

N. Eldon Tanner, Man of Integrity

He was tall, thin, and taciturn; but he had a clear head and a big heart. He played many roles in the First Presidency and played them all dependably, admirably.

He was a builder. Without him, Salt Lake City might very likely have not had the Salt Palace, Symphony Hall, Fine Arts Center, restored Capitol Theater, ZCMI Center, Crossroads Mall, Beneficial Life Tower, Kennecott Building, J. C. Penney Building, Deseret Book Building, Utah Power & Light Building, Deseret Gymnasium, Church Office Building, second Visitors' Center on Temple Square, and Management Systems Building.

He was community-minded. He helped establish the support for the Promised Valley Playhouse, Pioneer Memorial Theatre, Salt Lake Golden Eagles hockey team, LDS Museum and Genealogical Building, University of Utah College of Medicine, Westminster College, Boy Scouts of America, Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and the Utah Opera Company.

He was a public servant — a high school principal, town councilman, Alberta legislator, Minister of Lands and Mines, Minister of Lands and Forests, Board of Governors of the University of Alberta, and on the Board of Trustees of Brigham Young University.

He was a business genius. President of Merrill Petroleum, he subsequently became president of the Trans-Canada Pipeline Ltd, which in four years, under his direction built a \$350 million, 2,000-mile-long pipeline through five Canadian provinces. He was chairman of the board of sugar company U & I Inc., and ZCMI, and a director of the Toronto Dominion Bank of Canada, First Security Corporation, Mountain Fuel Supply Company, Bonneville International Corporation, and Deseret Management Corporation.

He was a devoted Latter-day Saint. He was bishop of Cardston First Ward, president of the Edmonton Branch, president of Calgary Stake, president of the West European Mission, president of the LDS Genealogical Society, Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve, member of the Quorum of Twelve, and member of the First Presidency of the Church under Presidents David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and Spencer W. Kimball.

He was genuinely interested in the loyalty of the Church's intellectuals — and this I know from personal knowledge. I first met President Tanner in the

spring of 1966 when I was invited, as a USU professor of economics, to attend one meeting of a series President Tanner had been holding with Dr. Lyman Tyler, director of libraries at Brigham Young University, about matters affecting books, education, and writing. President Tanner quizzed me at length on history, intellectuals, and the faith. We talked about *DIALOGUE*, then in the process of being founded. As counselor to the president of the Utah State University Stake, I asked, would it be proper for me to be associated with an independent journal? President Tanner thought it would be desirable "so long as they pay good attention to your advice." With this counsel, later confirmed by President Hugh B. Brown, I was glad to serve as an advisory editor of *DIALOGUE* from its founding until my appointment as Church Historian in 1972.

My second contact with President Tanner came early the next year, when I was serving as a visiting professor of Western History at UCLA. I had been invited by Alfred Knopf to write a history of the Mormons, thus seeking to "fill the biggest gap in Western history." Knowing that an honest history could not be written without unrestricted access to the materials in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City, I wrote President Tanner to see if the First Presidency would grant such access. Within a week President Tanner telephoned that the First Presidency had approved my request and wished me well in the project. Because of the mass of materials previously restricted and other delays caused by my responsibilities at Utah State University, the book was not submitted for publication until 1978, with my colleague from the University of Utah, Davis Bitton, as collaborator. The work was published in 1979 as *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints*.

In the meantime, President Tanner had represented the First Presidency in calling me to be Church Historian — the first time a non-General Authority had been appointed to serve in that capacity since the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Serious about his responsibilities, President Tanner did not take himself too seriously. Just a few weeks before his death, he visited with my son James, who was working on a one-man show on J. Golden Kimball. When told of James's interest in J. Golden, President Tanner, sat straight up in his chair, got a quizzical look on his face, and asked, "What do you get when you cross a Spencer W. Kimball with a J. Golden Kimball?"

"I couldn't guess, President Tanner," replied James. "What *do* you get when you cross a Spencer W. Kimball with a J. Golden Kimball?"

"Do it, dammit," said the First Counselor in the First Presidency with a mischievous twinkle.

He was a man who listened; he was a man who didn't judge people; he was faithful to our highest Latter-day Saint ideals. And people knew it. During his last years, many honors came his way. He received honorary degrees from several universities. The N. Eldon Tanner Chair of Business Administration at the University of Utah was named for him. So was the new School of Management Building at Brigham Young University. In a rare undertaking, the Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce held a "Giant in Our City" program in his honor. At this program President Kimball said that President

Tanner was “as approachable as a child, as wise as a father, and as loving as a gentle brother.”

But perhaps the greatest tribute came from LaRue Sneff, his secretary of many years: “One could not find a more considerate, thoughtful, and appreciative person than President Tanner. He was kind and generous in his support of worthy causes. In his modesty he was genuinely surprised at the honors which came his way. He truly lived by the words of his favorite scripture, ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,’ as he gave the last measure of his strength in that service in the position to which he had been called.”