

# The Vast Landscape of His Heart

*James N. Kimball*



As a first cousin once removed from President Spencer Woolley Kimball (which doesn't mean much in a family as extended as ours), I considered myself a sort of shirt-tail relative. That is, I was clearly much more conscious of his relationship to me than he ever was of my relationship to him. I don't think he ever really knew exactly who I was but did, nevertheless, seem to recognize me as yet another distant relative to whom he was unalterably bound. He would always shake my hand and, in that faint whispered voice, say, "Hello, Cousin."

My first recollection of him was on the program at the Kimball family reunions when I was a young boy. In earlier days, when the family was smaller and travel was more difficult, fewer relatives came to this annual gathering. In fact, Ranch Kimball and President Kimball provided the entire program. Ranch would entertain the children with impressive magic tricks and the adults with Uncle Golden stories. Then President Kimball would make a valiant but not always successful attempt to return the family to a more spiritual note. These early reunions thus developed a fine balance between the humorous and the spiritual. The program seldom lasted longer than an hour, and then the women would serve homemade pie and ice cream. I remember these childhood occasions with great fondness.

After Ranch's death, the program belonged to President Kimball alone. I recall vividly his first solo performance. He spoke of his travels as a General Authority, mentioning that often people would take him aside after a meeting and tell him stories of his famous Uncle Golden. He then paused and, with a hint of unexpected mischief, said, "I think I would like to tell you some of those stories."

They were some of the best I had ever heard. I recall one story in particular. He said, "Uncle Golden was often asked to travel on Church assignments

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*JAMES N. KIMBALL is president and owner of Kimball Travel Consultants and a columnist for the Deseret News.*



though they grew up in widely separated rural towns, their experiences seemed very similar. As young men both had worked strenuously. The work in the fields seemed relentless — hard, dirty, demanding work. A gentle nudge from their father meant it was 3 A.M. and time to get dressed and have breakfast. Work began when there was light around 4 A.M. and lasted until it was too dark to continue. Then there was supper and, occasionally before going to bed, a glass of bread and milk. If it was late summer, a fresh onion was added to the treat. Often there was a dance at the ward house on Wednesday night, but they chose to go to bed rather than attend: they were simply too tired.

Both welcomed a mission call because it offered a chance to travel. It also meant a release from the hard work of the farm for at least two years.

Their fathers had both served the Church faithfully all of their lives, had lived long but died in great pain. Their mothers' lives were not any easier. The women bore children, baked bread, made soap, canned vegetables, bottled fruit, pumped water, cut wood for the stove, sewed and mended wornout clothing, milked the cows, polished eggs, planted and weeded the garden, tended sick children into the night, and cooked three big meals almost every day of their lives.

As boys, each carried an awful suspicion of dentists since the local blacksmith was the only man capable of extracting a bad tooth; and with every epidemic of flu, whooping cough, measles, chicken pox, or the mumps, they both remembered at least one of their boyhood friends or family who did not survive.

There was little laughter or music in these remembrances. Life for them had been hard and the pleasures few. As I listened to them talk, I became aware of how very much my upbringing differed from theirs. What I did not realize then was that these boyhood stories were my last fleeting touch with the generation that was frontier Mormonism.

One conversation in particular remains strong in my memory. My father asked Cousin Spencer to tell us about his trip to Mexico on Church business. My sister and I had never known anyone who had been outside the United States. The details of the trip made a deep impression on our young minds. In Acapulco (a place I'd never heard of), President Kimball said he had seen people sailing in the air behind a power boat, strapped to a billowing parachute. He said the idea fascinated him, "So much," he said, "I went down to the beach early one morning and had them take me up. It was very exciting, but I did not tell anyone at the time: Not even Camilla!"

President Kimball often concluded those late evenings by talking about his favorite project in the Church — the Indian program. I found it hard to understand his concern for these people. The only Indians I had ever seen were the Shivwits from Southern Utah or the Utes from White Rock Indian Reservation west of Vernal. To me they were mostly drunken and poor, and hardly lovable — in some ways, not even fully human. In Vernal in the early 1940s, the men were always referred to as "bucks" and the women as "squaws." When they came to town on Saturdays, the "squaws" always rode

in back of the trucks with the “bucks” in the front. The squaws shopped; the bucks got drunk.

But President Kimball saw the Indians differently. Perhaps it was something in his upbringing, or more likely in the vast landscape of his heart, that instilled an empathy for these people and their plight. His love and concern for them became more than just a Church assignment. It was an ever-constant thing, like a parent’s inevitable absorption with a disabled child. He wanted desperately to help them. He would always tell us what a great people they were and how he felt their chances in this life were severely restricted because of their skin color. If the families of the Church would only open up their hearts and homes to the young Indian boys and girls, he believed, their chances could be vastly improved. He later said he had seen many Church families blessed because of such generosity. Though in the end the Indian program may have been considered by some as a failure, in several ways it clearly succeeded. Whatever else it did, it prepared and tempered this man’s mind and heart for a decision in later years that would alter dramatically not only the Church, but more importantly the world’s perception of the Church.

My last conversation with this beloved man was in the spring of 1980 when I gave him a historic letter that had come into my possession. It had been handwritten by Brigham Young to a Carl Meyer of St. Louis, Missouri, in 1877. Meyer’s grandson gave me the letter on the condition that I personally deliver it to the President of the Church. I explained the letter and its contents to President Kimball’s secretary, Arthur Haycock. He told me to come by the next morning with the letter. Brother Haycock read it first and asked me several questions. The answers must have been acceptable because he immediately ushered me into the President’s office. After our initial embrace — President Kimball was always a compulsive hugger, as am I — he read the letter and then thanked me. He promised to write a personal letter to Mr. Meyer thanking him for his gift. I had just finished reading the Spencer Kimball biography written by his son Edward and his grandson Andrew, Jr. I said I felt it had humanized him, something the young people would especially appreciate. I shall never forget his comment: “I am grateful I was still alive when it was written. Otherwise, I don’t think it would have made it through correlation.” Always the missionary, President Kimball then asked me if I thought Mr. Meyer might someday join the Church. I said, “I don’t know, but I’ll work on him.”

Knowing there were others waiting to see him, I stood up to leave (which seemed to relieve some of Brother Haycock’s nervousness), but the President grabbed my arm and asked me to stay. We talked about the Kimball family organization. He said he appreciated all that my father had done when he had served as president of it. He then showed me around his office, holding up one hand to ward off Brother Haycock. It was filled with an incredible array of gifts given to him from the members of the Church all over the world. There were conch shells from Samoa, Maori wooden masks carved into wild grimaces, mounted Texas steer horns, patched quilts, Indian blankets, busts and portraits

of himself and Sister Kimball, Mason jars of fruit, Japanese kimonos, bronze medal Inca sun calendars, and pictures of various temples made out of such assorted items as seashells, buttons, petit-point, and inlaid pearl. It was unlike any collection I had ever seen.

I finally said goodbye and told him how much I loved him. I said, "Please take care of yourself because I want you to outlive all of us."

"Oh," he said, "I intend to."

Along with 5 millions others, I watched the aging process deny him his energies and his vital grip on life with each passing year. It hurt me to see his feebleness, increasing with each general conference. I prefer the more vital memory of the man — the one whose personal generosity of spirit enabled him in a most magnanimous gesture to reach out to the world and make Mormonism a truly universal religion.