Salt Lake Citations

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A FRIEND WRITES:

In a walking excursion last fall through the old block lying between Fifth and Sixth East, Seventh and Eight South—in a narrow alley behind Charon's Mexican Bakery—I came across a shop of the sort that has become rather uncommon in our city. It is owned by a man equally rare among us in this era of post-agricultural Mormonism.

Architecturally, the shop is an old, hand-hewn extension on an older frame house jutting out in an ungainly way to the very edge of the roadway. It is square in shape, about 20 by 20 feet; its sidewalls are shingled, the roof sealed with tar paper. The original house behind it is a run-down, one-story bungalow devoid of even the homey vernacular charm that age usually imparts to older residences in this part of town.

The front wall of the shop supports two plate glass windows obscured with compound layers of grime and dust. A door-and-transom divides the façade symmetrically in two. On the smaller window of the door, as dust laden and opaque as the others, the stencilled name of the shop can be made out, given a sufficiently bright day and the proper solar declination. The onomastic curiosity lettered there reads "Latter Day Reliquariat." The proprietor does not seem to depend on casual passing trade or pedestrian custom; he appears indeed to make no concessions to business sense as commonly understood. His single effort to communicate his presence to the sea of consumers in Greater Salt Lake is through an ad of three lines placed once each month to coincide with Fast Sunday in the personals of the *Deseret News*:

> Sacred objects for testimony, trials, triumphs. Lovers of Holy Jesus and his Latter-day Saints welcome. [address]

I had not yet seen this ad when, in one of my regular exploratory Friday walks, an anise roll in my hand from Charon's around the block, I happened upon the Reliquariat.

From the front the shop has the look of a former family business, defunct in this generation. I tried the door casually, expecting to meet the re-

sistance of rust and locks, but it swung easily open, quiet on its hinges, and I passed in. An old set of sacrament bells fixed to the upper part of the door frame rang as I entered and again as I closed the door fast. The filtered light of the large windows supplemented by the candlelight from an old-fashioned Cummorah shrine on the right wall provided dim but even illumination.

A white-haired man in a collarless shirt sat writing at an antique mahogany scrivener's desk just in front of a curtained passageway leading back into the house, a tall upturned top hat on the table beside him. Though facing the door I had just entered, he was hunched over his work and did not immediately acknowledge my presence. The interior of the Reliquariat was a jumble of tables and bookshelves all crowded with objects and volumes, obviously for sale, but none of them tagged with a price. I had last visited a relic shop in Provo with my Aunt Eudora Richards Wooley in May of 1945 when she purchased a silver medallion embossed with the four temple signs as supplemental protection for my brother Tom, who was bound for the Pacific. It came back on the chain with his dog tags ten weeks later, undermining with one blow my faith in the efficacy of garments, amulets, and prayer to ward off danger and keep loved ones from harm.

Even after more than 50 years away from such a shop—and never having visited this one before at all—I found the smell and atmosphere of the place familiar and felt welcome in a family sort of way. The owner of the store, finally putting down his pen, gave me a warm greeting as he stood up from his desk and shuffled over to where I stood. With a hearty handshake, he introduced himself as Jesus Gonzales and invited me to browse as I pleased.

There was no unity of things on any given table or shelf, the most disparate objects being mixed higglety-pigglety, the common beside the rare. Most numerous were crafted wares expressing religious themes or reproducing sacred symbols. Thus, they were not relics at all in the strict sense: small steel swords of Laban, golden or brass plates with the Anthon characters on them (pre-Hofmann), scapulars with the Angel Moroni embroidered on one end and the Salt Lake Temple on the other, handsome carved boxes with hidden latches to store the emblems snipped from old garments—or their ashes. All these were familiar objects and self-explanatory. Brother Gonzales stood patiently beside me as I examined them, offering no commentary, pitching no sale.

But each table also had wonderfully unique items, true relics with histories behind them and the promise of intrinsic power or spiritual wealth. These, the old man described as I inquired about them. Memorable was a paper sacrament cup from which one of the Three Nephites was supposed to have drunk while visiting a ward in California that had been experiencing divisiveness. This had taken place on a Fast Sunday some years before,

and everyone had come expecting the testimonies to be full of bile and complaint as each faction addressed allusive aspersions to the other. As members entered the ward house, they passed an old man with a flowing beard and hair, who was seated on the church steps weeping. No one knew him or had ever seen him before. As the meeting began, the members saw that the old man had taken a seat on the stand, and after the sacrament had been passed, he stood to bear the first testimony. Afterwards, no one could remember exactly what he had said; each seemed to have heard a message that testified directly to his or her own soul. And each testimony born after his was filled with humble contrition and such declamations of eternal truth as had never been heard in that ward before. After the meeting everyone embraced and wept. A miracle had taken place. But when they remembered the old man with the beard and sought to thank him for his testimony and to discover who he was, he couldn't be found. One of the priests, recognising what had happened, retrieved the cup from which the man had taken the symbol of the Lord's blood—it seemed to stand out from all the others discarded in the same tray.

On one table were many small boxes with snippets of white material cut from the sacred veils of the Lord's House. A few came as samplers with veil-cloth from several temples packaged together and labelled. On another table was a display case in which small chips of stone, taken from the temples in Salt Lake, Logan, St. George, Manti, and Los Angeles, were carefully laid out. Gonzales explained that these were now extremely rare since the taking of such holy souvenirs by temple pilgrims and youth groups had been forbidden in 1963.

Relics from some of the most saintly Saints of this dispensation had also been gathered by Jesus Gonzalez. These he kept in a special locked case in which a candle perpetually burned, a vile of consecrated oil open beside it. They included the stick on which Joseph bit as a boy as the doctor operated on his leg (deep toothmarks easily visible all around it), a clump of tar and feathers scraped from Joseph Smith's face, a quill used by Oliver Cowdery in his early days as amanuensis to the Prophet/Translator, the quid of tobacco Brigham Young always carried to remind him he'd once been addicted to chaw, a thick swatch of bright red hair from Orrin Porter Rockwell tied with a rawhide thong. The modern day prophets were also represented: pocket lint saved by the undertaker when Joseph F. Smith was laid out, a vial of still uncoagulated blood drawn from J. Golden Kimball at the accident scene, the first insurance policy written by Spencer W. Kimball in Snowflake, Arizona, the typewriter ribbon on which Bruce McConkie wrote the first draft of *Mormon Doctrine,* on which the string of letters GreatandAbominable could clearly be made out.

Jesus Gonzales de Sangre de Christo arrived in the Salt Lake valley at the age of 12, a coattail immigrant, swept along in the wake of his father's passionate conversion to the faith of the Latter-day Saints. Gonzales's *padre*

operated a shop in the old quarter of Veridad Crus on the Andalusian coast that for three generations had brought mild prosperity to the family through trade in holy relics and religious paraphernalia, quaint hagiographies and rare manuscripts. During the Lenten season of 1922, an intense, bearded American spent hours in his shop, quizzing him about the life stories of the Saints whose sundry body parts and pieces he offered for sale in reliquaries ornate or simple. When he, in turn, asked about the man's background and, as a matter of courtesy, his faith, he discovered the man was a missionary with a message that quickly ignited a fire in his soul. This alarming fire soon withered his Roman piety and in time set him burning with a passion to be gathered to the bosom of Zion. There, in the tops of the mountains of the new Jerusalem, surrounded by saints and apostles living, not dead, Gonzales applied his inherited love of the sacred object to his new religious world, and from it drew the moral capital to found the Latter-Day Reliquariat. Jesus helped in the shop for seven years then took it over at his father's death in 1937.

He has continued there ever since, perched behind his escritoire every weekday, opening at 3:15 p.m., closing at 6:00. It was never a great commercial success; it wasn't intended to be. But customers have steadily dwindled since the 1970s, and it isn't uncommon for the cash register to go unrung for weeks. Jesus supplements his negligible income from store sales by working as an early morning janitor downtown at the temple, finishing work each morning in time to join the 5:10 session. Afterwards he walks home down State Street, but the ace bandages in which he wraps his legs are becoming less and less effective. It is only a matter of time until the vacuuming and the fourteen-block walk become too much. Jesus does not expect the Reliquariat to survive him. His only son, an investment officer at Bonneville International, has no interest in the family business.

I was in the shop for nearly two hours and made a single purchase, more as a tribute to Jesus than as an act of personal faith. That commodity remains regrettably scarce in my aging heart. For less than the cost of three hours' parking in the city, I acquired three seeds said to have come from an apple used in an old style endowment session at the St. George Temple in 1879. I was certain that desiccation and age would mean that these kernels would remain no more than souvenirs, decorative bits of antique vegetable matter, memorabilia of the Mormonism of my youth. But on a whim I planted them in a small pot when I got home, and as I sit here typing five months later, a young apple tree is warming in the spring sun that pours through the window of my study. I plan to transplant it to the back yard this weekend. I am already thinking with projected nostalgia of generations of fall fruit it will provide for my children's children's children. Thank you, Jesus.