



Elder Steven E. Snow, LDS Church Historian and Recorder and member of the First Quorum of Seventy. Photograph courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Not So Long Ago

Elder Steven E. Snow

The following remarks were delivered at the Sons of Utah Pioneers Sunrise Service held in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, July 24, 2012.

Our gathering this morning brings to mind the many July 24th programs, which will be held this day in many communities throughout the Church, particularly here in the Intermountain West. Once again, special musical numbers will be performed and speakers will remember the legacy of those pioneers called to settle the small towns and outposts throughout the West. It is only fitting we do this.

My early memories of these celebrations come from Southern Utah, where I grew up. In the Tabernacle in St. George, the cultural hall in Washington City, and the pioneer chapel in Pine Valley, those wonderful stories of our forefathers would be repeated each year. It was a way to connect to our past and reminded us of who we were and what was expected of us. Because I am a great-grandson of Erastus Snow, James G. Bleak, and Archibald Gardner, my parents and grandparents routinely shared with us a

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virtual storehouse of stories of strength and faith to remind us that we come from strong ancestors who believed and sacrificed for the gospel.

It was not so long ago that pioneers themselves would be recognized during these celebrations. Old and gray, they would stand to be honored or would be afforded special reserved seating in order to be recognized. They are no longer with us and have not been for many years. Their memory, however, is kept alive through programs like this one today and through the work of many organizations such as the Sons of the Utah Pioneers, the local chapter of which sponsors this sunrise service.

My generation, and the generations which follow me, are inclined to believe that the pioneers we honor today lived a long, long time ago. Today it seems to us that their dedicated, courageous acts have become legendary, almost mythical, as we think back over the many years that have transpired since they first arrived. Was it so long ago? Has it been too long and the lessons once taught are no longer relevant to today's generations?

It is true we certainly live in a different world than existed in 1847 when the vanguard company of pioneers entered this valley. No recorded time in history has experienced the technological changes we have witnessed in the intervening 165 years. If our pioneer ancestors were suddenly to find themselves in today's world, they would find it a very foreign place. My hunch is, however, that they would think long and hard before trading their world for ours. They might prefer to tame the frontier than deal with the vexing challenges of today's world.

In spite of the fact many years have passed, we need to be reminded that it really was not so long ago. Generations overlap in an interesting way. When I was growing up our local newspaper, the *Washington County News*, would often run a photo of a local family representing four generations. There would be great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and the new baby on mother's lap. On a rare occasion, great-great-grandmother would be in the photo. If you add up the cumulative life spans of those represented in these family photos, you are soon talking centuries, not decades.

As a very young boy, I remember sitting in the workshop of my great-grandfather, James Hamilton Gardner. In his last years he enjoyed making canes and I was an eager observer of his handiwork. My mother would tell me that one moment we would be best friends and the next moment we would be arguing like children. It was sometime later when I learned that great-grandpa was the son of Archibald Gardner, who joined the Church in 1845, came west, built numerous mills, and helped settle West Jordan, Utah, and Star Valley, Wyoming. He had numerous wives and many children, including my great-grandfather. Now that I understand polygamy, this scenario becomes much more possible; nevertheless, when I made this connection I realized that the



Elder Steven E. Snow speaking at the Sons of Utah Pioneers Sunrise Service held in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, July 24, 2012. Photograph courtesy Kristin Murphy, *Deseret News*.

world of our pioneer ancestors is much more closely connected with ours than I had previously understood.

Recently I was preparing a presentation on the Hole-in-the-Rock Expedition, which settled Southeastern Utah in 1879–80. Glenn Rowe from the Church History Department furnished me some old color film footage of survivors of the expedition which was shot in Bluff, Utah, in 1940. Those old-timers, no longer the children and teenagers of pioneer days, were dancing and reminiscing during a reunion at the old Bluff school house. I was born just a few years later, and it occurred to me that my lifetime had overlapped some of those who had made that perilous journey so many years before. Their accomplishments suddenly did not seem so much in the distant past as I had imagined.

Things do change, but the lessons of the past remain the same and are as applicable today as they were to earlier generations. By failing to learn our past, we risk losing a legacy of sacrifice and devotion that will ultimately accrue to our own detriment.

We who have grown up in these valleys of the West take justifiable pride in our ties to our pioneer ancestors. We often define ourselves by how many “greats” appear before the words “granddaughter” or “grandson” when referring to our famous pioneer forbearer. We even might be careful to point

out that we descend from “the first wife.” Sixty-five years ago President J. Reuben Clark reminded us that no special privileges are associated with our pioneer heritage. In one of his classic conference talks titled “They of the Last Wagon,” given in the October 1947 General Conference, he said from this pulpit:

In living our lives let us never forget that the deeds of our fathers and mothers are theirs, not ours; that their works cannot be counted to our glory; that we can claim no excellence and no place because of what they did, that we must rise by our own labor, and labor failing, we shall fail. We may claim no honor, no reward, no respect, nor special position or recognition, no credit because of what our fathers were or what they wrought. We stand upon our own feet in our own shoes. There is no aristocracy of birth in this Church; it belongs equally to the highest and the lowliest; for as Peter said to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, seeking him: “Of a truth I perceive God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him (Acts 10:34–35).¹

I have learned that one need not be a direct descendant of pioneers to understand and appreciate their legacy. This was driven home to me years ago in Soweto, South Africa, during a Sunday School lesson about the pioneers. I was confident no one in the room had retraced the Mormon Trail or had ancestors who lived in Nauvoo. I did know, however, that they appreciated the familiar telling of the westward trek. They understood persecution and the desire to find peace in a new home. They took inspiration from the travails and suffering of the pioneers. With seemingly no apparent point of reference or connection other than their membership in the same Church, this story became their story. Our pioneers became their pioneers, and the lessons of faith, devotion, obedience, suffering and triumph were received by them just as they are by the literal descendants of those who settled this land.

To me that is very reassuring. Because when you think of how this Church has changed since the centennial of the arrival of the Saints in this valley, it is important to take a more international perspective.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has seen dramatic growth throughout the world. Shortly after David O. McKay became president of the Church there were nine LDS temples. When my wife Phyllis and I were married in 1971 there were thirteen temples. Our goal as a young married couple was to visit every temple in the Church. Well, President Hinckley and President Monson have ruined all of that. There are now 138 operating temples in the Church, with many more under construction or in the planning stages. There will soon be thirteen temples in Utah alone. Temples are just one measure of the growth of the Church around the world.

In 1955 there were 224 stakes in the entire Church. The Utah South Area alone now has 225. Soon there will be three thousand stakes around the world.

In 1955 the membership of the Church was just under 1.5 million. Today membership exceeds 14.5 million.

In 1955 the Church was primarily a Western US or Intermountain Church. July 24th celebrations were held primarily in Utah, Idaho, and Arizona, areas where the Mormon pioneers first colonized under the leadership of Brigham Young. Today the Church is much more international in nature. No longer is Church history just being made in the towns and cities of the American West. Today's pioneers are in Manila, Moscow, Monrovia, and countless other cities and villages around the world. When you consider how new the membership is in these developing areas, in much of Africa the Church is still figuratively in Kirtland or Nauvoo. The history of these modern-day pioneers is equally inspiring to their people and to us. Think what it would be like to interview someone who lived in Nauvoo. Well, that is happening today around the world as our Area Church History Advisors interview these early converts to the Church. Their history is being collected, preserved and shared in the countries where it originated.

Many of these recorded experiences are very faith promoting. For example, in 2009 in Papua, New Guinea, 102 members traveled by canoe for five days down the Fly River to attend a district conference in Daru. A year later, 466 members made the same journey in thirty-five canoes. That year, 1,743 attended the conference, where fifty-two men were sustained to receive the priesthood. One of the travelers who came down the river was on crutches. When asked what happened, he replied, "Oh, a crocodile got me, but I fought it off!"

Another inspiring story comes from a country on the western coast of Africa. Mozambique was a former Portuguese colony that fought for its independence, which was won in 1974. Years of civil war followed. Chico Mapenda was sent to Eastern Germany to receive an education and to learn guerilla warfare. Ironically, he found the Church in a Communist country and converted. Upon returning to Mozambique he began to share the gospel with family and friends. His brother Gimo, who was a minister of a Protestant congregation, converted and brought many of his flock with him into the Church. At one time the Mapenda brothers were teaching over one thousand investigators. Branches of unbaptized Latter-day Saints began meeting through much of the country. Today the Church is firmly established in Mozambique, in part due to the faith and perseverance of the Mapenda brothers.

An example of simple faith and obedience comes from Western Africa. A group of newly converted members were being taught the law of the fast

and how important it is to forego two meals and give an equivalent amount of money to sustain the poor. One woman sitting in the back raised her hand and asked, “We only eat one meal a day. That is all we can afford. Should we eat on Thursday and not eat again until Sunday so we have fasted two consecutive meals?” The beginnings of the Church in Mexico and other Latin American countries are tied to a Spanish military officer stationed far from home. In 1874, Meliton Trejo was stationed in the Philippines. He had a dream that he should go to Utah (he was not a member of the Church). He later traveled to Utah, was baptized, and was able to help in a significant way with the first translation of the Book of Mormon into Spanish. Before he arrived, President Young had assigned two brethren to begin translating the Book of Mormon. They were non-Spanish speakers and could never have accomplished the work without the providential arrival of Meliton Trejo, who later served missions to Mexico and assisted with many early Church publications in Spanish.

Such stories resonate with local members of the countries where they occur. The retelling of such experiences teaches the same lessons we are taught from the lives and examples of our own early pioneers.

We are grateful for the resources that have been made available to maintain a small team here at headquarters to assist the local Church History Advisors around the world as they go about collecting, preserving, and sharing the unique history from their own people.

The recording of such experiences will bless generations that follow. They will understand that those who went before, those who did seemingly impossible things, were like them. The youth of today and those who follow will know they can do hard things as well. It might not mean trekking across the plains, or taking a five day trip in a canoe to a district conference, but because of these strong, righteous examples our youth will know they too can make difficult journeys. The figurative handcart they pull will be lighter because of those who have led the way and demonstrated that through faith and courage the impossible can become possible.

On this beautiful July morning, we are thinking particularly of the faithful pioneer souls who entered this valley 165 years ago today. We celebrate their safe arrival, and we honor the countless souls who followed them and put down stakes in this great place. Utah now has a rich and diverse history. Those early pioneers joined Native Americans, and they were followed by merchants and bankers, Eastern European miners, the military, and later defense contractors and employees. Modern-day immigrants and refugees enrich our lives with the diversity they bring to our community.

But this morning we celebrate the pioneers. Their story continues to awe and inspire us. Again I quote President J. Reuben Clark, who spoke these words on the one-hundred-year anniversary of their arrival:

So to these humble but great souls, our fathers and mothers, the tools of the Lord, who have, for this great people, hewed the stones and laid the foundations of God's kingdom, solid as the granite mountains from which they carved the rocks for their temple, to these humble souls, great in faith, great in work, great in righteous living, great in fashioning our priceless heritage, I humbly render my love, my respect, my reverent homage. God keep their memories ever fresh among us, their children, to help meet our duties even as they met theirs, that God's work may grow and prosper till the restored gospel of Jesus Christ rules all nations and all peoples, till peace, Christ's peace, shall fill the whole earth, till righteousness shall cover the earth even as the waters cover the mighty deep. Let us here and now dedicate all that we have and all that we are to this divine work. May God help us do so.²

I close by echoing the words of President Clark: Let us not forget those who have done so much for us. Honor them by living lives worthy of their memory—lives that will, like theirs, inspire the generations to come.

Notes

1. Reuben Clark, "They of the Last Wagon," *Improvement Era* 50, no. 11 (November 1947): 748.
- 2 Ibid.