

2016 JOSEPH SMITH SENIOR FAMILY REUNION TALK

By: Gracia N. Jones

Winter Quarter – Sunday, August 7, 2016

The Joy of Being Together—A little Remembrance and a Word of Appreciation:

I feel very grateful to be here to share some brief thoughts on the beginning of the Joseph Smith Sr., Lucy Mack Smith Family Reunions.

The first reunion was held August 18-19, 1972, in Nauvoo, Illinois.

I would like to ask any who were involved in that first reunion to raise their hand. Frances Orton was there, and her parents and brothers and sisters. It was my privilege to be one of many who helped in the organizing and planning—Buddy Youngreen, Frances' dad, Joseph Patrick, and Joseph Byron Smith, great-grandson of Samuel, and grandfather of Bob Smith who is head of I-Dig-Nauvoo, worked on the plans--

I won't go into great detail as to all the names of people involved—needless to say it is a project that has demanded great effort and sacrifice on the part of many—not for short term, but for most, it remained a lifetime commitment.

This year marks the 25th reunion. What I want to do here is give just a short version of how it began and for what purpose it was begun. And I want to go on record, as a witness to the great things that have come to pass through the forty-four years since we started, that its beginnings were inspired, and it has been overseen by extraordinary heavenly attention.

In a letter quoted in an article in the Salt Lake Tribute, Sunday, August 6, 1972, the organizers stated these purposes and goals:

“Goals of the reunion are in part to compile a complete record of the descendants of Joseph Smith Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith, to cultivate the type of relationships and interests necessary to have a successful family organization, and to maintain all family ties and associations.”

To a very great degree these goals have been accomplished. A family committee meets regularly with stewards from each family line building and maintaining a

database which contains many thousands of names, family group sheets, and addresses where possible.

For that first reunion, it took a massive effort to find and invite hundreds of Smith descendants across the entire country and Canada. We had a great committee to help; and publicity such as this article helped spread the word—but it took hundreds of phone calls to get the word out—and we had a good crowd, around 250 people from across all the family lines and from as far away as New York City, Texas, California, Utah, Arizona, Missouri, Illinois, and yes, I came from Montana. Today, we send vast numbers of letters, but also use the Internet to communicate across the family which is scattered world-wide.

At the first reunion a News Reporter tread where individual family members had agreed not to tread—one reporter asked the RLDS Church president, W. Wallace Smith, if this reunion effort ‘could lead to a reuniting of the two churches?’ President W. Wallace Smith, much discomfited, said, “No comment.”

Uniting the Churches was never a goal. Building strong family ties was.

The stated rule for all who attended was that there would be no discussions on religion. For too long the family had been divided—the purpose now was to try to build unity and good fellowship.

The theme for the first reunion was taken from a poem by Dr. Clinton Larson, a professor at BYU and a stalwart friend.

*We consecrate the wings of our being
To the kingdoms of the air,
That our families may live from the memory of time
Into the vision of the sky, in the joy
Of being together.*

And joy was the centerpiece of that, and subsequent reunions, as families that had been divided over a century were brought together finding common interests—a common spirit. Cousins who had lived in the same town and not met one another since they were children 50 or 60 years before, met, embraced, and seemingly picked up where they had left off—it was joyous to behold and be part of.

In subsequent years, a brother and sister who had not spoken to each other civilly since their parents died and they quarreled over dispersion of things reconciled. This reconciliation was doubly poignant when that brother died a few months after; it was comforting that they had met and made peace at the reunion of the Joseph Smith Jr., family in Salt Lake City 2005.

In 2013, a father and daughter, long estranged met, and visited amicably. That daughter passed away from cancer not a long time later.

Other projects came along and the united family organizations worked together to obtain vital property to be preserved for historical remembrance of those who had given so much in the early days of the restoration. Hyrum's home in Kirtland is one example. Who can forget planting the lilacs in the cemetery in Kirtland, and here at Winter Quarters? The Kirtland Temple has been the scene of amazing family gatherings during several of the reunions. The Smith Family Cemetery in Nauvoo is an ongoing project which the combined family organizations have committed to fund and help maintain. Dedication of the renovated cemetery in 1991 was a landmark event. It is a joy to have been involved in seeing this accomplished.

Perhaps little known, but certainly significant is the bedrock conversations which took place in 1973 over a family dinner in Independence, Missouri, between Truman Madsen, a professor from BYU, and Lynne E. Smith, Great grandson of Joseph Smith, a patriarch in the RLDS church, regarding the fact that each group, RLDS and LDS had documents not then available for use by the other. Could it be possible we could find an agreeable place to make an exchange and share these precious pieces of our common history?

I looked up on-line the sequence of events that resulted: in late 1974, an exchange of many documents was made, approved by the presidents of the two Churches.

"This exchange, which occurred late in 1974 after several years of study and consideration, was originally suggested by Richard Howard, historian of the Reorganized Church, who arranged the project with Earl E. Olson, assistant managing director of the Church Historian's Office."

To see the complete list that was exchanged go to this is the link to read the article:

[Discovery - Ensign June 1975](https://www.lds.org/ensign/1975/06/discovery?lang=eng)

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From The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

“Because of the exchange of documents, the Church now has, among other ... Joseph Smith placed the entire manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo ... The original manuscripts of the Inspired Translation (Inspired Version) of the Bible.”

Within this exchange among many other important documents, was included a copy of the manuscript of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. In 1979, significant verses of the JST were added to the footnotes of the LDS publication of the scriptures.

President Spencer W. Kimball expressed gratitude and let us know that the bridges of peace built through the Joseph Smith Sr., and Lucy Mack Smith family reunions had paved the way for that, and resolution of other significant issues that had been previously a center-point of contention. Harmony built through the family getting together spread outward and embraced not only the academic arm of both church groups, but gradually paved the way for the cooperation that exists in Nauvoo, Independence, and other historical sites which greatly enhances the enjoyment for visitors from all over the world.

It is true that no one person made this happen—it was an idea, a seed that sprang into life in a simple dinner discussion—that has now grown to bear fruit none who sat there that night could have ever imagined.

There are hundreds of large and small items one could list—but time doesn’t permit us to indulge in more at this time. We can safely say, however, that the reunions have been important catalysts in bringing needed change, dispelling suspicion and negativity, bringing peace that has brought great joy to many beyond our family circle.

The gathering of our Smith relatives from far and near is a massive effort each reunion. It could not happen without the dedication of those who take the

responsibility to organize the events we all enjoy. Thank you Frances and Steve Orton for all you have done to make this trek available and wonderful for us all.

Winter Quarters was a place of refuge for those who left Nauvoo in the winter of 1846-7; it is a refuge now, for us. We wish to thank each and every one—especially those who have gone the extra mile to give this large family group traveling on the train back to SLC dinner and a memorable tour at the Trail Center.

We look forward to two years from now when we will gather again—in the West.