

A Closer Focus: Challenges in Doing Local History

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THE SWEEP OF WIDE-ANGLE MORMON HISTORY is impressive, offering a comprehensive panorama of the Church's worldwide workings, progress, and achievements. But to see Mormon history only through this wide-angle lens is to miss the rich and productive study of local history. Local history—and by that I mean the stories of LDS congregations and communities or areas where Mormonism has grown—carefully researched and written is, I believe, a largely untapped reservoir of historical richness.

Viewing history through a close-up lens means bringing a detail, representative example, or unusual phenomenon to the foreground, while temporarily subordinating the larger, wide-angle history. Seen close up, local Mormon history provides sharply focused examples of how Mormon beliefs have been interpreted and how institutional directives and practices have been implemented in a given congregation and in the collective lives of its members. A closer focus shows the subtle and unique impact of Mormonism on individuals, families, and institutional units as they functioned within the larger constraints of their often non-Mormon communities.

This sharper historical focus, however, should not be confused with “narrow” history. The organizational Church, with its Salt Lake hub, is the common denominator. The way its programs are implemented by different local families and leaders can be specifically pinpointed and roundly explored. Placed within the context of the larger Church, such studies can assume all the scope of the wider view. Patterns, rich-

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ness of diversity, and the texture of general history glimpsed through the wide-angle lens begin to emerge more clearly in local studies. Local history, said one author, "reveals how things really happen; how things act and react, how the wheels and gears of history mesh and cog with one another" (Lord 1950, 135).

A closer focus yields another benefit. Local history inevitably deals with details in the lives of heretofore unknown individuals acting for themselves as well as collectively. By definition it resists dehumanization. Its sharp, specific details claim an immediacy and intimacy. It celebrates the individual. All general histories were once local histories. To the extent that they remain rooted in the truths of human experience, they still are. Local history brings us face to face with ordinary people who worked and struggled, believed and doubted, hoped and feared, sometimes failed, and often quietly achieved heroic goals. Local history can also have an unmatched poignancy springing from our common humanity. For these reasons, I believe, local history brings with it a special dimension of reality: instead of being lost to sight, the common person is acknowledged and celebrated as a doer and a mover. "The pivot of history," said historian Theodore Blegen, "is not the uncommon, but the usual, and the true makers of history are 'the people'" (in Jarchow 1965, 266).

In the winter of 1987, prompted by an increasing sense of urgency that the story of Mormonism in Minnesota be written, the Minneapolis Stake president called me to write the history of the stake. I had been a self-appointed agitator for such a project, although I never anticipated becoming the author. Because the Minneapolis Stake was the first stake organized in Minnesota, this history was necessarily the story of the LDS Church in the state, covering 150 years of various activities beginning with Nauvoo-era lumbering on the Black River and gradually narrowing in scope and focus after the stake was organized in 1960.

Writing this local history convinced me of several important, even critical, reasons for preserving local history. First was the challenge and adventure of finding sources. There were no local, neatly shelved, or catalogued library or archives to mine. The Church Historical Department had a twenty-year manuscript history of the stake and an eighty-year manuscript history of the two missions which had included Minnesota within their bounds. These were invaluable but only a beginning. The challenge was to locate and search historical sources that had never before been identified and to organize this information in such a way that it could be accessed and examined systematically. To become a sleuth, librarian, and archivist was labor intensive and time consuming but also an exciting adventure. Closets, filing cabinets,

garages, and attics in members' homes proved to be major resources full of surprises. One day a car pulled up to a local chapel, and the driver handed the wondering custodian a box of valuable historical records and scrapbooks, explaining that it had belonged to a deceased aunt who had been a "secretary in the Church." The nonmember family had no interest in the papers now but thoughtfully returned them "in case someone might be interested." Gradually a mass of fact was accumulated which had to be synthesized into a new, untold, and coherent story.

Of all the sources, the personal interviews with almost thirty past and present stake members were most rewarding. Many had been, or were, stake and ward leaders; others were counted among the faithful. Here was intense, personal interaction with history makers. My perspective broadened as I recorded their experiences, trying to see through their eyes, and pieced information and opinions into some kind of uniform whole. Their individual stories were microcosms of the Mormon experience, a marvelous reflection of how the Church affects individuals, works in their lives, and guides them through difficulties.

One particularly moving experience occurred when I drove to Rochester to interview a member suffering from atherio-lateral sclerosis (Lou Gherig's disease). Once a distinguished physician at the Mayo Clinic (as his father and grandfather had been before him), he had been forced into an early retirement. His future held nothing but continued deterioration. With great effort because of his damaged vocal chords, he shared the story of his conversion to Mormonism in the 1950s, when two missionaries knocked on his door. He recounted struggles as a branch president and high councilor to balance church service with a demanding medical career, efforts that bore fruit and others that failed. He spoke of the continuing blessing that the gospel was in his family's life and bore his unshakable testimony in a memorable way as I was leaving. "Brother Anderson," I said as I gave him a goodbye hug, "I am so sorry to see you in this condition." His response sums up the power of Mormonism to change hearts and lives and give strength to endure: "Now Sister Willes, I don't want you to feel sorry for me." He wagged his finger in my direction. "I'm in graduate school—graduate school for godhood." His life story, repeated thousands and even millions of times, is the history of Mormonism.

By the time *Minnesota Mormons* was published two years later, five people whom I had interviewed, including Mark Anderson, were dead. Several had shared important information unobtainable elsewhere. I count getting to them in time among the accomplishments of my research.

The second important aspect of doing local history is the singular challenge of interpreting sources. Accuracy and integrity of interpretation are important for any historian, but particularly so for local historians, whose written errors or omissions may often go unexposed by knowledgeable critical review. This is even truer of the local amateur historian than of the professional academician. I realized this when I was introduced recently as “the only person who knows Minnesota LDS history.” I had never thought of myself as being *any* authority, let alone *the* authority. I wasn’t a big fish in a little pond; I was the *only* fish in a little pond. Because a local history may stand as the only history ever to be written, it will probably never be contradicted or corrected in print. “Attention to detail” takes on a whole new meaning. Meticulous, scrupulous, and exhaustive digging and reporting are absolutely essential to the local historian.

In 1978 the Rochester Minnesota Stake, with barely enough members for stakehood, was created from units spread all over southern Minnesota. The rumor was—and I heard it at least four times from unrelated sources—that the mission president, Douglas Callister, had persuaded his grandfather, Apostle LeGrand Richards, then visiting in Minnesota, to organize a stake on the spur of the moment. Knowing something of the procedures of the Church made me wary, and I dug deeper, finally succeeded in interviewing President Callister, and learned that the strong impetus toward forming the Rochester stake actually came from another—nonfamily—member of the missionary committee who felt the time was right and shepherded the proposal through.

Accurate interpretation of sources demands respect for the whole truth. This means not just avoiding inaccuracies, myths, or hearsay, but telling a story as completely and candidly as possible. It involves an ethical commitment to historical honesty, courage to defend the right to tell the whole truth, a willingness to spend time and energy unearthing as many sources as possible, and an acute judgement in evaluating—probably for the first time—those sources.

For example, the story of the building of the Minneapolis Stake center in the early 1960s is, I think, a delightfully humorous sequence of adjustments and accommodations between the desires of Minneapolis LDS leadership, needs of the local congregations, constraints of the Minnesota climate, and the policies of the Church Building Department imposed from a two thousand-mile distance. When it came to selecting the building site, deciding to include a basement in the building, disagreeing over whether the structure would be air-conditioned, and choosing the dimensions of the Relief Society room, local leaders and the building department were not in complete agreement. The

rich, local oral traditions surrounding these incidents were the first stories shared with my husband and me when we moved to Minnesota fourteen years ago and first whetted my appetite for local history. They were told neither as victories over Salt Lake nor as claims for ecclesiastic superiority, but rather as endorsements of faith in the local leadership and confidence that we had—in Minneapolis—common sense, seasoned leaders, and relevant knowledge to know what was best for ourselves—at least when it came to building buildings.

Let me share just one of those experiences—the decision to air-condition the stake center. At that time Salt Lake guidelines used the year-round mean temperature of an area to determine qualifications for air conditioning. Minnesota summers are very hot and humid with a mean temperature well above that stipulated by Salt Lake; winters, however, are very cold and longer than summers, appreciably reducing the yearly mean. Local leaders, knowing beyond question that air conditioning was desirable, had the duct work installed while they waited for approval for the air conditioning, which never came. At least not until the first stake conference in the new building, when S. Dilworth Young was the visiting General Authority. Temperatures were hovering in the high nineties when the Saints gathered for the Saturday night conference session in August, and the humidity was nearly as high. All the opened windows and doors couldn't catch even a hint of breeze. Since no screens had been provided for the windows, Minnesota's "state birds" (mosquitoes) flew freely through the congregation. Despite their pride in the newly completed structure, the Saints had to agree with Elder Young who, visibly wilted, stood at the pulpit, mopped perspiration from his brow, and called the stake center a "hot and steamy mausoleum" of a building.

Afterward stake president Sherman Russell explained to him that permission to install air conditioning had not been forthcoming. Elder Young told him to resubmit the request immediately; two weeks later, permission arrived. President Russell later thanked Elder Young for his assistance and asked him what had happened. "Oh," said Elder Young, "I just called up Brother So-and-So of the Building Department and told him he was a damn fool."

As I circulated the manuscript before publication, however, this chapter bothered some readers. One thought I should cut the entire chapter because "it might generate bad local publicity for the Church." Another was convinced that it would cause the authorities in Salt Lake to "think less of the Minnesota Saints" should they be reminded of our "shortcomings." Another said that any exposed "differences of opinion" would undermine the "united front" Mormons like to present to the world. In the end, the chapter stayed in the book with majority

approval, written as fairly to both sides as I could make it, because it was what really happened—to the best of my ability to understand and tell the story.

Even through the close-up lens, myths persist and sometimes take on lives of their own. A commitment to the whole truth means unraveling these myths, if necessary, even to the disappointment of some. Among the myths I encountered one turned out to be true.

It had to do with the dimensions of the Relief Society room during construction of the stake center. I had heard the oft-repeated story of the faithful bishop who, realizing that the blueprint dimensions of the room were hopelessly small, surreptitiously slipped over to the building site the night before the footings were scheduled to be dug and, by the light of the moon, pulled up the stakes and moved them, adding about ten feet to the length of the Relief Society room. Everyone said he was only being obedient to the injunction to enlarge Zion's stakes.

Fortunately, the bishop, who was still living in the stake, agreed to be interviewed. His account was practically verbatim to what I had already heard. The only small difference was that he didn't purposely use the cover of night to hide his deeds. He said he was always over at the site at night because his full-time employment kept him busy during the day and the night was the only time he could check on the progress of the building. "And I don't remember if there was a full moon," he added with a wink, "but it makes a pretty good story." When I asked him if he was concerned that I use the story or identify him, he said with a grin "I'm *hoping* you will."

The third important aspect of doing local history is the necessity to mesh the close-up view—the "micro" history that is being written—with the wide-angle or "macro" view, the big picture. This is essentially the process of enlarging the descriptive content of the local story by finding parallel or similar examples elsewhere for comparison and fitting the local experience, both time and dimension, into the big picture of the Church, community, and state.

It helped me to understand that every family, branch, ward, and stake is simply the Church in miniature. Local Church units not only reflect doctrine and programs emanating from Salt Lake, but (because of the strong centralized authority of the Church), they duplicate them locally as nearly as possible. But local translations are not merely clones. They are innovations on a theme, important not only for the melody which is their foundation, but for the flourishes that make them unique. The subtle variations, quirks, lags, experiences, individuals, settings, and circumstances that make Mormon life unique to an area give depth and clarity and reveal much about the people there. In this way, local histories transcend one small sphere. Seen within the bounds of a

larger background, they become a harmonious and instructive detail worthy of attention not only by themselves, but as part of the greater whole.

For example, baptism is an ordinance experienced universally by members of the Church. Before 1914, however, when there was no baptismal font, many local baptisms were performed year-round in rivers and lakes. In many parts of the world ice has been broken to perform a baptism, but when one realizes that in Minnesota natural water is very cold for nine months of the year, frozen for six months, and the ice so thick that cars regularly drive on it for four months, the fact of year-round baptism takes on a poignant element. It also helps one to understand the local members' joy when a wooden font was finally constructed in the basement of the first chapel owned by the Church in Minnesota. For ten years it was the only font in the state, and converts traveled many hours to be baptized indoors. The inadequate water heater, requiring members to spend five hours before each baptism heating large kettles of water on the kitchen stove so ordinances could be performed in relative comfort, was only a minor inconvenience.

Local stories can also provide color and humor. Once two elders baptizing ten new converts in a small Minnesota lake were surprised when the whole town turned out to observe. They later learned that the townspeople were checking out a rumor that water was being brought all the way from Salt Lake for the baptism. The elders soon assured them that, as they put it, "the water of Minnesota is just as good as any other."

Another consideration for writers of local Mormon history is to remember that by definition Mormonism is a religion, a spiritual odyssey, a quest toward eternal truths. Religion enables people to enlarge their individual and collective capacities. When this spiritual energy is directed toward positive goals, it often becomes dramatic and truly heroic. Writing a history of Mormonism means recognizing and acknowledging this energizing spirit, not to glorify or idealize individuals or their cause, but to understand the impulses that move people to act above and beyond themselves. Local historians should, I believe, approach projects with unbiased sympathy, much as they would a room full of people that they wanted to know and understand better. Such a positive spiritual attitude gives historians greater empathy as they try to accurately reconstruct a religious past and allows that same spirit in turn to aid, enlarge, and inspire their work.

Surely this was my experience. The labor on the stake history brought its own special spirit. On numerous occasions, I experienced the clear sensation of being led virtually by the hand—of knowing

whom I should talk to next or whom I should ask for advice. Often information came my way that I didn't even know I needed until I began to evaluate it more closely. Previously unknown people almost miraculously crossed my path and helped fit more pieces of the historical puzzle. I gratefully and humbly acknowledge this guidance. Just as the Spirit moved the Minnesota pioneers to action and achievement, so it in turn helped me as I tried to understand exactly what they did and how they did it.

Most men and women will not make a remarkable contribution to Mormon history. Seen through the wide-angle lens, their names will never be even a footnote to that history. But that does not mean that what they do is unimportant or inconsequential. "What each individual does may frequently seem insignificant," wrote historian Clifford Lord, "but what thousands of insignificant individuals do is vitally important" (in Jarchow 1965, 266). Individual members of the Church may instead be doers and movers on the more proscribed local stage seen through a close-up lens. They cannot augment or diminish the struggles of those who have created their Mormon heritage, but they can preserve that heritage and pass it on, not just as they received it, but enhanced by their own efforts, talents, strengths, and faith. When we reaffirm, through local history, the importance of these individual efforts, we build and nurture a sense of identity and purpose, of continuity and community. We see sharply the spread and influence of the gospel rolling forth as it is played out in the lives of people—just like those next door.

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