40, no. 4 (April 1937): 226–27.
4. Thomas, "Tracking the Mormon Relic," 33.