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JOSEPH F. MERRILL

LATTER-DAY SAINT COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION, 1928-1933

by

Casey P. Griffiths

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Religious Education

Religious Education

Brigham Young University

March 2007

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Casey P. Griffiths

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by the majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

Date

Alan K. Parrish, Chair

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's committee, I have read the thesis of Casey P. Griffiths in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

JOSEPH F. MERRILL

LATTER-DAY SAINT COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION, 1928-1933

Casey P. Griffiths

Religious Education

Master of Arts in Religious Education

Joseph F. Merrill served as Church Commissioner of Education from 1928 to 1933, an era critical in the development of Latter-day Saint Education. During his tenure as commissioner several key developments occurred in Church education, among them the closing of most of the remaining Church academies, transfer of nearly all of Church junior colleges to State control, rapid expansion of the Church seminary system, and establishment of the first LDS Institutes of Religion. Merrill also initiated new efforts to encourage LDS educators to seek graduate-level education outside of Utah, and to bring religious scholarship to the teachers of the Church. In addition, during this time attempts were made by forces outside the Church to seriously curtail the continuation of the seminary program, if not to eliminate it entirely. Merrill's efforts were crucial in ensuring the survival and ultimate acceptance of this form of religious education.

This study is intended to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the contributions of Joseph F. Merrill as Church Commissioner of Education?
2. How can the lessons from Merrill's administration be applied to the challenges facing Church education today?

The first chapter of this thesis is intended to provide the necessary historical back to understand the events which took place during the Merrill tenure. Particular attention is paid to the work of Merrill's predecessor, Adam S. Bennion. Chapter two provides the historical background to understand Merrill's background before he was called as commissioner. The "Beginning of Institute" chapter explores the creation of the Latter-day Saint Institutes of religion. Next, the "Continuing the Transformation of Church Education" explores the decision to close or attempt to transfer to state control the junior colleges owned by the Church during this time. With the transfer of most of the Church colleges underway by the early 1930s, Church education found itself dependent on the work of seminaries and institutes. "The Released Time Seminary Crisis of 1930-31" chapter details the effects made by the report of the state high school inspector, I. L. Williamson, on seminary and Merrill's work to defend the legality of the seminary system. Next, "Joseph F. Merrill and Religious Educators" will document Merrill's dealings with the teachers who served under him as commissioner. Attention is devoted here to the effects of the Depression on Church education, as well as an account of the LDS educational venture with the University of Chicago Divinity school in the 1930s. Finally, the "Conclusions" chapter explains Merrill's departure from the office to serve as president of the European Mission. This chapter will also offer summary answers to the major research questions, and suggestions for future study

The overall intent of this study is to shed light on the contributions of Joseph F. Merrill to Latter-day Saint education. It is not intended as a full biographical work, but simply focuses on his service as commissioner, with occasional ventures into other periods as necessary. It is hoped the reader will emerge with a greater understanding of

this important era in Church history, as well as an improved vision of the divine hand guiding the fate of the Church.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any work of scholarship is the product of many minds, and this work is no exception. Countless people have been instrumental in the development of this thesis, of which only a few may be mentioned here. I was fortunate to have Alan K. Parrish, whose work on John A. Widstoe partly inspired this project, serve as my thesis chair. He has shown himself to be patient, enthusiastic, and above all, encouraging through the ups and downs of this process. Scott C. Esplin, who originally pointed out to me that almost nothing has been written on Joseph F. Merrill, deserves credit for the birth of this study. I was fortunate to also have him serve as a member of my committee, where his insights into this era have always proven illuminating. Mary Jane Woodger, likewise an expert on this era, has provided numerous insights and suggestions which have benefited this work. In addition she served to helpfully remind me to include the details of Merrill's spiritual side, which have made this work much more edifying.

Gratitude must also be expressed to the numerous authors who labors this study is built on. As I wrote I came to understand how most academic works are the product of not one person, but the merely the latest extensions of the work of countless devoted writers and researchers. Chief among these was the work of Kenneth G. Bell, whose study of Adam S. Bennion was used as a pattern for this paper. This study could accurately be considered the sequel to Bell's work. I also wish to express appreciation to the staffs of Church Archives, L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee library at Brigham Young University, and Special Collections in the Marriott Library at the University of Utah.

Next, I must acknowledge the love and support of my devoted family. My wife, Elizabeth, has provided so many helpful insights she could be attributed co-authorship of this work. Her depth of understanding, fascination with the most obscure topics, and general empathy have been of immeasurable value to me. I also appreciate her patience for working around a husband whose mind for the past year has been more in the 1920s and 30s than the current decade. Along with her, I wish to acknowledge my children, Acacia and Joshua. Concern over their future gives me a reason to search for meaning in the past. Finally, my immediate family, specifically my father and mother, Keith T. Griffiths and Laurie Griffiths, who sacrificed to give me my education, deserve credit for anything worthwhile I have produced.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Justification of the Thesis

Had the professional career of Joseph F. Merrill ended prior to his service as Church Commissioner of Education, he would have already been a noted Utah educator and an important subject for research and study. He became the first native Utahn to obtain a Ph.D.¹ and a pioneer in the school of mines and engineering at the University of Utah. His accomplishments as Church Commissioner of Education had the greatest impact on the lives of Latter-day Saints today. An impressive array of scholarship has been amassed on the works of other LDS pioneers in education, among them, Karl G. Maesar, David O. McKay, James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and Adam S. Bennion.² Merrill stood shoulder to shoulder with these educational giants, today he remains largely forgotten and his contributions need to be recognized. He was not the early pioneer that Maesar was, a prolific author or speaker Widtsoe or Talmage were, nor did he rise as high in the Church hierarchy as McKay. No work presently exists focusing solely on Merrill's contributions to Church education. When his name is mentioned it is usually in connection with his involvement in the creation of the first released-time seminary at

¹ *Dedicatory Program for the Joseph F. Merrill building at the University of Utah*, (Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah), 1. See also, Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe*. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 117.

² Among these works are: Reinhard Maesar, *Karl G. Maesar: A Biography by his Son*, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1928), Mary Jane Woodger, *Educational Ideas and Practices of David O. McKay : 1880-1940*, (Ed. D. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1997), Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 2003), Kenneth G. Bell, *Adam S. Bennion: LDS Superintendent of Education, 1919-1928*, (Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1969).

Granite High School in 1912. The most valuable contributions Merrill made occurred during his time as commissioner from 1928 to 1933.

This study seeks to answer two questions:

1. What were the contributions of Joseph F. Merrill as Church Commissioner of Education?
2. How can the lessons from Merrill's administration be applied to the challenges facing Church education today?

There were many diverse and interesting associates in the story of Church education in the Merrill years. Most of his work began under the auspices of other capable leaders, and many of his projects were carried to fruition by his successors. While Merrill worked in an administrative capacity, an army of dedicated teachers carried out the practical functions of Church education. In illuminating Dr. Merrill's life and accomplishments, many of the labors of these unsung heroes will also come to light.

Selection of Sources

This project began with the intent to produce a biographical work on Merrill's life and service. It soon became obvious that Merrill's life could not be adequately covered in the number of pages allotted for this thesis. Therefore, the primary focus is on the materials dealing with Merrill's tenure as Church Commissioner of Education.

The acquisition of Merrill's private papers by Brigham Young University in 1993 greatly enhanced this study. They contain a vast array of personal letters and journals covering his years at school in the eastern United States, his service at the University of Utah, and the entire period of his apostolic service. Additional primary source material is located at special collections in the J. Willard Marriott library of the University of Utah,³

³ J. Willard Marriott Library, Special Collections, Accn. 1062, this collection contains five boxes of material on Merrill's life. While not as extensive as the collection at BYU, there are many items of note

and the archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in Salt Lake City.

A Brief History of Latter-day Saint Education Prior to 1928

The policies and practices of the Merrill administration built upon those adopted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from its beginnings. The challenges Merrill faced were the most recent manifestations of the conflicts that shaped Mormon educational policy and the developing story of the Church Educational System. Hence, it is first necessary to review the history of LDS education before 1928.

Education has always been important to the Latter-day Saints. One of Joseph Smith's most well-known revelations, "the glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36) sums up the importance of learning in LDS beliefs. From its inception, the Church has sponsored vigorous educational programs, continually adapting them to fit the conditions surrounding the Church in its tumultuous history. By the early twentieth century, however, the Church had initiated vital changes to its educational system designed to allow it to adapt from an isolated culture in the West to a unique but integrated part of American society. LDS historian Thomas Alexander explained the dilemma as follows:

Conditions during the period of the 1890s constituted for the Latter-day Saints a challenge to the paradigm under which they had operated at least since 1847. The previous paradigm necessitated the integration of religion, politics, society, and the economy into a single, non-pluralistic community. This was simply unacceptable to Victorian America, so in the 1890s the Mormons began groping for a new paradigm that would save essential characteristics of their religious tradition, provide sufficient political to preserve the interests of the church, and allow them to live in peace with other Americans.⁴

contained in this collection. Also located at the University of Utah and extremely helpful in this study was the Frederick S. Buchanan Collection (Accn. 379), an essential repository for any student of 20th century education in Utah.

⁴ Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1986), 14.

To preserve their own culture, Latter-day Saints had strongly favored the creation and maintenance of their own system of schools, known as academies. As the isolation of the intermountain region began to come to an end, the Church found itself struggling to adapt to the American system of tax-supported, public education. Many began asking, would the Church continue to maintain its own schools, or dispose of them in favor of the new public schools? Church schools had the advantage of allowing religion to be taught in the classroom. In public schools this would be forbidden. In LDS belief, religion is a crucial part of everyday life, and therefore something that should be taught on a weekday basis. Could the Church maintain the successful religious education of its youth without maintaining its schools? At the same time, maintaining the education of its youth placed a crushing financial burden on the Church. Could the Church afford to retain its schools? Answers did not come easily. The Church's response to this situation would be dealt with over the ensuing decades, beginning in 1890.

Church Academies and Religion Classes

Alexander has noted that the Church educational system's growth during the early twentieth century resembled a balloon.⁵ It experienced rapid expansion, as Church schools were planted throughout the West. As the financial burdens of education skyrocketed a dramatic decrease in the number of Church schools followed. These schools were in turn replaced with seminaries and institutes.

With Church schools thriving at Brigham Young Academy in Provo and Brigham Young College in Logan, the Church-wide Academy system was launched in

⁵ Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 14.

1888 with the organization of the Church General Board of Education. An epistle sent by the First Presidency in 1886 asked the Saints to begin establishing schools:

It is pleasing to notice the increased feeling of anxiety on the part of the Saints to have their children educated in schools where the doctrines of the Gospel and the precious records which God has given us can be taught and read. Our children should be indoctrinated in the principles of the Gospel from their earliest childhood. They should be made familiar with the contents of the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants. These should be their chief text books, and everything should be done to establish and promote in their hearts genuine faith in God, in His Gospel and its ordinances, and in His works. But under our common school system this is not possible. In no direction can we invest the means God has given us to better advantage than in the training of our children in the principles of righteousness and in laying the foundation in their hearts of that pure faith which is restored to the earth. We would like to see schools of this character, independent of the District School system, started in all places where it is possible.⁶

President Wilford Woodruff more forcefully reiterated this request in another epistle, instructing the Saints to set up Boards of Education in individual stakes for the purpose of creating schools to educate LDS youth. He explained:

We feel that the time has arrived when the proper education of our children should be taken in hand by us as a people. Religious training is practically excluded from the District Schools. The perusal of books that we value as divine records is forbidden. Our children, if left to the training they receive in these schools, will grow up entirely ignorant of those principles of salvation for which the Latter-day Saints have made so many sacrifices. To permit this condition of things to exist among us would be criminal. The desire is universally expressed by all thinking people in the Church that we should have schools where the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the Book of Doctrine and Covenants can be used as textbooks, and where the principles of our religion may form a part of the teaching of the schools.⁷

Multiple difficulties arose in the beginnings of the Academy system, but for the most part they were overcome, and over the next decade dozens of academies were established throughout the Intermountain West. The academies functioned primarily to

⁶ James Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1966), 3:86-87.

⁷ Clark, *Messages*, 168.

provide education on the high school level. Typically, an Academy could only be established in an area with a large enough LDS population to support one. They received their support partly from tuition fees and partly from the Church. Often, parents who lived in remote areas sent their children away in order to have them receive an education at a Church school. LDS educational historian William E. Berrett noted that prior to 1907 almost all students in Utah received training from schools run by the Church.⁸

At the same time, to provide religious education for younger children and for those who could not send their children to Church schools, the First Presidency asked members to establish religion classes. These classes began with the intent to provide religious training within the confines of the law. A letter from the First Presidency gave the following directions: “Where arrangement can be made it will, as a general thing, be well to secure the district school room for this purpose, so that when they take place in the afternoon, these exercises can commence immediately after the regular sessions and before the children scatter; but when this is done care must be taken to keep the two entirely separate, so that the law might not be infringed upon.”⁹ Demonstrating the Church’s still potent influence in the territory, for the first few years of their existence, these Church classes took place in the same schoolrooms where regular school was held. After the Attorney General of the Territory ruled that such use of public schools violated the law, the classes were moved to local chapels.

⁸ Berrett, *A Miracle In Weekday Religious Education*, (Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), 27.

⁹ Clark, *Messages*, 196-197.

Public Schools vs. Church Schools

Around the time that the academies and the religion classes were being launched, public education in Utah was beginning to come into its own. Historian Leonard Arrington noted:

It would be fair to say that the primary reason for the slow development of a public school system in Utah – beside the obvious one that people engaged in conquering an inhospitable wilderness could not afford the luxury of much education – was the conflict between Mormons and Gentiles. Gentiles objected to public schools because Mormon teachers would expose their children to Mormonism; Mormons, to protect the standing of their own faith, refused to alienate control to non-Mormon elements.¹⁰

When the passage of the Edmunds-Tucker act greatly reduced the political influence the Church could wield, the time seemed ripe for public schools to be brought to Utah. The Free School Act of 1890 began the process of establishing public schools throughout the territory. For years the Church had opposed the establishment of schools supported by public taxation, but the mood appeared to be changing. Apostle Abraham H. Cannon wrote at the time, “The establishment of free schools by our people it is thought will have a good effect among the people of this nation in proving that we are the friends of education. Free schools will therefore be established.”¹¹

The establishment of public schools placed Church members in a difficult position. Paying taxes to the state, and tuition to Church schools seemed excessive to them. Public schools possessed several advantages over Church schools. First, they had more money for equipment and teachers. Secondly, the state would provide for books, transportation, and tuition. Third, many parents were adverse to sending their children away to a Church

¹⁰ Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 513.

¹¹ Cited in Frederick S. Buchanan, *Culture Clash and Accommodation: Public Schooling in Salt Lake City, 1890-1994*, (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1996), 22.

school, especially as the number of nearby public schools rapidly multiplied. At the same time, the Church could not afford to establish new academies to meet the demands of its membership.¹² Fueled by these factors, public school enrollment increased rapidly. By 1910 it had surpassed the enrollment of the academies.¹³

While the advantages of the public schools proved irresistible to the majority of the population, Church leaders and members still desired to provide a synthesis of secular and spiritual education. Religion classes, though still widely held, did not seem to be the best alternative. The First Presidency's letter that brought them into existence acknowledged that children would often be too wearied to take interest after their daily studies, and holding classes on Saturday was usually not a viable option.¹⁴ While academy attendance dwindled and Church leaders wrestled with these issues, the solution was about to present itself.

The Rise of the Seminaries

Released time seminary began at Granite High School in 1912 through the efforts of Joseph F. Merrill. Though initiated as an experiment, it soon found widespread acceptance and spread throughout the Church. Released time education possessed several advantages that the academies lacked. First, it took place during the school day, eliminating any need for students to take extra time out of their schedule for weekday religious training. Second, the Church built seminary buildings close to high schools, allowing students to use the transportation system provided by the state. Third, teachers at seminaries were free to focus solely on preparing lessons in religion, without having to

¹² Berrett, *A Miracle*, 27-28.

¹³ Milton L. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education*, (Salt Lake: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), 177.

¹⁴ Clark, *Messages*, 197.

prepare lessons in multiple subjects. At most academies teachers taught several different subjects, in addition to their religion classes. Most important, the seminaries could be operated at a substantially lower cost than the academies. As the Church looked into costs associated with both forms of education it found the average cost of educating a student at Church school to be \$204.97 per student, as opposed to \$23.73 per student at a seminary.¹⁵ Simply put, it cost eight times as much to provide for an academy student as it did to provide for one seminary student. With the Church members feeling the financial strain of running Church schools, and a workable alternative now in place, the stage was set for a revolution in Church education.

The Administration of Adam S. Bennion

Upon the retirement of Church Superintendent of Schools Horace H. Cummings in 1919, the leadership of Church education was reorganized. David O. McKay was appointed as Commissioner of Education, with Stephen L. Richards as First Assistant Commissioner, and Richard R. Lyman as Second Assistant Commissioner. Serving under them, Adam S. Bennion was appointed as Superintendent of Church Schools. Bennion 's work over the next nine years would mark a turning point in Church education. Joseph F. Merrill's major task during his service as commissioner consisted of bringing to fruition the administrative changes begun during the Bennion administration.

The first major shift in policy came in 1920. After reviewing the status of the academies and seminaries for a year, Bennion began to recommend radical shifts in the direction of Church education. In a letter addressed to the Church General Board of Education, Bennion and the three Commissioners recommended the immediate closing or

¹⁵ Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 84.

transfer to state control of no less than four and as many as eight academies.¹⁶ They also recommended the establishment of two years normal work at Brigham Young University, Brigham Young College (Logan), Snow College, Ricks College, Weber College, and Dixie College. Bennion later stated that the motive for saving these schools and promoting them to college status stemmed from the need to produce quality LDS educators who would serve in public schools.¹⁷ Lastly, the report recommended the establishment of seminaries near high schools, even if they were found in locations with larger LDS populations. This report was the opening salvo in a decade-long struggle for the Church to disengage from secular education altogether.

During Bennion's tenure the seminaries moved from being experimental institutions, to the established standard in Church education. Bennion saw seminary as the great equalizer that would allow every young Latter-day Saint to receive a religious education. He stated, "For years past our young men and women who have attended our Church schools have received daily instruction in theology – have been trained in their relationship with God and in the obligations to live up to Christian ideals. The Seminary promises to be the institution which will make this instruction more and more generally possible. If present plans are carried out there will be seminaries operated in many areas of the Church."¹⁸ The seminary program saw rapid growth during this period. When Bennion took office in 1919 there were twelve operating seminaries with an enrollment of 1,528 students. When Merrill became commissioner in 1928, the program had grown

¹⁶ The academies recommended for closure at this time consisted of Emery Academy, Murdock Academy, St. John's Academy, and Cassia Academy. Slated for possible closure were Uintah Academy, Gila Academy, Snowflake Academy, and Oneida Academy. Cited in Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 53.

¹⁷ Scott C. Esplin, *Education in Transition: Church and State Relationships in Utah Education*, (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 2006), 165.

¹⁸ Bennion, Adam S. "Preserving the Faith of Our Fathers and Mothers," *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 8, cited in Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 57.

to include seventy seminaries, with an enrollment of 11,500 students.¹⁹ In exchange for the rapid growth of the seminaries, the academies began to be phased out. By 1925 all the academies that were not expanded into junior colleges had been closed or transferred to state control, with the exception of the academy in Colonia Juarez, Mexico, whose community lacked a public high school.²⁰

Even more sweeping changes came in 1926. At a meeting of the Church General Board of Education Bennion submitted a document titled, “An Inquiry Into Our Church Policy.” In this report Bennion bluntly laid out the financial position of the Church schools and the seminaries. Bennion estimated that the relative cost of operating the schools was \$818,426.01 compared to \$197,502.59 for the seminaries. In light of this revelation, he presented the Church Board with three alternatives for the future of Church education. Under the first plan the Church schools would be maintained but with no further funding for expansion, while the seminary would continue to be allowed to grow. The second plan called for an expansion of Church education, but warned about prohibitive costs. The third plan called for the Church to withdraw altogether from the field of secular education to favor efforts at providing a religious education to LDS students. He also recommended the establishment of collegiate level seminaries near the campuses of universities and colleges where there existed a large enough population of LDS students to justify their existence. At the end of his report Bennion asked eight questions which would largely shape the direction of Church education from that point:

1. Does the Church receive benefit in returns from an 8 to 1 investment in Church schools as against the seminaries?
2. Do these returns equal the returns possible in other fields from the same investment?

¹⁹ Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 64.

²⁰ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 36-37.

3. Does there lie ahead in the field of the Junior College the same competition with State institutions that has been encountered in the high school field?
4. Can the Church afford to operate a university which will be able [credibly] to carry on against the great and richly endowed universities of our land?
5. Will collegiate seminaries be successful?
6. Can seminaries be operated successfully in communities where Latter-day Saints do not predominate?
7. May seminaries be legislated out of successful operation?
8. Assuming the Church can continue to operate Church Schools, can it launch a permanent campaign for fund which will automatically provide for all academic needs?²¹

Such a clear distillation of the dilemmas facing Church education caused serious reflection by every member of the board. Bennion's words would also prove to be almost eerily prophetic. With the exception of one or two, nearly every question raised in his report became an issue which Joseph F. Merrill would have to grapple with during his administration. At a later meeting of the Church Board, President Charles Nibley summarized the issue by saying, "the whole question in a few words is this: Shall the Church continue to compete with the State or shall it step out and attend strictly to religious education?"²²

After raising these questions, Bennion offered his recommendations a month later in March 1926. They were as follows:

- a. That we continue to establish seminaries wherever their need is keenly felt and wherever the local people exhibit a spirit of cooperation and enthusiasm which seems to guarantee for successful operation of such institutions.
- b. That [the Church] plan to withdraw from the field of the Junior Colleges as the State may make provision to take them over, or where conditions no longer warrant their maintenance, except in those cases

²¹ Minutes of the meeting of the General Church Board, Feb. 3, 1926. Cited in Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 87.

²² *Ibid.*

in which our judgment such conversion will be inimical to the welfare of our young men and women.²³

Bennion's conclusion was, "My judgment leads me to the conclusion that finally and inevitably we shall withdraw from the academic field and center upon religious education. It is only a question as to when we may best do that."²⁴

Two major factors led Bennion toward this move. The first was philosophical. For years the leadership of the Church had been wary of public education. Joseph F. Smith, for example, complained that high schools were being forced upon the people and was critical of the amount of money spent on state schools. He once remarked, "I believe we are driving education mad."²⁵ This attitude changed when Heber J. Grant became Church president in 1919. Grant, instead of opposing public education, became an enthusiastic supporter of it. In Grant's mind, the Church's primary educational labors should be in religious, not secular training. In a speech to a graduating class of Latter-day Saint University in 1922 he said that the purpose of Church education "was to make better Latter-day Saints. But for this reason, I am convinced there would be no need of having church schools as ordinary education can be secured at the expense of the taxpayers of the state."²⁶

During the early twentieth century, the Church hierarchy was filled with highly educated men. James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, Richard R. Lyman, and finally Joseph F. Merrill were all added to the Church's governing body, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In 1931, James E. Talmage sent a letter to soothe a troubled friend who was disturbed because "another college man [Joseph F. Merrill] had been added to

²³ Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁵ Alexander, *Mormonism*, 162.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

the Council of the Twelve Apostles”²⁷ Grant actively sought out the help of those he thought were the brightest and best education. Most of the Church leaders shared his views, and much of the negative feelings held for public school by Church leaders lessened considerably during this period.

Grant also saw the need for a greater openness between the Church and its neighbors. LDS historian Frank W. Fox wrote:

The principal significance of the Grant presidency [was] to transform the Mormon church from a small sect cloistered away in the Rocky Mountains to a national, and eventually international, religious movement with a universal message. In order to accomplish such a transformation, the church first had to come to terms with the United States politically, socially, culturally (to some degree), and above all spiritually.²⁸

Accepting public schools as a part of life was simply a part of a larger movement for Latter-day Saints to move closer to the American mainstream.

The second driving force behind Bennion’s radical policy shifts in was financial. Simply put, the Church could not afford to expand its schools sufficient to meet the needs of its members. On the other side of the table, the Church members could not afford to support a dual system. As early as 1922, he wrote to administrators at Dixie College describing the dilemma saying, “The Church now finds itself in the same position that the individual members of the Church have been in during the past two years. Matters financially are critical. When money is not available it simply cannot be spent. It therefore becomes our duty as well as our opportunity to do all we can to assist the Church in getting out from under its financial burdens.”²⁹

²⁷ Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:224.

²⁸ Frank W. Fox, *J. Reuben Clark: The Public Years*, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 443.

²⁹ Bennion, A.S., personal communication, Feb. 13, 1922, LDS Church Archives, MS 8537. Cited in Esplin, *Education in Transition*, 177.

While Bennion functioned as the chief architect of this restructuring, the drive behind it was coming from higher places in the Church. President Heber J. Grant remarked in the midst of all these discussions:

I am free to confess that nothing has worried me more since I became president than the expansion and appropriation for the Church school system. With the idea of cutting down the expense, we have appointed three of the Apostles as Commissioners; but instead of cutting down we have increased and increased, until we decided a year ago that there should be no further increase. We decided to limit Brigham Young University to \$200,000. Last year that school got \$165,000 for a new building, and inside of two or three years they expect a regular appropriation of \$300,000,, besides which they have plans laid out for new buildings involving an expenditure of over a million and a half. Well, we can't do it, that's all.³⁰

Grant further expressed his view that for any higher institutions of learning in the Church to be maintained, they would probably have to be largely supported by endowments, and went on to say, "our people are not in a position to make endowments."³¹ As a former businessman, Grant was used to looking at the financial bottom line of things, and brought this philosophy to the presidency with him.

Despite such strong statements, Bennion's suggestions did not find immediate acceptance. Church schools had long been an accepted part of the Church's program and suggesting that they all be discontinued caused some objections. Apostle David O. McKay urged caution in so quickly abandoning the Church schools. McKay wanted to seek a compromise between the two alternatives of maintaining the Church schools or going entirely in favor of the seminaries. He stated:

I stand right between these two extremes. I am not in favor of spending money on higher education in Church schools . . . but I hesitate about eliminating the schools now established, because of the growing

³⁰ Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 91.

³¹ General Board Minutes, 23 March 1926. Cited in Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:74-

tendency all over the world to sneer at religion. When President Woodruff send out his letter advising Presidents of Stakes to establish Church Schools, he emphasized that we must have our children trained in the principles of the gospel. We can have that in the seminaries it is true, but he added this, “and where the principles of our religion may form part of the teaching of the schools.” President Young had the same thought in mind when he told Dr. Maesar not to teach arithmetic without the spirit of the Lord. The influence of seminaries, if you put them all over the Church, will not equal the influence of the Church schools that are now established.³²

Bennion’s policy recommendations sent strong reverberations throughout the Church’s entire educational system. While work went forward on some of his suggestions, the major issues raised continued to be debated for the next year, without any major announcements of policy changes. Ultimately the questions proved too difficult for the Board to answer and the matter was submitted to the First Presidency for further consideration.

Transition to the Merrill Administration

Adam S. Bennion announced his intentions to leave the Church school system at a meeting of the Ogden Kiwanis Club on December 15, 1927. While his motives for doing so have never been completely explained, it was clear that his departure left a major void in the Church educational system at a crucial time in its transformation. Before he tendered his resignation he submitted one last report summarizing LDS efforts at education to the time, the contributions of his administration, and made further recommendations.³³ Bennion continued his practice of asking difficult questions by raising the following points about the future of Church schools:

- a. How far will the finances of the Church allow us to go in carrying forward an academic program, in the face of ever increasing needs in the realm of religious education?

³² Ibid.

³³ A complete copy of this report may be found in Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 171-182.

- b. To what extent will the Junior College find itself in the position of the Academy of earlier days when the Public Junior College shall have been established in our Utah educational program?
- c. To what extent is the Church warranted in spending money in carrying forward a university program in a field where other institutions backed by well-nigh unlimited funds now operate throughout this land. May there be a way to offer adequate training for those who are to be our religious teachers and leaders without being under the necessity of expending large sums to carry forward an academic program?³⁴

Other suggestions included the continued expansion of the seminary program, the establishment of collegiate level seminaries, writing of better curriculum, and a serious look at the continued efficacy of the Religion class program, which still continued in various places throughout the Church.

Joseph F. Merrill officially succeeded Adam S. Bennion as Superintendent of LDS education on February 1, 1928. His immediate marching orders called for him to carry to full fruition the changes begun by Bennion.³⁵ His efforts during the five years of his tenure largely completed the transformation of Church education.

While great strides took place under Bennion's leadership, a large portion of the work remained uncompleted. Among the unfinished issues Merrill faced were the following: How far should the Church take its policy to withdraw from the field of secular education? Did this mean the elimination of *all* of the Church schools, including Brigham Young University? What other programs faced elimination in the process of streamlining the Church's educational efforts? What needed to be accomplished to ensure the successful launch of the collegiate seminaries? To what extent should the training and education of teachers that would operate collegiate seminaries be taken? What should be the curriculum of a collegiate level seminary? Should the rapid

³⁴ Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 180, punctuation added.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

expansion of the seminary system be continued or curtailed? Did the seminary system even exist on sound legal ground? Perhaps most important, how could the spiraling cost of Church education be brought under control without seriously curtailing the Church's efforts to bring religious education to its youth?

The greatest challenge Merrill faced hovered unknown over the horizon. During the Bennion administration, it had become clear just how financially strained Church funds were. With the thunderous arrival of the Great Depression in 1929 Merrill faced this coupled with the specter of the worst financial crisis in the nation's history.

Conclusions and Summary

Education has always been a crucial part of Latter-day Saint theology and culture. A crucial tenet of the LDS faith is the notion of a synthesis between the temporal and the spiritual, a concept with far-reaching impact on the way LDS education has been conducted. Almost from its beginnings, religious training found itself alongside secular and vocational training as integral parts of a Latter-day Saint's educational experience. Early schools begun in Ohio, Missouri and Illinois all reflect this philosophy.

When the Church moved to the West, education still found a favored place among its efforts. Early on, the Church had carried out almost all education in the territory of Utah largely undisturbed from the efforts of outsiders. With the coming of non-LDS settlers to Utah, fierce battles began to be fought over how and in what manner education would be conducted. Over time, the efforts of other faiths to educate Mormon children and schools created by anti-polygamy legislation spurred the Church to create a more organized system of schools and religion classes to provide for the educational needs of its children.

As time passed, the rapid expansion of the public school system led to the demise of many Church schools. The role of Church schools was further diminished by the increased availability, greater financial resources, and relatively low cost of public schools. With the number of LDS students in public schools increasing, and families buckling under the necessity of supporting a dual system of education, the Church began to search for a viable alternative. The creation of released-time seminary in 1912 filled this void. Seminaries spread rapidly throughout the Church, offering a less-expensive alternative to an academy education.

The tenure of Adam S. Bennion introduced radical changes into the Church Educational System. He began to recommend closure of the academies and expansion of the seminary system. During his service nearly all of the Church academies closed or transformed themselves into junior colleges to provide teacher training for the Church. The motives for Bennion's actions stemmed primarily from financial burdens the educational system placed upon the Church, and seminary became the primary thrust of the Church's educational efforts due to its inexpensive nature. Eventually the decision was made for the Church to withdraw from the field of secular education altogether. As the Church moved to close or turn over its schools to state control, many questions began to be raised regarding the wisdom of completely abandoning the Church school system in favor of the seminaries. When Bennion resigned from the system in 1928, the transformation of Church education was still incomplete. Major questions remained about the Church's intentions to totally abandon all of its schools, how the transfer of the remaining junior colleges to the state would be managed, and what Church education

would be in the future. Coupled with all this came the fact that the Church and the rest of the nation sat on the cusp of a financial crisis of epic proportions, the Great Depression.

CHAPTER TWO

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND OF JOSEPH F. MERRILL

Joseph F. Merrill was born August 24, 1868, the first son of Marriner W. and Maria Kingsbury Merrill. As the son of an LDS apostle, he was raised in a home with a strong background in the gospel. His father made sure that early in his life he learned to value education. Many of the beliefs he held and character traits displayed in his administrative style can be traced to instances in his childhood.

Joseph F. Merrill was born on the western frontier while it was still largely untamed. Much of his childhood in Richmond, Utah, was spent performing difficult manual labor. As early as the age of ten he was sent away from home to work in railroad camps operated by his father in Idaho and Montana. In harsh working conditions, Merrill was frequently called upon by his overseers to perform tasks usually carried out by grown men. Family reminiscences state that he was much larger than most boys his age and by fifteen was nearly full-grown.³⁶ Hard work at such early age endowed him with a sense of industry he would display throughout the rest of his life.

Early Experiences

In spite of frontier conditions, great care was taken by Merrill's father to promote a love of education in his sons and daughters. An active participant in plural marriage, Marriner Merrill held no illusions about how much wealth he could leave his children after it was divided among thirty-nine descendents. Instead of physical wealth, he believed his legacy to his children would be education and a love of learning. One of his

³⁶ Melvin Clarence Merrill. *Utah Pioneer and Apostle Marriner Wood Merrill and His Family*. (Privately published, 1937), 460-1.

sons remembered him saying, “I may not be able to leave my children any property, but if I can give them an education I shall be satisfied.”³⁷ He frequently encouraged his sons by saying that an education would mean \$5.00 a day in a time when \$1.50 was the average wage for manual labor. Joseph recalled hearing his father express a sense of inferiority because of his lack of learning and a firm resolve that his sons would not be denied any opportunities to receive a good education. Marriner made sure that his sons were enrolled in public schools during the winter. School typically began when autumn came and ended when plowing time came in the spring, usually a period of four to five months. Not satisfied, Marriner hired a private teacher to run a family school from 1885 to 1887. At Marriner’s urging, the school period was lengthened to more than six months. The effects of this schooling would later have a great impact on Joseph’s decisions as commissioner. Unlike most prominent LDS leaders of his generation, Joseph never attended a Church-owned school and therefore he may have felt less of an emotional attachment to them during his time as Church Commissioner of Education.

During his childhood, seeds were planted that would later blossom into a great theme of Merrill’s life, a love of education. Later in life, Merrill recalled how a book on domestic science by James E. Talmage fell into his hands. “I began to read out of curiosity; I was soon spell-bound. The chemistry of baking powder, what yeast does, etc. were described and goaded me on. Then and there I determined I was going to study science, if ever I could go away to school, and emphasize chemistry.”³⁸ Merrill would later credit Talmage for inspiring him to spend eight years studying chemistry and engineering at eastern universities.

³⁷ Ibid., 341.

³⁸ Joseph F. Merrill, “James E. Talmage,” draft of an article written for *Relief Society Magazine*, MSS 1540, Box 11, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

Separate incidents during this time shaped the other theme of his life, religion. His father placed just as much emphasis on spiritual growth as he did on secular knowledge. Joseph later noted with pride that while his father may have sometimes been too busy for breakfast, he took time every morning to pray with the family.³⁹ Seeing his parent's devotion to their faith, at the age of ten he felt a need to pray and receive his own spiritual witness. Over the next nine years, he prayed every night for some kind of special witness but received no answer. In his nineteenth year, on the eve of his departure for college, his witness came. He later wrote of the experience,

I said very pleadingly, "Oh Father, wilt thou not hear me?" Then as distinctly as any word I ever heard in my life, I heard the word "Yes," softly spoken, and I was thrilled from head to foot with the most happy, satisfying joyous feeling that it was possible for one to have. I sprung from my knees and shouted, "Oh Father, I thank Thee." After praying nine years every night as earnestly as I knew how to pray, the Lord answered me. The great desire to be a better boy than I was before came at a critical time in my life. A few weeks later I left home to go to the University. Had I left without an answer, I may have forgotten to pray, for college life is none too helpful to a religious faith. Many students begin to study science, as I did, and many students of science begin to feel sooner or later that there is no personal God. I always remembered the remarkable way in which the Lord answered me, so I never forgot to pray.⁴⁰

Merrill spoke of this experience frequently, citing it as the foundation of his faith in his religion, a touchstone when kept him anchored in the faith. During his first address to the Church as Church Commissioner of Education he would refer back to it, saying:

I felt that the manifestation I received at that time was to me an absolute anchor. I cared nothing what the teachings of men were, if opposed to the doctrines of the Church, for I knew, and have known from that time to this, that the Lord God lives; that he does answer prayer; that he will sustain those who are worthy of being sustained. And this sustenance comes, of course, as a result of right living and of sincere service in his cause.⁴¹

³⁹ Ezra Taft Benson, "Elder Joseph F. Merrill," *Relief Society Magazine*, April 1952, 217.

⁴⁰ Joseph F. Merrill, "Boyhood Experiences," *Improvement Era*, May 1944, 281, 348.

⁴¹ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, Oct. 1931, 38.

Based on the enthusiastic recommendations of a friend, Joseph left Cache Valley in 1887 to begin attending school at the University of Deseret (later renamed the University of Utah). During this time he fell in love with the academic environment of a university (he later spent his entire academic career there.) He remained a staunch supporter of the University of Utah for the rest of his life. He later spoke longingly of what he called a “simple, unconventional life with knowledge as its prime objective.”⁴² Assisted by his work accomplished through private schooling at home, Merrill was able to complete the twelve-term course of study in just six terms.⁴³ In 1889, he was awarded a teaching certificate and was thereby qualified to begin his profession in education.⁴⁴

Education in the East

Having completed his studies at the University of Utah, Merrill chose to further his education. Plotting his next move, he sought the counsel of his father. Recalling Marriner’s enthusiastic response, he later wrote:

One cold night in December, 1888, I was driving him from Richmond to the Logan Temple. I ventured to ask him if I could go to Ann Arbor to the University of Michigan the following year. Instantly he replied, “yes, and I will keep you there as long as you let the girls alone, and devote yourself to study.” And next he added, “I have been handicapped all my life by a lack of education. So I decided to give my children an education instead of leaving them anything to quarrel over after I am gone!”⁴⁵

Merrill’s decision to go east had a dramatic impact on the rest of Marriner’s sons as well.

Of twelve brothers younger than Joseph, eleven later graduated from college, three

⁴² Joseph F. Merrill, “Remarks at U of U Alumni Commencement Banquet, June 4, 1946,” MSS 1540, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

⁴³ Melvin C. Merrill, 461.

⁴⁴ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Church Mourns the Passing of Elder Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 146.

⁴⁵ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Church Mourns,” 348.

received Ph.D. degrees, four earned Master's degrees, and two others obtained medical degrees.⁴⁶

In the fall of 1889 Merrill registered at the University of Michigan and within four years earned his Bachelor of Science degree. While the main focus of his study was chemistry, he also devoted time to physics, mathematics, geology, mineralogy, languages, history and psychology.

Despite his relatively young age and his unmarried status, Merrill served as a president of a branch of the Church during his time in Ann Arbor. While at Michigan he made several important acquaintances, among them Richard R. Lyman, who later became Merrill's colleague at the University of Utah, and eventually an associate in the Quorum of the Twelve.⁴⁷

Upon his return from Michigan, Merrill was hired as an Assistant Professor of Chemistry at the University of Utah. To better prepare himself he spent the summer of 1893 in intense study at Cornell University. The next two years, 1893-95, he taught at the University of Utah, with a brief interlude in the summer of 1894 to study at the University of Chicago.⁴⁸ In 1895, Merrill obtained a two-year leave of absence from the University of Utah, and traveled to Baltimore, where he attended Johns Hopkins University as a graduate student in physics and engineering. During breaks at Johns Hopkins, he spent his summers furthering his studies at the University of Chicago.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Richard R. Lyman, "Dr. Joseph F. Merrill of the Council of the Twelve," *Improvement Era*, Nov. 1931, 10, also, Bryant S. Hinckley, "Greatness in Men: Joseph F. Merrill," *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1932, 77.

⁴⁷ Lyman, "Dr. Joseph F. Merrill," 9.

⁴⁸ Merrill spent the summer terms of 1894, 1896, and 1897 studying at the University of Chicago. He later showed a preference for this school when he began enlisting scholars to teach Church educators, and when he began encouraging Church teachers to seek higher education. See Melvin C. Merrill, 462

⁴⁹ Harvard S. Heath, Candace Kearn, *Register to the Joseph F. Merrill Collection*, MSS 1540, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

The isolation he felt as a Latter-day Saint in the east was more pronounced during his time in Baltimore. Without an LDS branch to attend, he found himself visiting different churches on Sunday. Reflecting on his experience attending other churches during this time, and its contrast with his earlier religious experiences, he wrote,

I usually attended one non-Mormon church service, sometimes two services, every Sunday. For a considerable number of years I was out of intimate contact with my own Church so I went to all the churches in the communities where I lived (and I lived in four different educational centers during that time) and attended their services at least 350 times during that period. I listened to many eloquent sermons, but never once did I hear the preacher use the word “know” with the meaning we give it in our testimony bearing.⁵⁰

During this time he was engaged in an intense courtship with Annie Laura Hyde,⁵¹ who remained in Utah. In his letters to her he expressed his sense of isolation and guilt over his lapsing Sabbath observance. In a January 1896 letter he lamented being one of only three Utah men at Johns Hopkins, and that the long hours of his studies kept him from having any kind of meaningful associations. He frequently wrote of studying until the early hours of the morning (sometimes as late as 1 A.M.) and arriving the next day as early as 8 A.M. at the lab. In one letter he described his rigorous schedule to Annie:

If you care to know my course here it is; four lectures per week in math; four in mathematical physics; two in spectroscopy; two in electrical measurements; one in study of current physical literature; three hours daily in the lab work. But bear in mind that the lab work requires much more than three hours per day.⁵²

⁵⁰ “Some Fundamentals of Mormonism,” *Church News*, Dec. 7, 1946.

⁵¹ Annie Laura Hyde was the daughter of Alonzo and Annie Maria Taylor Hyde, and granddaughter of LDS Church president John Taylor. She and Merrill were married in 1898 and had seven children before her death in 1917. In 1918 Merrill married Emily L. Traub. She passed away in 1940. Melvin C. Merrill, 462-463, also Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Church Mourns,” 146.

⁵² Joseph F. Merrill to Annie Laura Hyde, Baltimore, Maryland, Jan. 24, 1896, MSS 1540, Joseph F. Merrill Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

Despite long hours, Merrill excelled in his studies. He returned to the University of Utah in September 1897 as a Professor of Physics and Physical Chemistry. He also began his tenure as Director of the State School of Mines and Engineering, also located at the University, a position he held until 1928. After teaching for one year he again took a leave of absence to return to Johns Hopkins on a fellowship, the highest university honor given to a student. His studies at Johns Hopkins continued from 1897 to 1899.⁵³ In June 1899 he received a Doctor of Philosophy degree, being among the first native Utahns to earn a Ph.D.⁵⁴

Merrill's work at the university became widely known, bringing some notoriety to the young scholar. An abstract of his doctorate thesis was published in the *Physical Review* in February 1899.⁵⁵ The study was later translated and published in several foreign languages.⁵⁶ That same year he was elected to the prestigious Phi Beta Kappa⁵⁷ scholastic fraternity.⁵⁸

Merrill's time in the east endowed him with several traits that would later be important to his service as commissioner. During his years of schooling he developed a keen sense of the struggle between secular and religious forces, especially in academics. His education outside of Utah gave him a familiarity and comfort among intellectuals that

⁵³ Heath, *Register*, 4.

⁵⁴ *Dedicatory Program for the Joseph F. Merrill building at the University of Utah*, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1. See also Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 117. John A. Widtsoe was studying in Germany at the same time, completing his work a few months after Merrill. The author has been unable to verify if Merrill was the first Utahn to earn a Ph.D., though in the program cited, which was produced by the University of Utah in conjunction with the dedication of the Joseph F. Merrill engineering building, he was recognized as such.

⁵⁵ The article was titled "Influence of the Surrounding Dielectric on the Conductivity of Copper Wire" and can still be accessed at the *Physical Review Online Archive*.

⁵⁶ Lyman, "Dr. Joseph F. Merrill," 10.

⁵⁷ Phi Beta Kappa is collegiate scholastic honor society, generally regarded as the most prestigious such organization in the United States. Members are selected by Phi Beta Kappa faculty members during their junior or senior years. They may also be selected after graduation for outstanding scholarship. *Encyclopedia Americana*, (Danbury: Grolier, 2003), 21:861

⁵⁸ *Dedicatory program*, 1.

was rare among Church leaders in the early twentieth century. It also imbued him with a respectability among outside scholars, giving him more influence to build up educational programs in the state. His education in the east thoroughly stripped him of the isolationist tendencies still remaining in Latter-day Saint culture. When expressing his educational philosophy, Merrill was more likely to quote an expert outside the faith, such as Roger Babson⁵⁹ or Senator James J. Davis,⁶⁰ than would another ecclesiastical leader. He was also keen to look outside of Utah for his ideas. His most far reaching innovation, released time seminary, may have been inspired by the theological seminaries he observed during his time at the University of Chicago.⁶¹

Religion and Academics

Far away from the predominantly LDS regions of his youth, Merrill's religious views underwent many changes during this time. While faith in his religion never faltered during his years of schooling, his desire to serve publicly in the Church was diminished by his awkward position with one foot in the secular world and one in the culture of Mormonism. Early in his studies at the University of Utah he noticed how pronounced the tension was between the religious and the secular, and often felt like he was unaccepted by both. He wrote, "We at the University felt we were between 'the devil and the deep blue sea.' The Gentiles regarded us as a Mormon institution. The

⁵⁹ Roger Babson (1875-1967) was an American statistician, economist, and business educator from Merrill's era. Today he is largely remembered for founding Babson College in Massachusetts. He is frequently quoted in Merrill's book, *The Truth Seeker and Mormonism*. Source: *Encyclopedia Americana*, 2:8.

⁶⁰ James J. Davis served as secretary of labor under Presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover. He was later elected a U.S. senator and served during the 1930s and 40s. He is quoted in almost all of Merrill's addresses and writings concerning education. See Joseph F. Merrill, "Why Religious Training?" *Relief Society Magazine*, Sept. 1932, Vol. XIX, No. 9, 507-511, *Encyclopedia Americana*, 8:534. Richard O. Cowan, *The Latter-day Saint Century*. (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1999), 81. See also Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 169.

Mormons (some of them) looked upon our school as an ‘infidel factory.’ Hence we did not enjoy the whole-hearted support of either faction.”⁶²

When Merrill returned to the university he resolved to remain faithful privately, though publicly he sought total neutrality toward both factions. He believed he could be more influential for good in the community if he displayed no partisanship, and therefore accepted no calls to Church service for a time. His training in the east seemed to have only reinforced his opinions in the matter, and when he returned home briefly in 1897, he did so with a firm resolve to maintain his course.⁶³

During this time he had an experience he would later consider to be the second great spiritual manifestation of his life. While riding in a train across Wyoming, he read in a local newspaper that Richard R. Lyman, his old friend from Ann Arbor, had been called to an important position in the LDS Church. Recognizing that Lyman, a recent hire at the University of Utah, was in the same position as he was, he scoffed and reassured himself that while Church service might be fine for Lyman, it was not for him. To himself he said, “Congratulations, Richard.” That instant a sign came that radically altered the course of his life. “No sooner had those words passed through my mind than I was surprised by the words “You are to be his first counselor.” These last words were not read from the paper or audibly spoken in my ears but they were forcibly impressed upon my consciousness as if they had been uttered in thunderous tones.” Upon his return to Salt Lake City, Merrill was met by Lyman and immediately received the anticipated call. Despite the fact that he would still spend two additional years at Johns Hopkins, he

⁶² Joseph F. Merrill, “The Lord Overrules,” *Improvement Era*, 1934.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

came to regard this experience as a spiritual bookend to this period of education. He wrote,

I have been of the opinion ever since that the Lord out of His abundant goodness used this very convincing means of showing me that my conclusions were wrong and that without fear of the consequences I should accept whatever Church call came to me. I did not for an instant doubt that the shock came from a divine source. It was ten years before on the eve of leaving for home that the Lord had given me a wonderful manifestation. I thanked the Lord that he had again made my way clear.⁶⁴

This experience led to a complete reversal of his position on remaining publicly neutral when it came to religion. From the time he accepted this call until the time of his death, he found himself constantly engaged in Church service. As he rose in stature during his academic career he came to regard his service in the Church as imminently helpful to the University rather than harmful. From this point forward his spiritual and professional life were intertwined, ultimately finding their final synthesis in his role as Church Commissioner of Education. Throughout his life navigating the tension between Church and state remained a constant theme.⁶⁵

The University of Utah 1900-1928

Finished at last with his schooling, Merrill resumed his post at the University of Utah. During his tenure there his skills as a teacher and administrator became evident. He introduced several innovations into the department of physics and electrical engineering that streamlined the curriculum and increased efficiency. Seeking to eliminate waste, he moved to standardize courses engineering students took during their first three years, before heading into separate classes their senior year. Through this he was able to teach more students with fewer instructors, diverting the savings to provide

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

better equipment. The plan later spread to other engineering schools and was officially recommend by the Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education, the leading organization in the nation for the teaching of engineering.⁶⁶

Doing less with more became the general slogan of his time at the University of Utah. He devised ingenious time schedules to ensure that every student could have adequate time in the laboratories and increase the efficiency of their work. While some students worked in the classrooms, others worked in the laboratories to ensure no wasted time on the part of the students.⁶⁷ One of his colleagues later remarked, “He is a born executive. Under his leadership the School of Mines and Engineering at the University achieved phenomenal growth and prestige.”⁶⁸ He became increasingly active in academic and civic organizations during this time. He served as president of the Utah Society of Engineers, the Utah Educational Association, the Utah Section of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, and of the Engineering Council of Utah.⁶⁹ Of his service at the university it was noted:

For the thirty-five years he served on the university faculty, he never missed a class he was obligated to attend. He was inflexible in his punctuality and expected his students and associates to be likewise. This was not simply an old-fashioned school-master's whim; it came of his old-fashioned code of honesty.⁷⁰

Merrill wrote bills that established the Utah State School of Mines, the Utah Engineering Experiment Station, and the Department of Mining and Metallurgical Research at the University of Utah. He worked to establish the U.S. Bureau of Mines Intermountain Station on the University of Utah campus. From 1909 to 1912 he served

⁶⁶ Bryant S. Hinckley, “Joseph F. Merrill,” 76.

⁶⁷ Lyman, “Dr. Joseph F. Merrill,” 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Church Mourns,” 147.

as secretary of the Utah State Conservation Commission.⁷¹ He was an ardent Democrat and served as an advisory member of the Democratic Central Committee from 1910 to 1916.⁷² He did not allow political convictions, however, to overrule his moral standards.

A tribute at his death noted:

He was prominent in early Utah politics, a tireless worker in one of the national parties. But when party leaders laid aside, as he viewed the matter, the political philosophy which he believed consistent with truth, he forsook them. Principle was more important than either party or friends. He was thoroughly intolerant of all politicians who preached one thing and practiced another, and without fear or favor he denounced them in private correspondence and from the public podium.⁷³

At the university he served in positions ranging from director of defense activities to president of the athletic council for seven years.⁷⁴ Even after he left the university to serve as Church Commissioner of Education, he remained in regular contact with the administrators there, sending several messages that he would self-effacingly call “butinsky letters,” addressing topics ranging from the student council to the sale of university property.⁷⁵

Church Service 1900-1928

His career in the secular field during this period was mirrored by his extensive service in the Church. He served as the Sunday School Superintendent for the Granite Stake from 1903 to 1911, and as a member of the Granite Stake presidency from 1911 to 1918 under President Frank Y. Taylor. In its early years, the Granite Stake became the proving ground for a number of innovations subsequently introduced to the entire

⁷¹ Heath, *Register*, 5.

⁷² D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997, 333.

⁷³ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Church Mourns,” 146.

⁷⁴ Ralph V. Chamberlain, *The University of Utah: 1850-1950*, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1960), 307, 352.

⁷⁵ For example, see Joseph F. Merrill to D.H. Christensen, May 23, 1929, Salt Lake City, MSS 1540, Box 4, Folder 2, Joseph F. Merrill Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

Church. Among these programs may were the first Family Home Evenings, beginnings of teacher-training classes, establishment of a Stake Amusement [activities] committee, and a renewed emphasis on systematizing genealogical work.⁷⁶ Shortly after his placement in the Stake Presidency, Merrill helped to introduce the first released time seminary.⁷⁷

Many events culminated in the creation of the first seminary. Seeing the benefits his wife received from her training in one of the Church schools, Merrill began searching for a way to provide a religious education to increasing number of LDS students attending public high schools.⁷⁸ One of Merrill's daughters felt that he may have drawn inspiration from the religious seminaries he saw during his time at the University of Chicago.⁷⁹ After proposing the idea to President Taylor and receiving full approval, Merrill immediately threw his energy into bringing the first seminary into being. He worked to ensure the construction of a suitable building, negotiated with secular leaders to allow the students to receive credit for their studies, and oversaw the hiring of the first seminary teacher. Describing his ideal candidate to the presidency of the stake, he laid down a set of standards still largely observed today in the selection of seminary teachers.

May I say that it is the desire of the Presidency of the Stake to find a young man who is properly qualified to do the work in the most satisfactory manner. By young, we do not necessarily mean a teacher who is young in years, but a man who can command their respect and admiration and exercise great influence over them. We want a man who can enjoy student sports and activities as well as one who is a good

⁷⁶ "An Expression of Appreciation to Pres. Frank Y. Taylor." Ceremonial Program, Oct. 4, 1928. Special Collections, BYU. It is interesting to note the number of innovations claimed by the Granite Stake during this fertile period. While not all the claims can be verified, the stake was in close proximity to the Church hierarchy, and produced numerous men who later ascended into crucial positions in the Church.

⁷⁸ See William E. Berrett *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education*, Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Printing, 1988, 30-31. Also Merrill, Joseph F. Merrill, "A New Institution in Religious Education," *Improvement Era*, 1938.

⁷⁹ Cowan, 81.

teacher. We want a man who is a thorough student, one who will not teach in a perfunctory way, but who will enliven his instruction with a strong winning personality and give evidence of thorough understanding of a scholarship of the in the things he teaches.

It is desired that the school be thoroughly successful and a teacher is wanted who is a leader and who will be universally regarded as the inferior to no teacher in the high school.⁸⁰

After an extensive search, Thomas J. Yates, a forty-one year old electrical engineer and fellow alumnus of Cornell was selected for the job. Yates agreed to teach part-time for a salary of \$100 per month.

Working together, Merrill and Yates outlined the first seminary curriculum, taking their course of study primarily from the standard works of the church. No professional outlines or texts were provided other than the scriptures. Emphasis was given to student and teacher rapport. One teacher later summarized part of the task as, “Go to the football games with them and do whatever is necessary to show them the relationship of life and their religion.”⁸¹ Though Yates only served for one year, he later commented on the potential of released-time seminary.

This institution [seminary] has spread its influence throughout our state and into other states. It is destined to become not only national, but a great international institution, for it is supplying that other half to our educational system, which has been neglected until our penitentiaries are being filled with youths who have gone wrong, not because they were inherently bad, but because the moral and spiritual part of their education has been neglected.⁸²

Concurrent to all these tasks, Merrill worked with the Granite District School Board to ensure that students would receive credit for their seminary class. Even before

⁸⁰ *History of Granite Seminary*, comp. Charles Coleman and Dwight Jones, unpublished manuscript, 1933, MS 2237, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

⁸¹ William E. Berrett, personal Interview conducted by Merrill Briggs, August 10, 1970. In Merrill Briggs, *A History of the Development of the Curriculum of the Seminaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

⁸² *Ibid.*

the project obtained approval from the Granite Stake Board of Education, Merrill had met with the local school board to ensure that there would be no legal difficulties in the matter. In a meeting held March 8, 1912 Merrill met with the Granite District School Board and outlined the basic of the plan. After hearing his arguments the Board came to the conclusion to favor the proposal as long as it did not interfere with the regular high school work. In later years, Merrill's work in establishing the legal grounds for seminary became an asset as he fought to ensure its continued existence under legal attack.

With all the preparations made, Merrill secured the necessary funds from the stake and initiated construction on a building adjacent to Granite High School. In the fall of 1912, the first LDS released time seminary opened its doors, with 70 students enrolled.⁸³ When he began his service as Church Commissioner fifteen years later, the seminary program had spread from one seminary in one stake to more than seventy seminaries in as many stakes throughout the intermountain West.⁸⁴ Seminary eventually replaced the Church academies as the dominant form of secondary education utilized by the Church in areas with large numbers of members. Speaking of the growth of the seminaries, Merrill commented, "We sometimes 'build better than we know.'" It was so in this case. The Granite seminary was set up to serve LDS students attending the Granite High School- to give them as nearly as could be the opportunity of studying the same courses in religious education enjoyed by students in the high school of the LDS University. Its promoters had no thought or desire that it should have any influence in closing LDS academies. But if it were successful at Granite they did hope that sooner or

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Milton L. Bennion, *Mormonism and Education*, Salt Lake City: Department of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939, pp. 206-210.

later LDS students in other public high schools might have the privilege of attending a seminary.”⁸⁵

Commissioner of Education

Merrill’s achievements in secular fields and in the Church had led to a high degree of notoriety by the time he was called as Church Commissioner of Education in 1928. Prior to his call, Heber J. Grant, President of the LDS Church, publicly called him “one of the greatest educational minds in the state of Utah.”⁸⁶ He entered the post as one eminently qualified and experienced. As satisfying as his work at the university was, Merrill felt his new position as Church Commissioner of Education would be even more fulfilling. Upon his departure from the university, he wrote to a colleague, “Well as I like my work at the University, I believe I shall enjoy my new work very much better. We were all surprised when we were informed of my election to the new position. I left the University campus with the heartiest of goodwill of everybody there.”⁸⁷ Though hesitant to leave his professional home of thirty-five years, Merrill felt his new position would offer a greater opportunity for service.⁸⁸

Besides his notoriety as an educator, why was Merrill chosen? Several factors merit consideration in answering this question. The first is Merrill’s relationship with the seminary program, which by this time had become the dominant form of Church education. The announcement of Merrill’s placement in the official Church magazine lauded him as “the father of seminary.”⁸⁹ Merrill’s experience in dealing with the

⁸⁵ Merrill, “A New Institution in Religious Education,” *Improvement Era*, 1938 p. 56.

⁸⁶ *Conference Report*, April 1926, 10-11.

⁸⁷ Joseph F. Merrill to Theo P. Holt, Salt Lake City, Feb. 3, 1928, Box 4, Folder 2, MSS 1540, Joseph F. Merrill Collection. L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

⁸⁸ “New Superintendent of Church Schools,” *Improvement Era*, Vol. XXXI, No. 4, February 1928. 325-6.

⁸⁹ “New Superintendent,” 325-6.

legislature may have played a part in his selection. Church leaders knew that the transfer of Church junior colleges to state control would have to be negotiated through the state legislature. As the head of the School of Mines, Merrill had written and ensured of several acts of legislation.⁹⁰ Another factor was Merrill's experience in the academic community and the connections he had built. Several of his associates at the university, among them Richard R. Lyman, James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, and Adam S. Bennion, were serving in Church leadership positions. Associations with these men must be have been a major factor in his selection.

Behind these secular factors, Merrill brought a firm conviction of the divinity of the work to the position. He believed the men who had called him were inspired, and that the work he was about to engage in had a great destiny. He saw the position as a greater responsibility than his duties at the University of Utah, and an obligation to the faith he professed. During his first address following his call as commissioner he said:

I believe that I have been called to the finest and the best educational position in America. I think that for two reasons primarily. One because of the character of the people with whom I have been brought in contact, and the other, because of the nature of the work itself.

Again may I say that I believe there is no kind of education in the world that is so fine and so elevating and so good and so important as religious education. And I believe that nowhere in the world is there a system of religious education that is equal in its quality, in its thoroughness and in its comprehensiveness to the system of education that is being undertaken in this Church. The time will come, I verily believe, and before very many years, when week-day religious education will be offered to every high school boy and girl, to every college and university boy and girl in this Church.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Included among these were bills making the School of Mines a division of the University of Utah, and another establishing the Utah Engineering Experiment Station and the Department of Mining and Metallurgical Research at the U of U. See "A New Superintendent," 325-6.

⁹¹ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1928, 37.

Acting on the suggestion of Adam S. Bennion, organizational changes took place almost immediately following Merrill's appointment. These shifts served to shorten the lines of communication between the Church's chief educational officer, and its leadership. Prior to this the Church School System had been governed by the General Board of Education, which was presided over by the president of the Church. The Commission of education consisted of a commissioner, two assistant commissioners, and the superintendent. When Bennion was called as superintendent in 1919, David O. McKay was appointed as the first commissioner of education. He was succeeded by Widtsoe in 1922. In 1925 the commission was disbanded, and the superintendent became the executive officer.⁹² In 1927 Widtsoe's call to serve as president of the European mission, and Bennion's resignation, both within few months of the other, opened the way for yet another restructuring.⁹³

Upon Merrill's appointment, the title was changed from "Superintendent of Church schools" to "Church Commissioner of Education," signifying a greater reach and authority to the office. Working under the General Board of Education, an "Advisory Committee" was created, consisting of several members of the General Board. It was intended to work closely with the new Commissioner as he oversaw the continuing transformation of the system.⁹⁴ On May 2, 1928 David O. McKay, Stephen L. Richards, Richard R. Lyman, and Adam S. Bennion were chosen to serve on this board.⁹⁵ Merrill was fortunate to be able to serve closely under these men. As his predecessor in the office, Bennion had been the major driving force in bringing about the vital changes

⁹² Alan K. Parrish, *John A Widtsoe: A Biography*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 2003), 357-9.

⁹³ Parrish, 384-5.

⁹⁴ William Peter Miller, *Weber College 1888-1933*, 1975, MSS 7643, Church Archives, SLC, 31.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

already happening. Bennion's new position as Director of Personnel for the Utah Power and Light Company meant he could no longer devote full time to Church education, but he could serve as a part-time advisor. McKay served as the Commissioner of Education when Bennion was Superintendent of Church Schools, along with Lyman and Richards as his counselors.⁹⁶ Thus, the team that had begun the Church's withdrawal from secular education remained intact, acting as capable advisors to the new commissioner as he sought to further the transformation of Church education. Merrill frequently sought the counsel of the advisory board and worked for a consensus among its members when making major decisions. At the same time he acted independently. On several occasions he went against the wishes of members of the advisory board, acting for what he felt were the best interests of the Church.

Though Merrill had strong opinions about the direction Church education should take, it was important to him to seek the approval of those serving above him. While he was an independent department head, he recognized his experience with Church education would be different. As the head of the school of mines, he had acted under secular officials. In his new position he functioned under those whom he believed were directed by inspiration. To reiterate this point, he ended his first address to the Church with this declaration:

To me there stands today at the head of this Church in President Heber J. Grant, the personal representative of the Lord Jesus Christ, and there sits surrounding him today men who have been called as special witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ. And I want to testify to you that I do know of my own self through revelation that has come to me, that these men are what they claim to be, and that this Church is what it claims to be, and that if we are true to our professions; if we are true to ourselves, we shall eventually attain to the goal for which we have started out.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 33.

⁹⁷ Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1928, 39.

Understanding his personal faith in the destiny of the Church gives insight into how Merrill could take the kind of bold and decisive moves he did as he moved Church education through one of its most trying periods.

Merrill brought to the position a distinguished educational background, and, perhaps even more vital, an outsider's perspective. As a newcomer to the Church hierarchy, he had been removed from the battles already fought to streamline the Church's educational efforts, and he was able to dispassionately diagnose the problem and seek solutions. Not having been present at the earlier discussions of policy, Merrill also pushed the Board to clarify their positions on items where no clear decision of policy had been made. Finally, Merrill had a secure faith in importance of his work and the leaders he served under that endowed him with the confidence to do what was necessary. Merrill's service over the next five and a half years would provide numerous opportunities to make crucial shifts in the Church's educational policy.

Conclusions and Summary

The talents, philosophies, and skills Merrill brought to the post of commissioner came largely from the experiences of his life. His childhood had given him a sense of hard work, thrift, and a love of education. His experiences as a student and at the schools in Utah and in the East led to an increased openness to the philosophies of education developed outside his native culture. His spiritual development during this time strengthened his faith. His academic career gave him a keen understanding of struggles between church and state in his native land. His expertise in science and skill as an administrator led to numerous positions of leadership and influence. All of these experiences qualified him for the unique challenges that beset his term as commissioner.

Upon his selection, the structure of Church education was reorganized, allowing Merrill a closer connection with his superiors. Many of the architects of the first stages of the Church's withdrawal from the field of secular education were retained, with Merrill serving as the executive officer of Church education. With these men providing guidance, Merrill set out to complete the transformation started during Bennion's service.

CHAPTER THREE

BEGINNINGS OF THE INSTITUTE PROGRAM

The Institute program of the Church was founded under the suggestion of Adam S. Bennion in his 1926 report to the board of education. Begun under Bennion's direction, the program was still in its formative stages when Joseph F. Merrill arrived on the scene. Institute represented only one of several projects started by Bennion and launched under the care of the Merrill administration. Merrill's contributions to this new form of education came mainly in two areas: 1) His contributions to the creation of the Institute curriculum and guiding philosophies, 2) His efforts to defend and justify the Church's expenditures to launch the Institute program.

Historical Development of Institute, 1912-1928

As early as 1912 individuals in Church education began to recognize a need for religious instruction to accompany training on the collegiate level. During the tenure of Horace H. Cummings as Superintendent of Church schools (1906-1920), requests were made by the president and several faculty members of the University of Utah to establish a facility near campus where religion classes could be held. Cummings wrote, "At present nothing is being done to look after them spiritually, and as a result some of our best educated boys and girls are losing interest in the gospel and becoming tainted with erroneous ideas and theories."⁹⁸ While the historical record does not say, it is probable that Merrill was among the professors advocating this change. It is also not likely to be

⁹⁸ James R. Clark, "Church and State Relationships in Education in Utah" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1958)

coincidental that the first mention of a recommendation for some sort of college instruction first appears in the annual report of Church schools for the year 1912, the same year that seminary began at Granite High School. Ultimately, Institute represents an application of the same ideas as seminary was based on applied at the collegiate level. In all of the early literature the program was initially referred to as “college seminary.”⁹⁹ Gustive Larsen and Andrew Anderson, seminary teachers in Cedar City, had been experimenting with seminary classes for college students since 1925, though there was not yet a separate organization in the Church devoted the religious instruction for those in college.¹⁰⁰

Once the concept had been introduced and approved of by the Board of Education, it was decided to establish the first Institute at the University of Idaho in Moscow. Why Moscow? At the time several factors came into play. Moscow was well outside of “Mormon country” but still close enough for Church officials to keep a close eye on things as matters developed. Several LDS professors served on the faculty of the University, and small but significant group of LDS students attended the school. Professor George L. Luke, Professor of Physics, was the main instigator of efforts to bring a Church program for the students that led to an invitation from the university. Merrill later noted that the school, and not the Church had initiated bringing Church education to the university level. He said, “Why not have them [collegiate seminaries] at the colleges? This question was given much attention three or four years ago and was finally answered affirmatively when the Church authorities received from the President’s office of your university at Moscow an invitation to establish in that city some kind of an

⁹⁹ William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education*, (Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), 48.

¹⁰⁰ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 48.

institution to serve the religious needs of university students coming from Latter-day Saint homes.”¹⁰¹ There were much closer schools to Church head quarters, Moscow had the right combination of a administrative and faculty support for the project. While other schools, specifically the U of U, enjoyed support among the faculty, there was some hesitation on the part of the administration.¹⁰²

The man personally appointed by the First Presidency to launch the program was J. Wiley Sessions, recently returned from a seven-year mission in South Africa. Though the call came somewhat unexpectedly, Sessions immediately traveled to Moscow and launched himself into the work. Seeking to win the favor of the predominantly non-Mormon community, he enrolled himself and his wife in classes at the university, joined the Chamber of Commerce and the local Kiwanis Club, and became active in community projects supporting the university.

Sometime later Superintendent Bennion, Rudger Clawson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and Heber J. Grant, President of the Church, all met with community and university leaders. Through these efforts opposition to the project melted away, and the Church enjoyed the full cooperation of the faculty, president, and state board of education.¹⁰³ Land was secured, a budget to build a facility provided, and the first LDS institute began its service to the students of the University.

After winning their approval, faculty of the university established standards and conditions for the Institute to meet in order to grant credit for classes given in religious philosophy and Bible history. Approved by the state board they were as follows:

¹⁰¹ Gary A. Anderson, “A Historical Survey of the Full-Time Institutes of Religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1926-1966.” (PhD. diss., Brigham Young University, 1966), 46.

¹⁰² William E. Berrett, *A Miracle*, 57.

¹⁰³ Ward H. Magleby, “1926, Another Beginning, Moscow, Idaho,” *Impact*, Winter 1968, p. 23.

CONDITIONS

1. That courses in religious education submitted for credit in the University of Idaho shall be offered in Moscow by an incorporated organization which assumes full responsibility for the selection of its instructors and the maintenance of its physical plant adequate for instruction of University grade.
2. That courses offered for University credit shall at all times conform to the following constitutional provision under which the University of Idaho operates: “No instruction either sectarian in religion or partisan in politics shall ever be allowed in any department of the university.”
3. That University elective credits of not to exceed eight semester hours may be allowed for such courses.
4. That students desiring to receive credit for such courses shall secure the consent of the dean of their college at the time of registration and that the number of credits for which they are registered be reduced so that the total number of credits taken, including those in religious education shall conform to university standards.
5. That credit for these courses be granted only upon the recommendation of the Committee on Advanced Standing.

STANDARDS

1. The instructor shall have a Master’s degree or its equivalent and shall possess such maturity of scholarship as it required for appointment to the position of full professor in the University of Idaho.
2. The courses offered shall conform to University standards in library requirements and in method and rigor of their conduct.
3. None but students enrolled in the University shall be admitted to these courses, or such other students as are rated by the Registrar of the University standing.
4. Classes in religious education shall conform to the University calendar and to University standards as to length of period.
5. Approval of courses in religious education shall not be granted until they are adequately financed and there is a likelihood of their permanency.
6. Approval of such courses shall be continued to foundations maintaining at least one instructor devoting not less than half time to such work.
7. The University reserves the right to assure itself from time to time that these conditions and standards are being met.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ J. Wyley Sessions, “The Latter-day Saint Institutes,” *The Improvement Era*, July 1935, pp. 412-413.

These standards set the precedent that the Church would attempt to meet the requirements and conditions of any university or college where an institute was established.¹⁰⁵

Joseph F. Merrill's Contributions

When Joseph Merrill took over Bennion's position, he immediately made his presence felt by trying to reign in the rising expenditures of the building project. Sessions would later recall, "The design was generally approved, but the size and cost could not escape criticism and concern, especially from Dr. Joseph F. Merrill who was now Church Commissioner of Education and the most economical, conservative General Authority of this dispensation. Not only Dr. Merrill but other important persons were concerned and this became an important question."¹⁰⁶ Feeling the crunch, Sessions made a personal appeal to Heber J. Grant, saying, "President Grant, I cannot go back to Moscow and build a little shanty at the University of Idaho." Grant expressed his own concerns at the building cost, but eventually decided to raise the budget since it would be near to the campus of the University, and would likely be the public face of the Church there.¹⁰⁷ Through a variety of private visits and personal haggling, Sessions was finally allowed a budget not to exceed sixty thousand dollars to build the Institute building.¹⁰⁸

As the new building neared completion the question naturally arose as to what the name of the new facility should be. A non-member, Jay G. Eldridge, Professor of German Language and Literature and long-time Dean of the Faculty watched the building being erected. One day when the building was almost finished, Dr. Eldridge asked; "What is this institution called? I suggest it be named the Latter-day Saints Institute of Religion."

¹⁰⁵ Bell, *Adam S. Bennion*, 96.

¹⁰⁶ J. Wyley Sessions, *J. Wyley Sessions Remembrance*, UA 156, box 2, folder 5, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT.

¹⁰⁷ Magleby, "1926," 23.

¹⁰⁸ Magleby, "1926," 23.

This suggested name was sent to Merrill, who soon replied by addressing a letter to the “Director of the Latter-day Saint Institute of Religion at Moscow, Idaho.” The mailman knew where to deliver the letter, and designation “Institute” has been in use ever since.¹⁰⁹

Establishing Institute Curriculum

Merrill wrote to Sessions in June 1928, giving him instructions to organize a Sunday School for university students once the building was completed. He also suggested special curriculum tailored specifically for the college students. Merrill wrote:

The primary purpose of this Sunday School could be to enable students to become settled in their faith by harmonizing and reconciling the truth of the Gospel with the truths of science and scholarship that they are learning in college. We shall have experts in the fields of biology, psychology, philosophy, etc., outline accepted theories in their respective fields with the facts upon which these theories are based and thus attempt to show that there is no irreconcilable conflict between scientific truths and religious truths. “Truth is truth where’ere tis found; on Christian or on heathen ground.” This would be the fundamental purpose of the courses of lectures in the Sunday School. We suggest that you proceed to arrange a course to cover thirty or more lectures for the Moscow Sunday School.¹¹⁰

Daytime Institute classes were set to begin in the fall of 1928. However, Sessions still felt unsure as to what curriculum for Institute would use. On July 24, 1928 he wrote to Merrill expressing these concerns. “I have been working on a plan for the organization for our Institute and the courses we should offer in our weekday classes. I confess that the building of a curriculum for such an institution has worried me a lot and it is a job that I feel unqualified for.”

Merrill’s reply two days later helped establish the basic philosophy of LDS Institutes of Religion:

¹⁰⁹ *Moscow Institute of Religion Memory Book 2001*, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

¹¹⁰ Magleby, “1926,” 27.

In this collegiate seminary work we are, of course, starting on a new thing in the Church. But if we keep the objective clearly in mind it may be helpful. And may I say that this objective, as I see it, is to enable our young people attending the colleges to make the necessary adjustments between the things they have been taught in the Church and the things they are learning in the university, to enable them to become firmly settled in their faith as members of the Church. The big question, then, is what means and methods can be employed to help them to make these reconciliations and adjustments. The primary purpose, therefore, is not to teach them theology. It is not to prepare them for seminary teachers or preachers of the Gospel. We should, therefore, continually hold before our minds that we want to hold them in the Church, make them active, intelligent, sincere, Latter-day Saints. We want to keep them from growing cold in the faith and indifferent to their obligations as Church members. We want to help them to see that it is perfectly reasonable and logical to be really sincere Latter-day Saints.

Now then, of course you know that to keep one interested in any cause, he should be more or less active in that cause. And you know that when our young people go to college and study science and philosophy in all their branches, that they are inclined to become materialistic, to forget God, and to believe that the knowledge of men is all-sufficient; further, that modern scholarship is thought to reveal many crudities and absurdities in our religious faith, that the theories of evolution in all its phases makes religious truths appear as crude absurdities. Can the truths of science and philosophy be reconciled with religious truths? If so, can our young people be led to make these reconciliations? These are questions and lines of thought that indicate our problem.

Personally, I am convinced that religion is as reasonable as science; that religious truth and scientific truths nowhere are in conflict; that there is one great unifying purpose extending throughout all creation; that we are living in a wonderful, though at the present time deeply mysterious, world; and that there is an all-wise, all-powerful Creator back of it all. Can this same faith be developed in the minds of all our collegiate and university students? Our collegiate institutes are established as means to this end.¹¹¹

Such an emphasis on reconciling religious faith with scientific reasoning is clearly in line with the controversies of that time. Historian Leonard Arrington noted:

To understand the founding of the Institute system it is necessary to recall that the early twenties were marked by the rising reputation of science and the decline of the influence and power of the churches. Scientists were taking over the study and interpretation of the Bible by means of the 'Higher Criticism.' Social scientists were endeavoring to provide a new

¹¹¹ Ibid., 31-32.

‘scientific ethic,’ while behavioristic psychology was replacing sacred and philosophical literature in the study of man.¹¹²

The founding of the Moscow Institute was only three years removed from the infamous Scopes trial,¹¹³ and the culture wars between the advocates of science and those who saw these theories as threats to religious thought had been raging for years.

From his writings, it was clear that Merrill intended for Institute to provide the necessary mediation between the two sides of these intellectual struggles. He repeatedly stressed the idea that truth could be found in many sources and that ultimately science and religion could co-exist in harmony. He would later write, “Rightly viewed and interpreted, do you think there can be any conflict between the facts of science and the truths of religion? Assuredly there can be no conflict between two truths. But certainly there have been severe conflicts between interpretations of facts of science and some teachings of religionists.”¹¹⁴ As a scholar existing with one foot planted firmly in the realm of science and the other in the field of religion, Merrill seemed the ideal person to determine what would be taught in the new institution.

Merrill’s feelings in this matter had stemmed from his experience as a college educator. He had seen many students become enthralled with the intellectual atmosphere of the university setting, only to have it undermine their faith. Recognizing that faith was a personal matter, he felt it was imperative for the Church to provide the necessary guidance to allow students to harmonize their religious beliefs and their secular education. He remarked:

¹¹² Leonard J. Arrington, “The Founding of the LDS Institutes of Religion,” *Dialogue*, Vol. 2, No. 2, (Summer 1967), 139-140,

¹¹³ Brought before a Tennessee court in 1925, the Scopes trial defended the legality of a Tennessee statute making it unlawful to teach any theory of creation contradicting the Biblical account. It focused national attention on the theory of evolution and spurred national debates on the topic. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 24:399-400.

¹¹⁴ Joseph F. Merrill, *The Truth Seeker and Mormonism*, (Salt Lake City: Zion’s Press, 1946), 18.

For several years there has been growing in me a feeling that we ought to be more and more diligent in our work, particularly with our young people. I have been laboring for many years with young people, many of whom have been more or less critical, many of whom have grown indifferent to the Church; some of whom have left the Church. I have felt that if there is anything possible that I can do, that we can do for them, to save them, it ought to be done, because in their veins flows the blood of Israel. But if they are to be saved they must save themselves, through our help and through the guidance that we can give them. No one can save another. He must save himself.¹¹⁵

Sentiments like Merrill's were common among many scholars of the period as well. When the institute at Pocatello, Idaho, was dedicated, F.J. Kelly, President of the University of Idaho, wrote to express his opinion of the program, and to urge other churches to engage in similar ventures:

Public education in America has been separated from religious education on the theory that the church and state must be kept entirely apart. It has never been the thought of public spirited citizens of the United States that religious education was not a necessary part of the all-round education of her citizens.

With the rapid growth of secular education the problem has become somewhat acute and some people have jumped to the conclusion that there was no longer any place for religious education in the American scheme of training. To my way of thinking this is an entirely false conclusion. American must always find a place for religious training in the all-round scheme of education.

The churches are the agencies through which religious instruction should be given. . . All the great churches should recognize their responsibility at state supported colleges and universities. These church institutions should be recognized as an intrinsic part of the educational scheme and the universities should incorporate their activities as far as possible in the general scheme of student life.¹¹⁶

The institute was dedicated in a ceremony held on September 25, 1928. Merrill attended the ceremony along with President Charles W. Nibley of the First Presidency. The university also agreed to grant credit for institute courses taken, barring those

¹¹⁵ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, Oct. 1931, 36.

¹¹⁶ CES Resource File, CR 102 174: Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

specifically sectarian in nature. After its opening the institute won widespread acclaim, not only from the University of Idaho, but also from other colleges throughout the Northwest. It was visited several times by Ernest O. Holland, President of Washington State College. At a meeting of the Washington State Teacher's Association he told more than a thousand educators that the Institute had come nearer to solving the problem of religious education for college students than any that he new about and advised them to visit it.¹¹⁷

Expanding the Institute Program

Even while the Moscow Institute was being built, the decision was made to move forward with Institutes in other locations. In a meeting of the Church General Board of Education on February 29, 1928, the decision to establish an Institute at the Utah Agricultural College in Logan was discussed. Eight stake presidents near Logan wrote the Church to request an Institute near the college. The situation was different from the Moscow Institute, where the University had specifically asked for the program. Outside of "Mormon Country" the Church's efforts to establish institutes proceeded smoothly. However, inside Utah, where memory still existed of the long battles between the Church and secular schools, Merrill faced more of an uphill battle. Some of the members of the board, among them Adam S. Bennion and Merrill, wondered if the board of trustees for the Utah Agricultural College or its faculty would be accepting of an institute and would allow college credit. In a meeting held on March 21, 1928 the decision was reached that the Church should move forward on the construction of buildings at the Utah Agricultural College and the University of Utah as soon as possible.

¹¹⁷ Arrington, "Latter-day Saint Institutes", 143.

Efforts to establish an institute at the University of Utah were more difficult. Arthur L. Beeley, a professor at the school, was selected by the advisory committee to be the first institute teacher at the university. On April 24, Merrill reported that he had talked with George Thomas, president of the university, about the establishment of an institute there and employing Beeley as the teacher. Thomas objected to employing any member of the University's faculty at the institute. He also rejected the request to grant credit for Old and New Testament studies. In his study, A. Gary Anderson felt this may have stemmed from the fact that the University had just been accredited, and Thomas may have feared they might lose their accreditation. Thomas felt strongly that the institute should strive to ensure the spiritual and social well being of the students and not worry about credit.¹¹⁸ These and other difficulties delayed opening the institute at the University of Utah for six years, until 1934.

At Logan preparations for an institute went more smoothly. In April 1928 Merrill reported that the site of the institute would be donated by local people, greatly cutting costs.¹¹⁹ In June 1928 the First Presidency authorized fifty thousand dollars to construct an institute building. Sterling B. Talmage and W.W. Henderson, faculty members at the agricultural college, were approached to serve as the teachers at this institute, but both declined. After the board agreed that Henderson was the right man to head the institute, Stephen L Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles met with him personally. The board gave its permission to offer Henderson five hundred dollars above his regular pay at the agricultural college, if necessary, and specified that he would only be employed for

¹¹⁸ Anderson, "Full-Time Institutes," 160.

¹¹⁹ "Minutes of the Executive Committee of the General Board of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," CR 102 33, Church Archives, SLC. Cited in Miller, William Peter Miller, *Weber College 1888-1993*, 1975 MSS 7643, 1975, Church Archives, SLC, 37.

one year. With these new conditions in mind, Henderson agreed to take the position. A budget of two thousand dollars was approved for the facility's maintenance. Upon Merrill's request, a small fee was required of students attending the institute. Henderson opened the institute in the fall of 1929.¹²⁰ Six years later, the first group to complete a four-year course of study and graduate from the new institution received their diplomas from the Logan Institute. The graduation was seen as such a significant event that President Heber J. Grant personally attended and spoke at the ceremony.¹²¹

In January 1929 at a meeting of the advisory committee, Merrill recommended the establishment of another Institute in Pocatello, Idaho, near the southern branch of the University of Idaho. At the next meeting of the board, the Church approved an expenditure of twenty-five thousand dollars to construct a building.¹²² After spending four years in Moscow, J. Wyley Sessions and his family were relocated to Pocatello to oversee the launching of this new institute.

As the program grew and expanded, issues arose regarding the nature of the institute program. When Thomas C. Romney, Director of the Logan Institute, wrote the board requesting permission to teach a course in higher criticism of the Bible, the board decided that it would be unwise to offer a course with that title. The board also decided to use the institute buildings as much as possible for the benefit of the students at the schools they belonged to, but to discourage use by other Church organizations. Eventually it was decided to charge other Church organizations to use institute buildings.¹²³

¹²⁰ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 52-53.

¹²¹ Arrington, "Latter-day Saint Institutes," 143.

¹²² Berrett, *A Miracle*, 53.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

During his time as Commissioner, Merrill also visited the University of Wyoming, where authorities had expressed interest in having an institute built. Merrill reported that of the roughly fifteen hundred students, only seventy-five were Latter-day Saints. Negotiations continued, and an institute was established in 1935, after Merrill's service as Commissioner came to an end.¹²⁴

During Merrill's service requests were made and work begun on establishing institutes at the Northern Arizona Teachers College at Flagstaff, University of Arizona, Tucson, and at Southern Arizona Teacher's College at Tempe.¹²⁵ All of these institutes were eventually built and still function today.

Defending and Justifying the Institute Program

Merrill's work as Commissioner consisted not only of making arrangements for and building of institutes, but also explaining the purposes and reasons for the Church move to establish this new system of education. Most of Merrill's work with institute was carried out as the United State slipped into the Great Depression. Merrill felt a duty to explain to the Church members and the communities where institutes were built why he had authorized new expenditures while the Saints struggled financially. The Church Department of Education published his address at the dedication of the Pocatello Institute as a way of explaining this new drive in education.

In the address Merrill began by giving a brief history of the LDS educational system, and then launches directly into answering the "why?" behind the creation of the institute program. His responses form an interesting mix of the practical and the

¹²⁴ Ibid., 53, 224.

¹²⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to Arthur J. Hansen, Salt Lake City, April 25, 1932, Joseph F. Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

idealistic, true to the Church's long-standing tradition of mixing the temporal and spiritual.

His first reason for the institutes was an appeal to the cost-effectiveness of this form of education. He states:

Latter-day Saints . . . believe in schools and are ready to make sacrifices, if need be, to establish and maintain them. They believe not only in a training in secular subjects, but also in a religious education. However, they have no money to waste or spend unnecessarily. Hence to them for many reasons the wise and proper thing to do is to give support to the public school system from the kindergarten to the university, and then, in addition provide facilities and opportunities for the training and instruction in the field of religion.¹²⁶

Merrill further stated the practical benefits of having LDS students attend public schools, among them the spirit of understanding promoted from having students of different faiths and traditions working together in the same schools. Merrill felt strongly that engagement and toleration served the Saints better than separatism and exclusiveness.

Next Merrill acknowledged that while the Saints were in agreement of the separation of Church and State in education, they also felt strongly that the teaching of religion was a key component in the creation of good citizens.

They [Latter-day Saints] are entirely agreeable to the policy of keeping the public school free from sectarian teachings. But in the seminary and entirely apart from the public school they seek the privilege of acquainting their young people with the Christian Bible, its lessons and teachings, and with Church history and doctrines. And they do this not so much because they want their children taught the fine points of a theology as that they want them taught the fundamentals of good citizenship and practical religion.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Joseph F. Merrill, "LDS Institutes and Why," *Improvement Era*, Dec. 1929, p. 135.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

All of these statements related in a general way to Church efforts in education. When Merrill spoke specifically of the purpose of institute, he spoke of the influence of the secular, questioning the environment of the collegiate setting, and the necessity of providing a steadying influence during this crucial time of development.

When students go to college they are faced with new problems, some of them disturbing to their religious faith. They hear, read, and are taught some things that seem in conflict with religious views previously held. What shall they do? Are adjustments possible? The Latter-day Saints are firm believers in the harmony of all truth. To them it is impossible that truths discovered in the realm of science and philosophy shall be in conflict with truths of religion. However, our understanding of what is truth is often faulty. The chaff often conceals the kernel. Dogmatism raises its arrogant hand and smothers clear thinking. College days are times when most young people need the aid and counsel and a steady guiding hand, though often they themselves do not know this. Yes, adjustments are possible. Religious faith need not retreat from nor surrender in any of the fields of research or learning. Scholarship can never put God out of existence nor find a substitute for Him. This is the abiding confidence of the Latter-day Saints.¹²⁸

Merrill's address concludes with a plea for other religions to establish similar schools of religion. He even extended an invitation for other religions to use the facilities in Pocatello for religious purposes for a nominal fee. He stated, "We are willing to do every feasible thing to save the youth of the land from being overwhelmed by the waves of infidelic and materialistic thought that are sweeping over the land."¹²⁹

Joseph F. Merrill and the Institute Program Today

Brought into office during a period of financial upheaval and shrinking resources, the launch of the institute program represented one of the few happy duties of Merrill's tenure as commissioner. For the most part his duties as commissioner were confined largely to the closure of schools, and consolidating of resources. Even phenomenal

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 137.

growth of the high school seminary program slowed down greatly due to the effects of the Great Depression. In institute he found expression for one of the dearest desires of his heart, seeing college students reconcile their belief in God with the growing understanding of the realms of science. His efforts at establishing institutes brought some challenges and setbacks, most notably at the University of Utah, his former professional home. At the same time, the birth of this new form of religious education expanded, grew, and came to represent a viable and hugely successful alternative to expensive Church schools. As of the 2004-05 school year, 367,034 students were enrolled in the institute program, as opposed to 44,005 at the remaining Church colleges and universities.¹³⁰ Simply put, over eight times as many students were receiving their religious education through the institute program than through Church schools.

Considering the much lower operating cost of the institutes, and the fact that in the last eight decades millions of Latter-day Saints have gained their spiritual education through the program, the immense value of the Institutes of Religion to the Church becomes clear.

The spiritual dividends of the Institute program have also been demonstrated. Elder L. Tom Perry, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, remarked in 1997, “The Church periodically measures the progress of the institute programs. This last year an institute study revealed the following: of those graduating from institute, 96 percent received temple endowments; 98 percent of those receiving their endowments had their marriages performed in the temple; 96 percent of the men graduating from institute

¹³⁰ This information accessed from www.lds.org (Dec. 5, 2006). Statistics for Church colleges and universities represent a combination of the Fall 2004 enrollment for Brigham Young University, its affiliate schools in Rexburg, Idaho and Laie, Hawaii, and the Latter-day Saint Business College in Salt Lake City, Utah.

served missions.”¹³¹ Perry testified of the role that Institute plays in the Church today: “There is a great blessing in having a knowledge of the gospel. And I know of no better place for the young people of the Church to gain a special knowledge of sacred things than in the institute and seminary programs of the Church.”¹³²

Merrill played a key role in launching this program in four ways. First, he was the originator of the released-time seminary program, which became in many ways the inspiration and prototype of the institute program. Second, he successfully oversaw the implementation and founding of the first handful of institutes, the founding organization of the rest of the program that would eventually be patterned. Third, he served a critical role in the development of institute curriculum and philosophy, much of which still remains in place today. Fourth, as commissioner he took it upon himself to explain the benefits and utility of this new venture to the leaders and membership of the Church and outside observers.

Conclusions and Summary

Institute represents a transitional project between the administrations of Adam S. Bennion and Joseph F. Merrill. Inspired by the success of the released-time seminary program, Bennion moved to set up collegiate-level seminaries at several colleges and universities. The first of these was established at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. Its successful establishment came in large measure from the efforts of the first Institute Director, J. Wyley Sessions. Merrill’s involvement came from his firm guiding hand over the project’s expenditures and his contributions to the development of the Institute’s curriculum.

¹³¹ L. Tom Perry, “What a Way to Grow,” *New Era*, Aug. 1998, 4.

¹³² *Ibid.*

With the successful establishment of the Moscow Institute, the program was expanded to other schools, among them the Utah State Agricultural College at Logan and the University of Idaho at Pocatello. During Merrill's tenure, efforts also began to establish institutes at the University of Utah and the University of Wyoming, which resulted in programs there after his release as Church Commissioner of Education.

Merrill acted as a major defender and proponent of the fledgling program. In public he spoke of the financial, civic, and spiritual benefits of the institutes. He strove to ensure that the program became accepted among Church members as a viable alternative to Church schools. Through his efforts, he helped the Institute program to establish itself and eventually expand to become the dominant mode of collegiate-level religious education in the Church.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTINUING THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHURCH EDUCATION

Among the most difficult and controversial duties assigned to Joseph F. Merrill as Church Commissioner of Education were his efforts to streamline and modernize the Church Educational System. This transformation was a painful and unpopular process, but a necessary one if educational expenses were to be brought under control. The First Presidency wasted no time informing Merrill of this responsibility. Almost immediately upon his succession to the position he was informed “that the policy of the Church was to eliminate Church schools as fast as circumstances would permit.”¹³³ Historian James R. Clark noted,

The minutes of the General Board of Education for the next five and one half years would show he faithfully tried to carry out these instructions, which he had received from President Heber J. Grant. In doing so he met frequently with State educational officers, State legislators and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction all towards the goal of having the State of Utah assume full responsibility for education at all levels formerly assumed by the LDS Church including higher education. This would leave the Church free to concentrate its entire educational budget of religious education.¹³⁴

Working against popular sentiment, the objections of some of the leading figures in the Church, and sometimes his own sentiments, Merrill diligently strove to accomplish this directive from the First Presidency and ensure the future of Church Education. He recognized the work before him to be almost overwhelming, but he had an keen desire to

¹³³ James R. Clark, “Church and State Relationships in Education in Utah,” (Ph.D. diss., Utah State University, 1958), pp. 441-442.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

carry out the wishes of those he saw as inspired of God. Only a few weeks into his service he wrote to Church President Heber J. Grant:

If my experience so far in this office is indicative of the future, it will be very necessary for me to remain in this office more than five and a half working days per week in order to do my work. We are so occupied by callers that many days we do not have time even to examine our mail during business hours, and so about the only opportunities so far we have had to do any work in the office has been after the building is closed. For many years I have found it necessary to work during Saturday afternoons and many times on legal holidays. My present position seems to indicate that I shall have to continue the same practice, one that I do not at all object to, although, of course, *I want to be in harmony with your desires.*¹³⁵

While Merrill held considerable experience, as well as strong opinions about the direction Church education should take, the main force behind his actions was a desire to carry out the wishes of the inspired leaders of the Church.

Ending the Religion Class Program

One of the first steps taken by Merrill was to end the Religion class program. The program began in 1890, but by the 1920s had been in competition with the Primary program for children's time. Both groups met on weekdays after school hours, both provided religious training, and attendance to both meetings was urged by Church leadership. As a result, children were spending two late afternoons away from home to accomplish essentially the same purpose. When junior high schools began to develop in Utah, many students in the seventh and eighth grades began to look on the religion classes as a function of elementary education, which seriously injured the program.¹³⁶

Realizing the primary and education departments were duplicating each other's work, Merrill moved quickly to consolidate Church efforts in this area. He made

¹³⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to Heber J. Grant, Feb. 27, 1928, Salt Lake City. Joseph F. Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 20, Folder 3, Special Collections, BYU, emphasis added.

¹³⁶ Clark, "Church and State," 41-42.

recommendations to the General Church Board of Education in March 1929, that divided duties of the Religion class program between the primary and the education department. The provisions suggested that, first, the primary take responsibility for the religious education of children from kindergarten to sixth grade, and withdraw from education in the junior high field, or grades seven to nine. The department of education would then move to establish junior seminaries to ensure the religious education of junior high students. Further, to ensure increased cooperation between the two organizations, two members of the General Board of Education would be appointed as advisors to the Primary General Board.¹³⁷

The First Presidency immediately accepted Merrill's recommendations, and sent out a letter in May 1929:

Please be advised that we have approved the recommendations of the General Church Board of Education that the Primary and Religion Classes of the Church for the children of the elementary grades of the public schools, kindergarten to the sixth grade inclusive, shall be consolidated and the work be carried on under the auspices of the Primary Association which, it has been decided, shall hereafter be known as the Primary-Religion Class of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This organization is given the responsibility of conducting week-day classes in religion for the children of these elementary grades, in general about ages five to twelve inclusive.

Further, the General Church Board of Education through the Department of Education is given the responsibility of conducting week-day religion class work for the children of the Church beginning with the seventh grade of our public schools, in general about ages twelve and up. These classes, it has been decided, shall be known as junior seminary classes.

The purpose of these approved recommendations is to insure harmony and cooperation in providing week-day religious instruction for all our children by making only one organization at a time responsible for week-day religion class work. It is hoped that you and all others concerned will heartily support the plan and aid in carrying it out. All reasonable efforts should be made to have all children of the Church attend, where feasible, a weekday, as well as a Sunday, class to receive religious instructions.

¹³⁷ Clark, "Church and State," 442-443.

Further information regarding the details of this suggested change may be had by applying to Joseph F. Merrill, Commissioner of Education, or Sister May Anderson, President of the Primary Association.¹³⁸

In taking these steps, Merrill continued the logical progression for the religion class program. A large measure of its autonomy had already vanished when its own board was discontinued, and brought under the umbrella of the seminary program. Even the title of the new organization, "Primary-Religion Classes," eventually returned to its original title.¹³⁹ Although the Religion Classes program represented a significant educational innovation on the part of the Church, and a worthy forerunner to the seminary and institute programs, its work was ready to be carried on by its successor programs.¹⁴⁰

Decision to Close the Junior Colleges

Much more difficult than the movement to eliminate the Elementary Religion Class program, Merrill had the unhappy duty of closing or transferring to the state most of the Church's junior colleges. By the time he took office, the movement was already well underway. The Brigham Young College in Logan closed in 1926, and negotiations were underway to transfer the rest of the schools to state control or, if necessary, close them. Even before he accepted the position of commissioner, Merrill asked for a clarification of what the Church's stance was regarding these schools. He would later recall in a letter to his brother:

When I was asked by the First Presidency if I would accept the position being vacated by Dr. Bennion, I asked for a statement of policy. They replied, 'We have concluded to spend all the money we can afford for education in the field of religious education.' My first duty would be

¹³⁸ James R. Clark ed., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 5:267-268.

¹³⁹ Brad Westwood, *An Administrative History of the Church Educational System (CES) 1888-1994*. MSS 2373, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

¹⁴⁰ For a more extensive history of the Religion Classes Program, see D. Michael Quinn, "Utah's Educational Innovation: LDS Religion Classes, 1890-1929," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 43, 1975, 239-395.

to eliminate the junior colleges from the Church School system, just as the B.Y.C. had been eliminated a year and half before, and to promote the extension of the seminary system, just as widely as our means would permit. I told them I was in hearty sympathy with extending the seminary system, that as a matter of fact I spearheaded, as a member of the Granite Stake Presidency, the establishment of the first seminary in the church according to the plan still in operation . . . The First Presidency told me that this was the plan they would like to see followed. But the junior colleges were to be closed.¹⁴¹

The directions from the First Presidency were clear. Before he could move forward, however, Merrill sought a clear consensus from the General Board of Education concerning the matter. Wasting no time, he raised the question at his second meeting with the General Board after assuming the post of Commissioner. Merrill wanted a concrete statement of policy from the Board about the future of the junior colleges. During the meeting, movements about the time for the state to take over the functions of junior colleges in Utah, Idaho and Arizona were discussed. The hopes some board members were raised that the schools might not be eliminated altogether, but perhaps transferred to state control and continued. Merrill was directed to work towards conversion taking place in both states as quickly as possible.¹⁴²

Immediately Merrill began writing to members of the State Superintendent's committee for the study of junior colleges. He wrote to one, saying he felt that junior colleges were "the next step in the advance in our educational development in the state."¹⁴³ From the surviving letters emerge Merrill's motives in pushing for such a rapid transfer to the state: he did not want any of the schools to close, he wanted them to continue under state control. Members of the General Board agreed. On January 17,

¹⁴¹ Joseph F. Merrill to Amos N. Merrill, Salt Lake City, Dec. 13, 1951, Joseph Francis Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 4, Folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁴² Miller, 31.

¹⁴³ Joseph F. Merrill to D.C. Woodward, Salt Lake City, May 21, 1928, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

1929 a resolution was unanimously passed in which the Board stated, “We favor the establishment of junior colleges under public auspices and the enactment of the legislation necessary to accomplish this end.”¹⁴⁴

The school in the most danger was the Latter-day Saint College, located in the middle of Salt Lake City. Merrill’s plan appears to have been to make the college an auxiliary of the University of Utah, thus ensuring its continuation. He wrote to several legislators expressing his plan. To Edward H. Snow, a member of the state Board of Equalization, he wrote:

I think the outstanding practical point I make is that we can convert the LDS College temporarily into an auxiliary of the University of Utah, where we can do first year college work on the University plane, without any cost to the state. This expense, then that the State would have to bear, might be put into a fund for the taking over of one or two of our junior colleges. Thus the state will be saved any additional expense at the present time and the whole movement can get a start.

As I told you, we are graduating 550 students at the LDS College next year, all of whom will meet the entrance requirements at the University of Utah. Shall we dump them on to the overcrowded University, or with the University’s approval, shall we keep them and enable the money that would be appropriated to the University for them to be given to the junior college cause elsewhere, enabling the public to educate twice as many with the same money as would be educated at the University.¹⁴⁵

The letter concludes on a cautionary note, with Merrill informing Snow if the offer was not accepted he would be forced to recommend the immediate elimination of all junior college work at LDS College, thus depriving the state of a valuable resource.

Whether or not Merrill actually intended to do this, or was simply trying to give the state a motive to move quickly, cannot be told. When the state rejected the offer, a portion of

¹⁴⁴ Joseph F. Merrill to C.H. Skidmore, Salt Lake City, Feb. 1, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁴⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to Edward H. Snow, Salt Lake City, Jan. 28, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

the school's collegiate department survived, and eventually became LDS Business College.¹⁴⁶

While trying to save at least a portion of the LDS College, Merrill found himself engaged in an intense campaign to manage a successful transfer of the rest of the Church junior colleges to the state. February 1929 witnessed a flurry of activity on his part to persuade legislators to take over control of the schools. By this time there were two bills before the legislature that could bring about a successful transfer of the Church schools to state control. The first, the Candland Bill, favored a takeover of the junior colleges, making them independent, locally controlled institutions. The second, the Hollingsworth Bill, would reorganize Snow and Weber Colleges as branches of the University of Utah. Merrill favored the Candland Bill, feeling it would be more economical and beneficial in the long run to keep the schools independent.¹⁴⁷

Undermining his efforts, however, was a general feeling among the legislators that the Church was not serious or united concerning his efforts to transfer or close the schools. In a letter dated February 1, 1929, he wrote to one school official to dampen rumors of division between the general board and the Church Department of Education on the issue. He wrote, quoting directly from the minutes of the General Board's decision, unequivocally giving the position of the Department of Education. "The attitude of the Department of Education is one of extreme friendliness to the enactment of junior college legislation. We have told the Governor that this Department would

¹⁴⁶ A. Gary Anderson, "A Historical Survey of the Full-Time Institutes of Religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1926-1966," Ph.D. diss, Brigham Young University, 1968, 138-9.

¹⁴⁷ Joseph F. Merrill to A. P. Bigelow, Salt Lake City, March 27, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

cooperate one hundred percent with the State in making it possible for the State to begin this movement without additional revenues or further delay.”¹⁴⁸

The next day an editorial was published in the *Deseret News* announcing the closure of two schools and urging the state to take action not to waste the opportunity to take the schools:

The General Church Board of Education at a meeting Wednesday afternoon decided to close at least two of the Church junior colleges in Utah on or before June 15th, 1930.

When the Brigham Young College was closed in June 1926 it was understood in the Board that it had entered upon a policy of withdrawing from the junior college field. No school has been closed since that time, largely because there were no provisions in law for the establishment of junior colleges under public auspices. But the feeling has been growing that changing conditions force the closing of other schools in the immediate future. . . .

. . . The Church Commissioner of Education has proposed a plan of cooperation to the State and the University, enabling the Church to withdraw gradually from the junior college field, to avoid throwing the full burden upon the public school system all at once and to avoid the immediate need of additional state revenues to support junior college works as per the Caudland bill.

But it has been objected that the public had insufficient data and that a commission should be appointed to study the junior college question. Of course this proposition was made only to stall progress. There is available all the data needed. The Church is maintaining both types of junior colleges – the two-year and the four-year types. No one can successfully hold that there is not available ample data as to the feasibility of either type of junior college. *The question is does the public care to take advantage of the successful pioneer work in this field done by the Church?*¹⁴⁹

At this point Merrill began to experience resistance from the legislature. The Church was not the only organization experiencing financial difficulties. The 1920s were a difficult period economically for Utah as the state struggled to recover from a post-war

¹⁴⁸ Joseph F. Merrill to C. H. Skidmore, Salt Lake City, Feb. 1, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁴⁹ *Deseret News* Editorial, Feb. 2, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 11, Folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU, emphasis added.

economic slump. Thomas Alexander would refer to this period as the “Little Depression.”¹⁵⁰ The onset of the Great Depression, only months away, would make things worse. Many in the state legislature felt it was the wrong time for the state to launch a junior college system. On February 8, 1929, Merrill received a letter from state senator C. R. Hollingsworth expressing sympathy toward his desires, but also stating that the financial condition of the state would not permit the establishment of junior colleges at the time. Merrill wrote a lengthy reply two days later, reassuring the senator of the plan’s feasibility and desirability. He also expressed his personal sentiments that he was acting for the good of the state, not just for the Church’s benefit.

Again, may I advise that I look at our educational problems in Utah now from exactly the same point of view and with the same motives that I have always looked at them. On leaving the University a year ago I told President Thomas that I thought I could do the University and public education in Utah more good by coming to my present position than I could be remaining longer at the University. I have always thought that there was an absurdity in the Church and State competing in the educational field. The ideal condition, I think, is one in which everybody supports the public school system from A to Z, from kindergarten to the university. Therefore, like my predecessor, Dr. Bennion, I am very desirous of getting the Church out of the field of secular education in which I do not believe it belongs.¹⁵¹

Merrill further stated his desire to assist the program, though he recognized he was serving in a private position and did not want to make himself “obnoxious.” He then made a request to personally meet with the legislative committees on the question to explain how the program could be carried out with a minimum of cost.¹⁵²

While Merrill still maintained a cordial tone in his letters, as the opposition mounted he became more direct. Writing to the superintendent of schools in Ogden, he

¹⁵⁰ Thomas G. Alexander, *Utah: The Right Place*, (Salt Lake: Gibbs, Smith, 2003), 276, 302.

¹⁵¹ Joseph F. Merrill to C. R. Hollingsworth, Salt Lake City, Feb. 6, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

plainly stated, “If Ogden does not care to have a junior college, the neutral attitude is exactly the one to take, but please be advised that the days of maintenance of Weber College by the LDS Church are probably numbered.” He went on to say, “Personally, I am anxious to do all I can to avoid a condition in which Ogden will be without a junior college, but I cannot avoid this condition single-handed.” Retaining a friendly tone, he ended the letter with what could only be considered a forceful warning. “You will observe . . . that we are doing all in our power to make favorable the passing of the Candland Bill. It is now up to the University, and to the Legislature. In any case, this Department is going ahead eliminating junior colleges. Of course we would greatly prefer to eliminate only when the public is ready to begin, but we are serving notice of our intentions. Does Ogden want a junior college? If so, my suggestion is that Ogden get its coat off and go to work.”¹⁵³

It may be noted that Merrill’s style was markedly different from his predecessor, Adam S. Bennion. Even colleagues in the department noted that Merrill lacked the “liberal warmth and perspective” Bennion possessed.¹⁵⁴ Bennion was an English literature major, and an eloquent speaker and writer. While Merrill could be eloquent, he saw himself as a scientist, and communicated best through blunt facts. Even his public speeches were filled with more honest, plain statements than rhetorical flourish. Merrill may also have been expressing a desire to let the educational community and legislature know there was a new commissioner and the Church was ready to do what was necessary to reach its aims. Whatever the reason, the language was about to become more direct.

¹⁵³ Joseph F. Merrill to W. Karl Hopkins, Salt Lake City, Feb. 9, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁵⁴ Russell V. Swensen Interview, Sept. 13, 1978, interviewed by Mark K. Allen, UA OH 32, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

Merrill apparently met with the state committee and received skepticism from them when he explained the details of the plan. Merrill wanted the state to know in no uncertain terms the Church was serious about its offer. He later wrote privately to Senator Hollingsworth expressing his frustration with the reception the legislators gave to his presentation:

But may I say for your private information, in answer to the statements thrown about the committee room and among the legislators that I was speaking without authority when I suggested that junior colleges under Church auspices would be short-lived institutions, that it has been decided that in any case, whether the Legislature acts or does not, that Weber College under Church auspices will go out of existence at the end of the next school year, June 1930. Some others of our junior colleges will also pass out of existence on or before that date.

The offer I made to the Governor and the University on behalf of this Department, that we would cooperate fully to enable the State to begin support of junior colleges outside of Salt Lake City, has been treated very lightly, almost scoffingly. If this Legislature does not act, the date of closing will be hastened. In the Church colleges there are now enrolled approximately fourteen hundred junior college students. *I am telling you only the plain truth when I say the Church will not longer carry this burden and it will drop it much sooner than otherwise if the University and the State do not care to accept our offer.*¹⁵⁵

Clarifying the Church Position on the Junior Colleges

Part of Merrill's frustrations may have stemmed from the fact that while he was defending the Church's solidarity in divesting itself of the schools, there was still a lack of clarity among the General Board about what should be done. While the way forward existed clearly in Merrill's mind, there still remained some confusion as to how the policy should be carried out.

¹⁵⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to C.R. Hollingsworth, Salt Lake City, Feb. 14, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 1, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU, emphasis added.

In a letter to Anthony W. Ivins, a member of the First Presidency, Merrill expressed some frustration over the nebulous nature of the policy and a desire to clearly understand what direction the Church wanted to move in. He wrote:

When I have asked the Presidency what the policy is with respect to our schools, President Grant has asked me to read the minutes. He says I would find it all written up in the book. I have carefully gone through the minutes and find that the matter of policy with respect to the schools was considered in a series of meetings held during March 23, 1926. I find among other things that President Nibley is recorded as having said:

It is easier to formulate some policy with three or four than with twenty. Let us form some definite policy and work to that end. If it is to establish seminaries, let us establish them. If it is to go and continue and compete with the public schools, why let us go ahead, but the main thing is to get some definite policy for the future. I make this suggestion as a motion.

The motion was then seconded by Brother Clawson and carried unanimously.¹⁵⁶

Merrill took Nibley's statement that the policy should be formed by "three or four" men to designate his own office along with the First Presidency. However, he was surprised to find members of the General Board of Education still making suggestions on the matter. In the same letter he went on to state:

Brother McKay recently submitted a document relative to the maintenance of our schools to the Presidency. Since the meeting of the General Board I have met with President Nibley, who asked me not to let Brother McKay swerve me from the plan of eliminating some more of our schools. The day before he left for California I went to see President Grant, who told me that the Church did not have the money to continue the schools and the development of seminaries. I told him in some detail of what I had written to the Governor and others, of talks I had had, and so on. He approved the suggestion that we should work to eliminate more of our schools. Brother Stephen L. Richards tells me that he is sure that Brother McKay will support us when we have a specific recommendation to make concerning further elimination. I have felt, therefore, that I am expected to work toward further elimination; so I have been doing it.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Joseph F. Merrill to Anthony W. Ivins, Salt Lake City, Feb. 1, 1929, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

As indicated in the letter, a complete sense of unity concerning the policy had not yet been achieved. Undoubtedly, David O. McKay, a member of the Church's governing body of Twelve Apostles, was the most determined advocate of the continuation of Church schools. At the same time the First Presidency seemed to be pushing for elimination as soon as possible. Merrill's own feeling at the time seemed to be in favor of elimination of some schools, but his tone was one of caution. In a letter from this time he wrote, "The field of education is so extensive that every dollar that the Church can spare for educational purposes must be used for religious education . . . But in all of our planning I believe we should keep in mind what is wise, economical, and best."¹⁵⁸

While Merrill was a strong proponent of the seminary system, it appears that he did not favor the total elimination of all Church schools, especially Brigham Young University. Before he assumed the post as commissioner he wrote in a letter to Franklin S. Harris, the President of BYU, "If my views can be approved by the Board you will have, I think, no reason to regret my recent appointment."¹⁵⁹

All of these different forces came to a head in a critical meeting of the General Board of Education held February 20, 1929. The majority of the meeting was devoted to answering Merrill's question, "Shall Weber and at least one other junior college be closed on or before June 15, 1930?" Merrill began by informing the Board of his efforts to eliminate Church schools, but that he found it difficult to eliminate schools without depriving the people of the advantages junior colleges could bring. The only alternative was to have the state take over the junior colleges, but Merrill felt that the legislature

¹⁵⁸ Joseph F. Merrill to O.W. Adams, Salt Lake City, July 26, 1928, Joseph Francis Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 4, Folder 2, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁵⁹ Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, Salt Lake City, Dec. 28, 1927, Harris Presidential Papers. Cited in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 5 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 2:85.

would not take the Church seriously unless the Church announced the closing of one or more of the junior colleges. Otherwise, the legislature would assume that the Church would maintain the colleges indefinitely, even if the state never took them over. Merrill felt a clear sign of intention might shock the legislature into taking action on the school issue.

At this point, Anthony Ivins chimed into the discussion, declaring it was his understanding that Church policy was to close the schools as quickly as possible in favor of seminaries and institutes. At the same time, he recognized there was confusion on the subject, and requested the Board secretary read the minutes to see if a decision had actually been reached. A brief reading of the minutes showed that several meetings had been devoted to the subject, but the final word in the matter had been deferred to the First Presidency. Upon hearing that, Merrill asked President Heber J. Grant for a clear statement of policy, who replied that it was Church policy to close the schools as quickly as possible.

This seemed to settle the matter until President Ivins asked if there was any understanding to the contrary. At this point David O. McKay spoke up, declaring he had read the Board minutes and found no action establishing such a policy. If such a policy did exist, it came into being by an act of the First Presidency and not the Board. Grant replied that a series of discussions had been held, resulting in the closure of the Brigham Young College, and the college's closure clearly settled the question. President Charles Nibley restated the financial benefits of seminary system over the Church schools, as well as the belief held by some board members that the religious instruction in seminaries was better than in Church schools, though he acknowledged they could never fully replace the

schools. At this point McKay cut to heart of the matter, and stated that his understanding was that the policy applied to the Church high schools only and not the junior colleges or Brigham Young University.¹⁶⁰

Considering the fact that Merrill had been working to transfer or close the junior colleges for an entire year, it seems as though this discussion was taking place *after* the crucial decisions had already been made. Though most Board minutes from this time are currently restricted to researchers, it seems clear that by February 1929 the Board had not given anything more than an understanding that the general goal was to eliminate some Church schools. How far the Board was willing to take this policy and just how many schools should be eliminated had never been decided. The Church Commissioner and First Presidency had acted independent of the Board to this point, but it was evident that a united decision from the Board was necessary to take such a monumental step as the closing junior colleges. Any decision made to that effect would have a huge impact on the future direction of Church education. For McKay the stakes were personal. He had served as principal of the Weber academy before it became a junior college, and always maintained close ties to the school.¹⁶¹ The thought of closing an institution so close to his heart may have been what spurred him into action.

Grant declared that the policy covered all Church schools. Even BYU would eventually have to be considered for closing or transfer, just as the junior colleges were now taking steps in that direction. Seeking confirmation he asked Adam S. Bennion, who had retained his position as a Board member, what his opinion was. Bennion replied

¹⁶⁰ William E. Berrett, CES History Resource Files, 1899-1985, CR 102 174, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

¹⁶¹ See Jeanette McKay Morrell, *Highlights in the Life of President David O. McKay*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966, 56-57.

in his understanding that the Presidency had wished for all of the schools to close. To that end, he had prepared plans for an eventual closure of all schools, including BYU. Grant expressed his feeling that it “almost breaks one’s heart” to think of closing the schools after they had accomplished so much good, but Church finances simply could no longer support them.

At this point Stephen L Richards moved for the Board to officially sustain and approve the decision of the Presidency in order to clarify the record. McKay spoke in opposition, stating he did not wish to be considered as not sustaining the First Presidency, but he could not vote in favor of eliminating the Church colleges. The motion was seconded by President Ivins and carried.

Grant then addressed Merrill’s specific question, stating, “You can put it down that unless we definitely announce that some of these schools are to be closed at a certain time and then stand by that decision, the state will take no action. If we do not carry out the terms of our announcement we shall be considered as merely ‘bluffing’ and shall not be taken seriously in further eliminations.”¹⁶²

In regards to what schools would be closing, Stephen L Richards questioned whether they should specifically name any schools in connection with closing. He suggested simply stating that at least two junior colleges would be closed by June 15, 1930. The motion was seconded by Joseph Fielding Smith, and carried, with David O. McKay dissenting.

At this point McKay expressed his reasons he was opposed to any movements to close the remaining Church schools. He felt that school closures would cause the Church to lose control over the training of teachers. In his opinion it would be better to slow the

¹⁶² Berrett, CES History Resource File.

growth of the seminary program, in favor of retaining the junior colleges. He also felt that the seminaries and institutes were still largely untested, with more time being required to show them to be a suitable replacement for the schools. Finally, he deemed it necessary to consult the local people and win them over to any program before the Church made any decisions.¹⁶³

While Merrill left the meeting with the clarification he had been seeking, he may have gotten more than he hoped for. For example, it is clear that he never favored the total closure of BYU, even though he was now under orders to work towards closing the school. Merrill's firm desire was to transfer the schools, not to close them entirely. However, in spite of his feelings he worked diligently towards that end for the rest of his tenure as commissioner.

Whatever his feelings, the Board decision gave Merrill some added leverage, which he immediately began exercising. In late February 1929 public announcement of closure of two schools by June 1930 was made. Merrill knew that the first school closed would be LDS College, and he threw his efforts into somehow saving it. Writing to Senator Alonzo Irvine, Merrill informed him that Weber College, Snow College, and LDS College were the three schools under consideration for closing. He again offered to give LDS College to the University of Utah, expressing his willingness to take 500 incoming freshman, a move that would save the state \$75,000 a year. He also reminded the senator of the low cost of the state taking over the physical facilities at Weber and Snow, compared to building colleges from scratch. He ended with another direct call to action. "If no junior college legislation is passed, the LDS College will be one of those closed by the end of the school year, and our opportunity to assist the State in this matter

¹⁶³ Berrett, CES History Resource File, 1899-1905.

will have passed. The above is plain statement of the facts in the case, and I think it is well that you should know them.”¹⁶⁴

Writing to other legislators, Merrill continued to press the Church’s need to divest itself of the schools. In a letter to Senator Ray E. Dillman, chairman of the Utah legislative committee on education, he stated, “The Church must now withdraw from the junior college field. It has, however, demonstrated the advisability, the feasibility, and the practicability of junior colleges. But the finances of the Church will not longer permit of a continuance of junior college maintenance. The State is distressed, but not so much as the Church is. . . There will be no turning back, however, from our decision to begin closing our junior colleges at the end of next year.”¹⁶⁵

Despite his best efforts, the legislature rejected Merrill’s offer. Senator Dillman, writing in reply, clarified the main reason, finances. With no possibility of the transfer taking place that year Merrill was forced to confront the possibility of closing the schools outright. Knowing a transfer might still be possible, he began working with the General Board to ensure the survival of the schools until the legislature could be persuaded to take over control. On April 1, 1929, he suggested to the Board that Weber and Snow colleges might be able to continue functioning if tuition was raised to charge the same fees as the University of Utah. Provisions were made to ensure the continuance of both schools until 1931. The tuition increase was enacted.

With steps taken to ensure the survival of the schools, Merrill began the battle again. Unfortunately Merrill’s papers do not document the legislative battles of the next

¹⁶⁴ Joseph F. Merrill to Alonzo Blair Irvine, Salt Lake City, Feb. 27, 1929. MSS 1540, Merrill Collection, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁶⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to Ray E. Dillman, Salt Lake City, March 1, 1929. MSS 1540, Merrill Collection, Box 5, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

few years as clearly as those crucial early battles of 1928-29, but a look at the end results reveal Merrill's tenacity and skill for negotiation. At the end of his tenure, all Church schools had survived, in one form or another. Of course, Merrill cannot be assigned sole credit for this. The survival of these schools is a tribute to the sacrifice and determination of the General Board members, and perhaps more importantly, the communities surrounding the schools. In some cases, Merrill was working for the closure of some smaller schools to ensure the survival of larger ones. He labored under the necessity of having to see the bigger picture, acting for the good of the entire system. He lacked the luxury of having one school to save, instead he was trying to radically alter and thus save an entire educational system. Merrill served during some of the most challenging years in Church education, and understood clearly that sacrifices might need to be made to ensure the continuation of the greater whole. However, considering the extreme tests he was confronted with, his results were remarkable. Examining these years, it is best to divide the schools into two categories, schools that remained under Church control, and schools that survived but came under state control.

Schools Remaining Under Church Control

In spite of the directive given on February 20, 1929 that all Church schools would be considered for closure, it seems clear Merrill never intended to eliminate all schools. At the end of his service, the schools remaining were Brigham Young University, Ricks College, LDS Business College, and Juarez Academy in Mexico. Each of these schools remained under Church control for varied reasons.

Brigham Young University. Though he was willing to carry out the Board's wishes, Merrill was reticent about the closure of BYU. The day after the meeting, Merrill

wrote to Thomas N. Taylor, chairman of the Executive Committee of the BYU Board of Trustees, expressing his desire to keep BYU open.

At the Board meeting yesterday it was not definitely stated so, but it seemed to be the minds of most of those present that the BYU as a whole be included in the closing movement; and that is specially the reason why I am writing you. My own hope and fondest desire that we may retain the BYU as a senior and graduate institution, eliminating its junior college work, and make the University outstanding, a credit to the Church, and a highly serviceable and necessary institution. But whether or not this can be done or not will, or course, depend on conditions.¹⁶⁶

Franklin S. Harris, president of BYU at the time, had the impression that Merrill wanted to turn the school into a graduate institution, modeled after Johns Hopkins University.¹⁶⁷ Merrill himself never specified his plans, but it is clear he never intended to close the school. In 1930 he wrote Harris, “As I have told you before, I think it is perfectly feasible and logical to make the BYU the most outstanding institution between the Mississippi and the Pacific coast.”¹⁶⁸ In an article written for the *Deseret News*, Merrill staunchly defended the need for a Church university, though he seemed to feel its primary purpose, among other things, should be the training of seminary teachers. He wrote,

A university is an essential unit in our seminary systems. For our seminary teachers must be specially trained for their work. The Brigham Young University is our training school.

We need in the Church a group of scholars learned in history, science, and philosophy, scholars of standing and ability who are interpret for us and make plain to us the results of research and the reasoning of the human mind . . .

I offer as a third reason why we need a university the fact that Latter-day Saints’ ideals are in many respects different from and higher than those of the average non-Latter-day Saint ideals so high in the

¹⁶⁶ Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:87.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:90.

¹⁶⁸ Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, Jan. 8, 1930, Harris Presidential Papers, cited in Wilkinson, 2:221.

educational world that all students in all schools of all grades may see beauty thereof, and perhaps be influenced by them?¹⁶⁹

Many other factors came into play relating to the continuance of BYU, but these are the vital reasons why Merrill never pushed for its elimination.

Ricks College. The second exception to the transfer policy was Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho. While Weber, Snow, Dixie, and Gila Colleges were all transferred to state control, Ricks College remained under Church auspices. In fact, Ricks College was the only junior college to remain under Church control at the end of the Great Depression. The reasons it survived and remained under Church control are markedly different from the other schools. Historian Scott Esplin observed that Ricks College owes its existence today as much to the state of Idaho as the transferred schools owe their continuation to the state of Utah and Arizona, though for wholly different reasons. While acceptance of the schools in Utah and Arizona guaranteed their survival, it was the Idaho legislature's repeated rejection of Ricks College that ensured not only the school's continuation, but also its current status under Church control.

As the Church and the nation sank deeper into the Depression, rumors began to spread throughout Rexburg of the school's closing. Seeking to strike preemptively, a delegation was sent from Rexburg to meet with the First Presidency and Merrill in April 1930. At this meeting the delegation gave five reasons why the college should survive: (1) the college taught principles that developed good character, (2) the school was part of community history and included the ideals of the founding fathers, (3) the college provided a "desirable background to other church organizations," (4) Ricks was the only Church institution in Idaho that attracted wide public attention and had been granted

¹⁶⁹ William E. Berrett, CES Resource Files 1899-1985, CR 102 174, Church Archives.

authority by the State Legislature to grant teaching certification, as was the case with state institutions, and (5) Ricks was well advertised through the state and well received.¹⁷⁰

In response to this Merrill could only reply that he “had always been taught that the Lord helps those who help themselves.”¹⁷¹ In truth, aside from the fourth reason presented, there was nothing presented at the meeting making Ricks College a more worthy candidate for continuance than any of the other Church schools. Though Merrill and the First Presidency were sympathetic, no firm answer could be given to the question of the school’s chances for survival. When the committee returned to Idaho and began to spread rumors of an agreement to continue the school indefinitely, Merrill approached the Board and asked that some action be taken to counteract the reports. He was then given permission by the Board to clarify to the community that the transfer policy did apply to Ricks, and that steps should begin to be taken to turn the school over to the state of Idaho as soon as possible.¹⁷²

During his visits to Rexburg during this time, Merrill found himself in the midst of an emotionally charged community and became an unpopular figure among certain of the colleges supporters. William Berrett, a close associate of Merrill’s during this time, recalled a trip to Rexburg where he asked Merrill, “Shall I take you to the President’s home? I’m sure he would like you to stay with him.” “No,” he said, “I’ll have to stay at the hotel. I’m sure while he might let me in he wouldn’t appreciate my coming!”¹⁷³ T.

¹⁷⁰ David L. Crowder, *The Spirit of Ricks: A History of Ricks College 1888-1997*, Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College, 1997, 101-2.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Jerry C. Roundy, *Ricks College: A Struggle for Survival*, Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College Press, 1976, 118.

¹⁷³ William E. Berrett Interview, Jan. 27, 1982, interviewed by Thomas E. Cheney, UA OH 69, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

Edgar Lyon, a teacher at Ricks during this period, wrote of a meeting held to discuss the closing of the college. He wrote, “the attitude was almost one of defiance, with a threat to secede from the Church and use the tithing paid by Idahoans in Idaho, and not for the BYU. I feel, however, that these local people are barking up the wrong tree. The stake presidents did not mince words, either, when they criticized Dr. Merrill.”¹⁷⁴

When permission was secured to transfer Weber, Snow, and Gila Colleges to state control in 1931, it seemed that the fate of Ricks college was also sealed. Merrill reported that “the matter of closing all junior colleges under Church auspices was definitely settled.” He then felt the responsibility for continuing to maintain the remaining schools rested with the states and communities involved.¹⁷⁵ Dwindling Church funds began to be cut for Ricks in favor of other parts of the educational program.

When a move to transfer Ricks failed in 1933, Merrill still showed support for the school. He wrote to Arthur Porter, Jr., a Ricks College official, “The cause of the college is just. Let the support of the people be so generous that the College shall never die.”¹⁷⁶ However, the bill’s failure and Merrill’s departure in August 1933 to serve as president of the Church’s European mission meant that another commissioner would have to see through the final fate of the college. When further attempts to transfer the school failed to pass the Idaho legislature in 1935 and 1937 some local newspapers began to poke fun at the “immortal bill to dump Ricks College into the laps of Idaho taxpayers.”¹⁷⁷ In the midst of these difficulties, the school persisted, and eventually was granted a reprieve when David O. McKay was placed in the First Presidency as second counselor.

¹⁷⁴ T. Edgar Lyon to David and Marie Cairns Lyon, Feb. 15, 1933, Rexburg, Idaho, Box 13, Folder 3, Reel 10, T. Edgar Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁷⁵ Roundy, 131.

¹⁷⁶ Crowder, *Ricks College*, 113.

¹⁷⁷ Esplin, “Education in Transition,” 214.

What factors kept Merrill and his successors from simply closing the school when attempts to transfer it to state control failed? First, as the delegation pointed out, the college did serve an important role in Idaho, particularly in the Snake River Valley. If the school suffered an outright closure, no other school existed to take its place. Second, Church leadership changed. McKay was highly influential in keeping the remaining Church schools after he became a part of the First Presidency. The President of Ricks College during this time, Hyrum Manwaring, would cite McKay as the chief factor behind the school's survival. He wrote, "History, if it speaks the truth, must record that President David O. McKay did more than any other one man to save our great school."¹⁷⁸

Juarez Academy. The Church academy in the LDS colonies of northern Mexico was never seriously considered for closure during the Bennion/Merrill era. Perhaps the most influential factor in the academy's survival came from the fact that there was no competing education system in the area. Mexico during the early twentieth century was in frequent upheaval, and no firmly established public school system existed. As had been policy in the United States, the Church remained willing to provide education for its members when no viable alternative existed.

LDS Business College. The one major school closure during Merrill's tenure as commissioner came when LDS College was closed in 1931. Merrill worked diligently to bring about the school's survival as a unit of the University of Utah, but his efforts were to no avail. Initially named Latter-day Saint University, the school was originally intended to serve as the pinnacle of the LDS education system.¹⁷⁹ Located in the heart of Salt Lake City, the school was eventually replaced in this role by Brigham Young

¹⁷⁸ Cited in Esplin, "Education in Transition," 215.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890-1930*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, 163.

University. Lack of financing, problems with faculty, and prominence of the nearby University of Utah all entered into its decline. By the time Merrill became commissioner, the school was serving as a high school with a few junior college departments.

After the 1929 Utah legislature failed to accept the Church schools, LDS College was found to be the most vulnerable school. By this time enough public high schools existed in Salt Lake City to handle the students from the school. The school's close proximity to the University of Utah made it unlikely that legislators or the community would choose to fund if it came under state control. The school's Board of Trustees and several local stake presidents all contacted Merrill to give reasons why the school should survive, but in the end the factors in favor of its closing were found to be more compelling. On December 10, 1929, it was decided that the school's junior college would close in June 1930. A few months later, in February 1931 the General Board decided came to close the high school as well.¹⁸⁰

Anticipating the closure of the school, its leaders made an effort to ensure its survival in some form. In May 1931, the president of the Business College, Faramorz Y. Fox, brought a packet to the Church leaders entitled, "Should the Church Maintain LDS Business College." Fox argued for the business department of the school to continue, regardless of the closure of the rest of the school. He wrote:

The school is not in competition with any public institution, its patronage coming mainly from those above high school age, who cannot or will not enter standard college. It is not a competitor of any other Church school, its plan and organization differing greatly from that of college schools of business. It is not a local institution; its enrollment is drawn from all over the West. Its graduates are to be counted by hundreds. Among them are many now prominent in business and professional affairs. To close the College would be an unnecessary

¹⁸⁰ Miller, *Weber College*, 39.

withdrawal of sponsorship that at small outlay had reflected great credit upon the Church.¹⁸¹

Through Fox's efforts, the Board was persuaded to allow the business department to continue as a separate school. Since that time it has been known as LDS Business College.

While the business department would continue under these new auspices, closure of the rest of the LDS College, the high school in particular, was painful for the Church leadership. The students leaving the school would be forced to attend the local high schools established, and the Salt Lake City board of education had refused to grant permission for released-time seminary or credit for religion classes. Students in the area were required to take seminary before or after school. As a result, seminary enrollment in Salt Lake City was only about 10 percent, while in areas with released time enrollment averaged 70 percent.¹⁸²

Value of Closing LDS College

Why was LDS College closed while the other schools remained under Church control, or at least allowed to continue until they could be transferred to the state? Several factors should be considered when answering this question. First, it was in direct competition with state schools. Second, the school's functions could be duplicated by local high schools and the nearby University of Utah. The only real loss in the school's closure stemmed from its students no longer receiving religious education during weekdays. On the positive side, in its closure it may have inadvertently served as a kind of sacrificial lamb to convince the local legislature the Church really was serious about closing its schools if the state would not accept them. The announcement of the closure

¹⁸¹ Cited in Esplin, "Education in Transition," 217.

¹⁸² James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed., Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1992, 504.

of LDS College sent a clear signal to the state that the opportunity to take over the schools would be lost if they did not act quickly. It reads:

At a meeting of the General Church Board of Education, held December 26th, 1930, action was taken confirming a decision of the First Presidency, and the General Board of Education, that the LDS College High School would be closed as a Church school in June 1931. This action does not affect the LDS Business College which will continue as usual.

The closing of the High School continues the policy of the General Board to withdraw, wherever feasible, from the field of secular education in favor of the public school system. The opening next fall of the new public South High School makes it feasible to close the LDS High School next summer without overcrowding city high schools.

At the same meeting the General Board decided that all the Church Junior colleges – Ricks at Rexburg, Weber at Ogden, Snow at Ephraim, Dixie at St. George, and Gila at Thatcher, would cease to function as Church supported schools in 1933 at the latest. At least two of them will thus cease in 1932. But the board hopes that these colleges will be continued under public auspices. And in order to give the public time to work out the necessary plans and to secure the necessary legislation the Board decided to postpone the closing date from 1931 to 1932 and 1933, as stated. *The responsibility of continuing junior college opportunities in the communities now affected is now passed on to the public, the states, counties, and cities concerned.*¹⁸³

Merrill pushed for LDS College to close. At the December 26 meeting mentioned above he had asked the Advisory Committee for permission to make two recommendations to the General Board. First, that LDS College close in June 1931. Second, he asked for the Church to commit to maintain Snow and Weber colleges until 1932 and 1933, respectively. This promise would only take effect if the legislature would provide for the beginnings of a junior college system. When Adam S. Bennion stated he could not approve the closure of the LDS College so soon, Merrill, satisfied that

¹⁸³ “Announcement of the Closing of LDS High School,” Dec. 29, 1930, Box 3, Folder 18, Accn. 1062, Joseph F. Merrill Papers, Special Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, emphasis added.

two of the three members of the Advisory Board present favored the plan, decided to make the recommendations to the General Board.¹⁸⁴

In part, the Utah legislature may have failed to act because they sensed some hesitancy on the part of Church leadership to close LDS High School. Intent on presenting a united front, Merrill was sent by the First Presidency to meet with the Utah Governor in March 1931 to assure him of the Church's unity in the matter.¹⁸⁵ The same year as the closure of LDS College, the Utah legislature passed a House Bill 101, which provided for the transfer of Snow College to the state in 1932, followed by Weber College in 1933.

Schools Transferred to State Control

Snow College. The first major school to pass to state control was Snow College, located in Ephraim, Utah. The survival of the college may in part have come from the fact that it was relatively isolated. At the time, Snow College was the only junior college located in central Utah. P. C. Peterson, a legislator from Ephraim, was instrumental in convincing the population of Ephraim to vote to continue the school. According to local lore he is said to have given legs of lamb to "bribe" his fellow legislators into saving the school.¹⁸⁶ Upon the school's transfers, Merrill was optimistic about its future. He wrote:

All friends of Snow College will rejoice greatly that the College is to continue, that the impending change is a transfer and not a closing. But from another point of view, even a closing would not mean the end of the College, for as long as memory lasts, Snow College will continue to live in the minds and hearts of its loyal sons and daughters. Death is pronounced only upon the things of the earth, not upon things spiritual – the things characteristic of the Snow spirit.

¹⁸⁴ Miller, *Weber College*, 40, In the minutes available the other member of the Advisory Board present is identified as Richard R. Lyman, the identity of the other board member is not known.

¹⁸⁵ Miller, *Weber College*, 41.

¹⁸⁶ Albert C. Antrei and Allen P. Roberts, *History of Sanpete County*, Salt Lake: Utah State Historical Society, 1999, 206.

But the college is to continue and its doors will still swing open to the fine type of young men and women who have entered it in the past. This fact is a source of joy to us all.¹⁸⁷

Weber College. Weber College had more factors supporting its continuance than any of the other Church schools, excepting BYU. As previously mentioned, David O. McKay was a former principal of Weber, and had strong feelings regarding its continuance. The school was also located in the larger city of Ogden, Utah, and had many influential community members in favor of its continuance. The biggest question concerning Weber's future at the time concerned whether it would continue as an independent school or become a branch of the University of Utah.¹⁸⁸ Most of the community in Ogden opposed being a branch of the university, fearing it would "submerge the entire identity of Weber."¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the push was made to secure the college's future as an independent school. The move was successful and Weber came under state control in 1933.

Gila College. Similar in many ways to Ricks College, Gila College was located in the small Arizona town of Thatcher. Early in 1929, Merrill wrote to H. L. Schantz, president of the University of Arizona, requesting that the state of Arizona take over the operation of the school either as a branch of the university, or an independent institution. He also made an interesting statement in this letter, telling Schantz,, "we are encouraging high school graduates who come from LDS homes, who care to enter the collegiate field,

¹⁸⁷ Joseph F. Merrill to Snow College *Snowdrift*, Salt Lake City, April 19, 1932, Joseph F. Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 11, Folder 3, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁸⁸ Richard R. Roberts and Richard W. Sadler, *A History of Weber County*, Salt Lake: Utah Historical Society, 1997, 230.

¹⁸⁹ Richard W. Sadler, *Weber State College: A Centennial History*, Salt Lake: Publisher's Press, 1988, 65.

to do so in the states where they reside.”¹⁹⁰ Merrill pledged “one hundred percent support” to state systems and gave encouragement about the benefits of a junior college system, citing efforts in Utah and Idaho as examples.¹⁹¹

When the formal announcement was made of the college’s impending closure or transfer, the community quickly rallied to save the school. Campaigns were launched to provide the public with information about the value of prolonging the life of the school. These efforts were spear-headed by the college’s president, Harvey L. Taylor, who also served as the local stake president (a church officer with supervisory responsibilities to local congregations). Assisted by his second counselor, future church president Spencer W. Kimball, the work was enthusiastically undertaken. In January 1932, a conference was conducted at the college and attended by nearly 4,000 people, an astounding number, considering the student body at the time consisted of less than 200 students. “Gila must never close!” became a rallying cry for everyone in the community, resulting in a swelling of support for the school.¹⁹²

When it was chosen to decide the fate of the school through a special election, Taylor and Kimball launched an all-out offensive, sending speakers and a special musical program throughout local communities to drum up support for the measure. Their efforts resulted in a resounding success, with the measure for the state to assume control passing with 1618 votes in favor and 309 opposing.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Joseph F. Merrill to H.L. Schantz, Salt Lake City, Feb. 1, 1929, MSS 1540, Box 5, Folder 3, Merrill Collection, Special Collections, BYU.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Thomas Alexander Scott, “Eastern Arizona College: A Comprehensive History of the Early Years,” Ed.D. diss., 1985, Brigham Young University, 640-641.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 645-46, 650.

Gila College probably represents the most successful example of a school transfer under Merrill's tenure. Two factors were decisive in this. First, community leaders took Merrill's advice and took upon themselves the responsibility of saving the school. Their efforts were enthusiastic, well-organized, and specifically designed to alleviate the fears of the local non-LDS population, who feared they would be using tax dollars to support what was still largely a Church school. However, all of these efforts might have been in vain if supporters of the college had been dealing with a legislative decision, rather than a local election. It cannot be argued that the supporters of Ricks College worked any less diligently than those of Gila College, but they ultimately found themselves to be the victims of sectional disputes in the Idaho state legislature. It is likely that if the fate of Ricks College had been decided in a local election, the college would have found the support it needed to secure a transfer to state control. In the case of Gila College, a combination of strong local support and fortuitous circumstances ensured the survival of the school, in spite of trying times financially for the state of Arizona.

Dixie College. Dixie College may represent another sacrifice Merrill was willing to make to ensure the survival of larger schools. While Snow's advantage came from its isolation, and Weber's from its location in a population center, Dixie possessed neither of these advantages. The school was located in St. George, Utah, at the time a smaller community. Further, it was near to Cedar City, where a state supported school already existed. In January 1931, Merrill notified Joseph K. Nicholes, president of Dixie College, that financial support for the college would not be extended past the 1930-31 school year. He further offered \$5,000 a year for two years to help transform the college

into a high school.¹⁹⁴ Anthony W. Ivins, a member of the First Presidency, and native of St. George intervened on the college's behalf, but remarked that 'it seemed impossible to put a 'dent' in Merrill's 'armor.'"¹⁹⁵

Undeterred, the school's supporters embarked on a campaign to garner enough local support to ensure legislative action to save Dixie College. Unsettled by what the unintended results of these efforts might be, Merrill wrote to leaders in St. George to express his concern:

We think if this is done it may jeopardize favorable action on the proposition to continue Snow and Weber as State junior college[s]. We here do not believe that the conditions are favorable for the establishment of a State junior college in St. George. Certainly before the State could do that it would have to have a junior college at Richfield, one at Price, and another at Vernal.

We hope, therefore, that the friends of Dixie College will desist from an effort to get the college at St. George continued under public auspices. We believe that the proposition already made to you by the Church is very favorable and therefore that the friends of Dixie should express their gratitude by limiting at the present time the efforts for State junior colleges to Snow and Weber.¹⁹⁶

Merrill met personally with individuals behind the effort, but they persisted in their efforts, leading to an even stronger warning from Merrill:

We told you very frankly our fears were that while there was no chance of the State taking Dixie over, your application might have a detrimental effect on the efforts that were being made in behalf of Snow and Weber. . .

Maybe this thing is getting out of your control. But I may say that the Church will not give single cent during the next biennium to Snow or to Weber. If, through the efforts that are being made in behalf of Dixie that seem to be endangering the chances of Snow and Weber, failure results, I am not at all sure but that the Church will withdraw the generous offers it has already made in behalf of a school at St. George. Can you

¹⁹⁴ Douglas D. Alder and Karl F. Brooks, *History of Washington County: From Isolation to Destination*, Salt Lake: Utah State Historical Society, 1996.

¹⁹⁵ Personal notes of J. K. Nicholes, Dixie College Archives, cited in Esplin, 201.

¹⁹⁶ Personal communication, Feb. 3, 1933, Dixie College Archives, cited in Esplin, 204.

and your friends not see that the time is wholly inopportune for efforts in behalf of Dixie?¹⁹⁷

Merrill ended the letter with a plea for St. George leaders to “look at this proposition from a state-wide point of view rather than a local narrow one.”¹⁹⁸ Having experienced earlier legislative failures of the spring of 1929, before the onset of the national Depression, he was understandably nervous of asking skittish legislators to take on another school, and thus ruining the chances of Weber and Snow Colleges to continue under state control.

Desperate to save their school, leaders in St. George ignored Merrill’s warnings. Seeking support, they even went so far as to open negotiations with groups lobbying for the repeal of the prohibition of alcohol. This move must have been a great shock to the Church leadership, who opposed lifting prohibition. It must have also deeply affected Merrill, who by now was serving as an apostle, and had vehemently spoken against the repeal of prohibition.¹⁹⁹ So determined were St. George leaders to save Dixie, they went head to head with Church officials in this matter.

Fortunately, Merrill’s fears were not realized. The bill to transfer Dixie College passed in March 1933. The state agreed to take the school along with Snow and Weber Colleges, provided they were under no obligation to provide financial support for Dixie. The state accepted the deed to Dixie College on July 1, 1933, and leased the school back to St. George, allowing the school to continue.

¹⁹⁷ Joseph F. Merrill, personal communication, Feb. 9, 1933, Dixie College Archives, cited in Esplin, 204.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Large portions of Merrill’s addresses in Church General Conferences, for example, had been devoted to explaining the evils of alcohol and the dangers of repealing Prohibition. See Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Conference Report*, April 1932, 111-116, October 1932, 35-41, and April 1933, 111-115.

Conclusions and Summary

The transfer of Church junior colleges to state control was undoubtedly the most difficult issue Merrill dealt with during his service as commissioner. As illustrated, even Church leadership was divided at times over the issue. It should not be assumed, however, that Merrill's experience with this aspect of his duties was totally negative. He recognized that people on both sides were working for what they felt was best. In a general conference address he said:

Without a single exception every individual with whom I have been brought into contact has looked at our problems from the standpoint of what is best for the whole. I have talked with ambitious college presidents, with ambitious teachers, with ambitious chairmen of boards, with respect to their problems. Without a single, exception they have said that what is best for the whole is what we will cheerfully accept. That spirit makes the work extremely pleasant.²⁰⁰

With reference to the leaders of the Church, Merrill never expressed any bitterness or resentment, only admiration. In October 1931, in the midst of all the struggles over Church schools Merrill was called to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. In his first apostolic address, he took occasion to express his feelings about those he associated with as commissioner, and to provide an evaluation of he felt about the work he had been performing:

May I say that this honor that has come to me is very great, because the nomination that I have received expresses a confidence in me of what I have come to regard as the finest body of men that live. My work the last three or four years has brought me more or less into intimate contact with the General Authorities of the Church. I have learned that they are not only capable men, but they are very much devoted to their work; that they are very anxious that this work shall go forward as the Lord has intended it should go forward. So their lives and their energies are wholly devoted to it. They are also men of deep sympathies and great love for their fellowmen.

I have often remarked that in the position I have been occupying since

²⁰⁰ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1928, 37.

coming to the Church Office Building, nearly four years ago, that I have experienced the greatest joys of my life, because I have been contacting with and laboring with people who look at the work from one point of view only, the point of view of what is best for the whole, what is best for the Church. I have not seen a single instance where selfishness or selfish interest could be observed at all. These brethren, the General Authorities of the Church, are wholly devoted to your interests, to the saving of the souls of men. I love them. I have come to regard them as God's men. So I feel wholly incapable, my brethren and sisters, of being one of their number, because of my unworthiness and because of my inability. But I have been honored with the nomination. If I am sustained in the position I shall try, as hard as I know how to try, to fulfill its obligations. I have no other interests. All my time will be devoted to the cause of this Church, forwarding its interests and those of the people as best I can.²⁰¹

Merrill supported Church leaders, and the leaders supported Merrill in his efforts, however unpopular they may have been the membership of the Church. At one particularly rancorous meeting in Rexburg, around the time that the prospects of Ricks College looked dim, T. Edgar Lyon, a teacher at Ricks at the time, recorded the following experience:

Apostle [David O.] McKay was here on Friday, and 1966 people came to hear him. President Hart was here and the people had a real stormy session, concerning the closing of Ricks College. The attitude was almost one of defiance, with a threat to secede from the Church and use the tithing paid by Idahoans in Idaho, and not for the BYU. I feel, however, that these local people are barking up the wrong tree. The stake presidents did not mince words, either, when they criticized Dr. Merrill. Hermana [Lyon's wife] was afraid that Br. McKay would go through the ceiling while Pres. Hart was talking about Dr. Merrill.²⁰²

Merrill took seriously the First Presidency's directives to complete the transfer or close the Church schools. The first year of Merrill's tenure was crucial, where he is often seen as the voice prodding the General Board to formulate a definite policy. When the decision was made on February 20, 1929 for the Church to divest itself of all its schools,

²⁰¹ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, Oct. 1931, 35-36.

²⁰² T. Edgar Lyon to Parents, Feb. 15, 1933, Rexburg, ID, T. Edgar Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Box 13, Folder 3. Reel 10, Special Collections, BYU.

including Brigham Young University, Merrill went to work. When he saw the need for exceptions to the policy, as in the case of BYU, Merrill made them. In some cases, such as Snow and Weber Colleges, Merrill was instrumental in ensuring their survival even under the worst economic conditions. In other cases, such as Ricks and Dixie College, the credit for keeping the schools alive goes to communities in which the schools were located. In the case of LDS College, Merrill recognized that the school's closure would not make a serious impact on Salt Lake City. This action may have stemmed from his decades of experience serving as a state educator. Merrill had more faith in state institutions than perhaps those who served with him on the General and Advisory Church Boards. In addition, his earlier experience with released-time seminary convinced him that supplementary religious education, combined with state-supported secular education, presented a more financially agreeable solution to the Church's financial woes.

However, opponents of school transfers also had compelling reasons to believe the Church's direction in education was not in its own best interests. David O. McKay had earlier stated,

I think the intimation that we ought to abandon our present Church Schools and go into the seminary business exclusively is not only premature but dangerous. The seminary has not been tested yet but the Church schools have, and if we go back to the old Catholic Church you will find Church schools have been tested for hundreds of years and that church still holds to them . . . Let us hold our seminaries but not do away with our Church schools.²⁰³

McKay was right when he pointed out the experimental nature of released-time seminary compared to the tried and tested tradition of religious schools. Even while Merrill was negotiating the transfer of Church schools, seminary came under a near-fatal attack in the state of Utah. Debate about the wisdom of the transfer movement would

²⁰³ General Board Minutes, March 10, 1926, cited in Wilkinson, 2:73.

continue for decades. When McKay became Church president, a move was actually made to transfer Snow, Weber, and Dixie colleges back to Church control. Ultimately the movement ended in defeat, and the colleges remain under state control today.²⁰⁴

Whatever the concerns, the fact remains that the foremost reason for divestiture of schools was financial. In plain terms, the Church simply could not afford to support a system of schools any longer. Merrill's results in this area are inarguable. During his service Church expenditures on education were drastically reduced, allowing Church education to weather the Great Depression successfully. From a high of \$958,440 spent on education in 1925, expenditures declined to a record low of \$459,580 in 1934, the year after Merrill left office.²⁰⁵ In 1930-31 alone Church expenditures on education were lowered by \$100,000.²⁰⁶ At the same time, Merrill and other leaders felt inspired to save certain schools, among them BYU and Ricks College, both of which proved to be assets to the Church in the future. Speaking of the purpose of maintaining these schools, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

The university [BYU] has brought much favorable notice to the Church. Its sponsoring organization, the Church, is widely recognized. It has become known for standards and ideals which have been written about and talked about and which have let the world know of those things in which we believe. Its academic programs and its athletic programs have both brought honor to the university and the Church. And as generations of students move through its halls and on to graduation and then out across the world, they will bring honor to their alma mater and its sponsor, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

We shall continue to support BYU and its Hawaii campus. We shall continue to support Ricks College. We are not likely to build other university campuses. We wish that we might build enough to accommodate all who desire to attend. But this is out of the question. They are so terribly expensive. But we shall keep these as flagships testifying to

²⁰⁴ Thomas G. Alexander, *Utah: The Right Place*, 2nd ed., Salt Lake: Gibbs Smith, 2003, 375.

²⁰⁵ Wilkinson, 2:211

²⁰⁶ General Board Minutes, Nov. 4, 1931, cited in Scott, 638. See also, Bennion, 200-201, 223,

the great and earnest commitment of this Church to education, both ecclesiastical and secular, and while doing so prove to the world that excellent secular learning can be gained in an environment of religious faith.

Backing up these institutions will be our other schools, our institutes of religion, scattered far and wide, and the great seminary system of the Church.²⁰⁷

The current status of the Church education could not have come about without the labors of Joseph F. Merrill and the generation of Church leaders he served under. The sacrifices they were willing to make provided a financial future for the rest of the system. In addition, the exceptions to the policy they were inspired to make have been a benefit to multitudes of Latter-day Saint students.

In the midst of these dramatic changes, there were dangers lurking on the horizon. The Church had now figuratively placed all of its eggs in the seminary basket, with no viable alternatives outside that system. Church schools were accepted as a thing of the past, and any attempt at reviving the academy system would be financially impossible. If anything threatened the seminaries, the Church's whole educational program was at risk.

²⁰⁷ Gordon B. Hinckley, "Why We Do Some of the Things We Do," *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 52.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE 1930-31 RELEASED TIME SEMINARY CRISIS

While the arduous work of overseeing the divestment of most of the Church schools was underway, the seminary system came under direct attack. Quick action on the part of Joseph F. Merrill resulted in a spirited debate on the legality of seminaries, and finally an assurance of their continuation. This victory, however, came with sacrifice on the part of the Church, a general reform of Utah high school policy, and major changes in the seminary curriculum.

The Setting

By January 1930 the movement for the Church to withdraw from the field of secular education was underway, but not yet complete. The fledgling Institutes in Moscow, Idaho, and Logan, Utah had been opened and results were encouraging. The transfer of the remaining Church schools was still in the air, though a clear policy was in place, with specific goals in mind. The seminary program, rapidly expanded during Adam S. Bennion's service as Church Superintendent of Schools, was becoming the backbone of Church education. For example, Between 1922 and 1932 seminary enrollment rose from 4,976 to 29,427.²⁰⁸ Merrill's task of transferring or closing the schools led regrettably to the closure of the high school portion LDS College in Salt Lake City.

The closing of LDS College raised tensions between Latter-day Saints and the rest of the city's population. While the seminary program spread in other areas, it met with

²⁰⁸ James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed., Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1992, 504.

opposition in the Salt Lake area, because the school board there refused to grant either released time or credit. The success of the seminary program stemmed in part from the willingness of school boards to grant permission for released time to students and high school credit for classes in biblical studies. From its inception, seminary curriculum had consisted of three courses, Old Testament and New Testament, for which credit was granted, and Church History, for which no credit was granted. As a result, in the city with Church headquarters, students were forced to take seminary before or after the regular school hours. As a result, seminary enrollment in Salt Lake remained at about 10 percent, compared to an average of 70 percent in other areas. Further, the closure of LDS College meant a large number of LDS students would be thrust into this situation. Contemplating the problem, it was clear that efforts would have to be made to change the minds of the school board members.²⁰⁹

At the same time, Merrill recognized the tension surrounding the relationships of seminaries and schools, and did not want to give the impression that the Church was seeking anything beyond what he felt were its legal rights. In his first address as commissioner he said,

You understand of course that in all of our system of education we are not trying to get into, we are not trying to dominate, we are not trying to influence improperly, we are not trying to interfere in any way with the public school system of education. All that we are asking is that the members of the Church may voluntarily go during school hours into our buildings, and our own property, and receive religious education.²¹⁰

The last thing the Church leaders wanted was a confrontation over the seminary system. With the divestiture of Church schools already in progress, the continued operation of the seminaries was key to the success of Church education.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 504-5.

²¹⁰ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1928, 37-39.

However, a confrontation was about to be thrust upon them, and Merrill would have to take the lead in defending the legality of the seminary system.

The 1930 Williamson Report

While all of these pieces were being moved into place, a report from the state Inspector of High Schools, I. L. Williamson,²¹¹ to the state school board, was issued on January 7, 1930. The report was highly critical of the relationship between Utah high schools and seminaries. Merrill had tried to meet with Williamson's committee before it made its report to the state board, but had been refused permission.²¹² Church leaders, Merrill included, found themselves blindsided by the report and quickly organized themselves to issue a response. The full text of the report was issued in the *Salt Lake Tribune* the next day.²¹³ Williamson attacked the seminary program, stating his concerns in three areas, 1) the Utah constitutional aspect, 2) the educational aspect, and 3) the financial or economic aspect.²¹⁴

Constitutional Aspects. Constitutionally, Williamson pointed out that Utah laws forbid the teaching of sectarian doctrine in a state controlled school. He questioned whether Bible courses in seminaries were truly free from sectarian doctrine. Quoting from the introduction to the current seminary textbook, *Outlines in Religious Education*, he read: "Basic aims in the teaching of theology, an abiding testimony that God is our Father; that Jesus is the Christ, and that Joseph Smith and his successors are the prophets

²¹¹ Williamson, originally from Kansas, was a former Superintendent of Tintic School District, and a non-Latter-day Saint. According to the *Salt Lake City Directory* for 1932, Williamson returned to Kansas in 1931. See 1920 U.S. Census for Eureka, Juab County, LDS Family History Library, Salt Lake City. See Frederick S. Buchanan, "Masons and Mormons: Released-Time Politics in Salt Lake City, 1930-56," *Journal of Mormon History*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1993, 77.

²¹² William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education*, (Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), 43.

²¹³ The complete text of the Williamson report may be found in Appendix C of this work.

²¹⁴ "Seminaries of LDS Church Put Under Study by School Officials," *Salt Lake Tribune*, Jan. 9, 1930, 14-15.

chosen by Him to reestablish His gospel in the earth as the power of God unto salvation.”²¹⁵

He went on to show evidence that the Book of Mormon, specifically chapters of Ether and 3 Nephi, had been used to supplement the Bible during Old and New Testament studies. He charged the seminaries with teaching doctrines in credit courses accepted by no other religious body besides the LDS Church. He charged:

That the Garden of Eden was located in Missouri; that Noah’s ark was built and launched in America; that Joseph Smith’s version of the Bible is superior to the King James version, and that Enoch’s city, Zion, with all its inhabitants and buildings, was lifted up and translated bodily from the American continent to the realms of the unknown may all be facts, but they are not accepted as such by the religious world in general, and consequently must be classed as denominational doctrine.²¹⁶

Williamson questioned whether the current relationship between seminaries and public high schools violated the principle of the separation of Church and State. He said the state was giving financial support to seminaries by allowing students to be transported to schools in state vehicles where they would subsequently be attending seminary classes during the day. He claimed high schools rooms were being used for seminary classes, heat and janitorial services were being provided from public funds, and school attendance offices were being used to report absences from seminary classes. He even went so far as to claim that students using school study halls to do homework from seminary classes were in violation of the law. In summary, he stated:

The school and the seminary are so linked together that in the minds of the public, pupils, and patrons, they are thought of as one institution. The buildings are side by side, the pupils ride to both buildings in the same truck, seminary courses are listed on the high school programs, credits are entered on the high school records, seminary lessons are prepared in public school study halls, and the portraits are of seminary

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

instructors are published in the high school annuals side by side with members of the high school faculty, under the general heading, "Faculty." The permanent record card of one of the large high schools of the state contains the statement that "credits from other institutions are entered in red ink."²¹⁷

Acknowledging the connection between high schools and seminaries to be "somewhat intangible," the report listed the offenses as examples of a lack of separation between the two institutions was a violation of Utah law.

Educational Aspects. The next section of the report dealt with what the committee saw as educational detractions in the seminary program. Williamson charged that though only a half-credit was granted for each course of study in seminary, the work given in the classes were equivalent to a one-credit study course. He believed the resulting amount of work caused students to fail in other studies, resulting in a lower rate of graduation and a greater amount of failure once students reached the college level. He wrote,

What [are] the implications for efficiency and scholarship? Are there any reasons to believe that the high school students of our state can scatter their energies over 18 units of work and do it as effectively as students in other states who concentrate for four years on 16 units? Is there any reason to believe that the students of Utah can carry five to five and one-half units of work per year in an efficient manner when the standard for American high schools is four to four and one-half units?²¹⁸

To prove his contentions, he cited a 1926 U.S. Bureau of Education study which reported the performance of county schools being below the achievements of the Salt Lake City schools. Williamson connected the academic shortfall of the county schools to the time students spent on religious studies, compared to Salt Lake schools, which had no released time programs. He added:

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

If it were conceded that a single course in theology is of more value than the entire high school course, the fact yet remains that the public schools are established and maintained for the sole purpose of furnishing public education and the constitution specifically provides that this function shall not be interfered with, and that no part of the burden of religious education shall be borne by the state.²¹⁹

Financial and Economic Aspects. The report accused the seminary program of increasing the financial burden of the state, due to the effects of low grades and failures it purportedly caused. It stated that seminaries were forcing pupils to become “part-time” students since they were taking 16 units of credit, instead of 18. Beyond this, the report charged that curriculum had to be adjusted for *all* students to compensate for those taking fewer credits as a result of seminary. Without giving any specific numbers, Williamson estimated the cost to the state because of these factors, to be “many thousands of dollars.”²²⁰ Appealing to the taxpayers, he laid out what he felt were the consequences of the continuation of the seminary program:

If students in certain schools devote one-sixth of their time to theology and five sixths of their time to the public school, then a 36-week term with theology becomes the equivalent of a 30 weeks term without theology.

From the standpoint of equity, should taxpayer A, who lives in one part of the state, and who may be vitally interested in public education, but not theology, have his taxes increased in order to lengthen the school term of a district in another part of the state, in which the pupils devote only five-sixths of the lengthened term to public education and one-sixth to theology? Would it not be more just to the taxpayer to have a 30 weeks’ term without theology, since, in terms of public education, one is giving the equivalent of the other?²²¹

Near the end of the report Williamson expressed his feeling that the issues involved were constitutional, educational, and financial, not religious. He further stated

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

that he did not question the value of religious education. Rather, he did question the “laxity” toward observance of the laws. Williamson felt Church and State had an obligation to lead the way by their adherence to the constitution. Finally, Williamson stated he felt the seminary program was an infringement on the spirit of the law and possibly a violation of the letter of the law.

Merrill’s Response

The day after the report appeared in the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Merrill fired back by publishing a lengthy response in the *Deseret News*. Merrill countered that the seminaries saved state money by shouldering part of the educational load and raising the standards of the students attending state high schools. Part of the report he labeled an overreaction,

To one who knows the real situation, the question will arise, was not the writer of the report straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel?

How, for example, does the existence of a seminary near any high school add one penny to the cost of transporting pupils to and from the high school? Every person who gets this transportation is a school student, and if the seminary did [not] exist not one penny could be saved in transportation.²²²

Merrill went on to declare that the seminary system saved the state thousands of dollars by employing teachers and provided for part of the cost of the credits required for graduation, without charging for any of these services. He said the goal of modern education to be the formation of character, which the seminary was designed to do. He also cited a Church questionnaire, sent out fourteen months earlier, in which nearly every high school principal questioned cited the presence of a seminary as a positive thing for their schools.

²²² “Head of System Answers Attack Upon Seminaries,” *Deseret News*, Jan. 9, 1930, 1.

Merrill acknowledged that the report had raised some valid concerns and vowed, “should any of these conditions be found to exist, they will be corrected.”²²³ He attempted to explain why some of the discrepancies in the report existed. For example, in Panguitch, Utah, the seminary had been conducted in a high school classroom. This action, however, had come about as the result of a trade in which the school, lacking facilities, had been given permission to use a local Church recreation hall for some of its classes.

Merrill also pointed out that Universities and Colleges had allowed credit in biblical studies for years and there was no reason why high school could not offer credit as well. Answering the more serious question of scholastic deficiency in seminary students, Merrill said, “the impression widely prevails that the scholarship of seminary students is higher than those of non-seminary students. If this is the case, then what the report says about scholarship of high school students has no point whatever.”²²⁴ He promised that the charge would be investigated by the Church.

Lastly, Merrill took affront to the charge of the Church not supporting the law. He declared that the Church stood firmly behind the laws and acted as a force to promote “sound morality, good citizenship, and high educational ideals and attainments.”²²⁵

Merrill was not the only one to respond to the report’s accusations. D.H. Christensen, a former superintendent of Salt Lake City schools, and a Latter-day Saint, wrote a letter to the *Deseret News* questioning Williamson’s interpretation. He noted that the U.S. Bureau of education report quoted by Williamson also declared that Salt Lake City children attended 480 weeks of school during their 12 year education, while students

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

from rural districts, where seminary was offered, attended only 420. Therefore, any academic differences between the two groups was more likely to be a product of less school time, rather than time spent in seminary. He continued, “A high school student who spends 1/5 of his school time in study and discussion of things spiritual, loses nothing and he may gain much by the uplifting and wholesome influence of such effort . . . Mr. Williamson’s conclusion in regard to student deficiency is simply not a supportable claim.”²²⁶

The state board turned the question over to a subcommittee consisting of George A. Eaton, assistant superintendent of Salt Lake City, Clarence A. Robertson, an attorney from Moab, Utah, and Joshua Greenwood, from Utah County. From this committee’s decision it was clear that divisions regarding this issue would be clearly drawn along religious lines. When the sub-committee issued its recommendations, Greenwood, a Latter-day Saint, refused to sign the report. Eaton and Robertson, both of other faiths, endorsed a complete “disassociation” between schools and seminaries. In addition, they recommend the withdrawal of credit for seminary work in high school and all Utah universities. Finally, they recommended that no students be excused during regular school hours for religious study. This proposal, if enacted, meant the end of released time seminary, and judging by seminary attendance in areas where released time was not allowed, could cause a serious curtailment of Church educational efforts.²²⁷

²²⁶ D.H. Christensen, “Seminary Students Not Deficient in Scholarship,” *Deseret News*, Jan. 21, 1930, 3.

²²⁷ “Probe Committee Splits on LDS Seminaries,” *Deseret News*, March 24, 1930, 3. Also Buchanan, 78. Buchanan’s analysis of these events notes that in most conflicts the members of the board opposing LDS efforts at education were Masons, and their opponents, Latter-day Saints. No attempt was made in this work to determine the religious persuasion of those involved, except where it held direct bearing on these events.

Defense of Released Time Seminary

Following the report, the state board invited Merrill to make a defense a month later. In the meantime, a war of words began brewing between the Church leaders and the state board, and prominent Church members began to speak out on the issue. At a meeting of Church educators held in early April, Church president Heber J. Grant addressed the conflict directly, “it is up to us who hold a vote to see that this liberty (seminary) is granted.” Milton H. Willing, the democratic secretary of state, and an LDS parishioner, declared, “We can’t be successful without such institutions and in my judgment if they are lost to the state it will be the fault of the people of the Church.” Milton Bennion, Dean of the University of Utah’s School of Education and a member of the Church’s Sunday School General Board, pointed out that many states worked with schools on religious issues, with many successful programs.²²⁸

The moment was crucial. With so much invested in seminaries and institutes, the Church in the last phases of divesting itself of its schools, the survival of released time seminary was critical to the continuation of the Church program of education. Merrill presented a twenty-four-page document addressing the claims of Williamson’s report on May 3, 1930. While this written reply is likely the work of many in the Church department of education, it bears Merrill’s signature and repeats many of the arguments Merrill had already made in favor of seminary. Merrill began by addressing the charge of seminary being a cause of deficient scholarship among high school students. Securing data from the fifty-two high schools where seminaries were adjacently located, he reported that in 1928, out of a total of 2,017 students, 1,019, or 55% were also seminary graduates. The seminary graduates had an average scholarship grade of 83.3,

²²⁸ Buchanan, 78.

compared to their non-seminary counterparts, who had an average grade of 81. The figures from 1929 reflected roughly the same conclusion, with an average grade of 83.6 among seminary graduates, and an average of 81.6 among non-graduates.²²⁹

Addressing Williamson's charge of seminary attendance affecting college performance, Merrill cited statistics from Brigham Young University, where seminary graduates enjoyed an average grade of 75.6 over 71.3 of the non-seminary students. At the Utah State Agricultural College seminary graduates earned an average grade of 81.42. The average grade of non-seminary graduates there was 79.36. The University of Utah had declined to provide statistics. Merrill acknowledged the extra work required of seminary students but he responded that there was "no excellence without labor" and "no royal road to learning." If students were failing to excel, it was more likely the result of too little study rather than the fault of the seminary.²³⁰

Answering concerns that seminary studies prevented students from graduating, thereby costing the state more money, Merrill's analysis showed only one student in 1928 in the state of Utah whose failure to graduate from high school was linked to his seminary studies. In 1929, three students gave seminary as their reason for not graduating. Of these, only one had returned to complete their studies. Having begun to establish his case, Merrill now leveled an accusation at the state inspector: "Can there be any

²²⁹ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *A Reply to Inspector Williamson's Report to the State Board of Education on the Existing Relationship Between Seminaries and Public High Schools in the State of Utah and Comments Thereon by a Special Committee of the Board*, issued as a letter to the Utah State Board of Education, May 3, 1930, Box 57, Folder 13, Buchanan Collection, AO149.xml, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, 4, hereafter referred to as the *Merrill Report*. While it is likely several figures authored this report, it was sent under Merrill's signature and he should be considered, if not its sole creator, to at least be responsible for it. For the sake of clarity, and so as to not confuse this report with the Williamson report, I will refer to the words in this report as Merrill's, knowing other unidentified church officials may have also had a hand in writing them. A copy of the original document may be found in Appendix D of this work.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

justification for a school official making grave charges against an institution without having facts to substantiate his charges?”²³¹

Next, Merrill addressed the accusations that the seminary program cost the taxpayers thousands of dollars. He responded that they were in fact saving thousands of dollars. Quoting statistics from the Williamson report, Merrill pointed out that if seminary provided one-sixteenth of a student’s high school credit, it was work being done for the state cost-free. Elimination of the seminary program would require the additional hiring of teachers and expansion of classroom space to cover the classes it provided.

Merrill further responded by citing questionnaires sent from the Church office of education to superintendents of school districts where seminaries operated. The letters asked two questions: “1) Are the LDS seminaries in your district a financial burden to the public school funds? That is, if they should cease to exist would the expense of operating your high schools be increased, diminished, or not affected? 2) Is the influence of the seminary helpful or hurtful to the high school and the students? That is, does it handicap or otherwise [impair] high school discipline, efficiency or morale?”²³² Of the superintendents questioned Merrill reported that “nearly all” reported expense would be increased if seminaries were eliminated. None said expense would be reduced. In answer to the second question, all but two respondents reported seminaries as being helpful to discipline, efficiency, and morale. The remaining two said they had no evidence either way. Though the reports were issued with promised anonymity, several superintendents volunteered to make public their names, along with statements supporting the seminaries. Superintendent R.V. Larson of Cache County wrote:

²³¹ Ibid., 8.

²³² Ibid., 7.

Should the two seminaries in Cache District cease to function it would cost the district an additional \$6,000 per year at least. I am considering the salaries only, and not the additional room that would be needed at the North Cache High School. Two additional rooms would be needed at North Cache High School, at a cost of four to five thousand dollars per room, and the situation would be such that it would be inadvisable to build two rooms alone, so four rooms would be built, at a cost of \$16,000 to \$20,000.

Our high schools were a fair size when the seminary work was introduced. Immediately principals and teachers commented on the wholesome effect they seemed to have on the student body. There was evident a better tone in the high school and a higher moral plane. It could not be otherwise with most of the students coming in daily contact with a high school class teacher, who was emphasizing the ideals of right-living.

For twenty years I have been partly responsible in an administrative way for the introduction of changes in the course of study in the State as a whole and in the Cache schools in particular. I have seen highly lauded schemes introduced and have seen them fail, and we have silently buried them. The seminaries were expected to give the high school pupil a foundation for moral integrity and character development. They are doing so to a surprisingly successful extent. They seem one thing that is coming up to expectations.²³³

Other superintendents responded similarly. One who remained unidentified wrote, "I am very glad to say that we consider that a portion of our teaching load is being carried by the seminaries. We consider ourselves fortunate in having the present seminary arrangement."²³⁴ In all, sixteen superintendents responded, none citing seminary as an added financial burden.

When it came to the expense needed to transport students to schools, and therefore adjacent seminaries, Merrill responded even more cuttingly. He drew notice to the fact that even Williamson himself had admitted seminaries did not increase the public expense. He pointed out the absurdity of this charge:

As to bus transportation, we admit frankly that the seminary is benefited by the transportation system of the high school. So is the corner grocery, the refreshment stand, the shop, the business house, and the town

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid., 8.

as a whole in which the high school is located. It could not be otherwise. But within the meaning of the law no sane person would assert that because these places are benefited by the presence of the high school in the community they are therefore supported, in part, in any legal sense whatsoever, by the money of the taxpayers.²³⁵

Merrill continued, observing that the instead of costing the state money, the Church had been shouldering a significant amount of the work of providing the state with education. He cited schools such as LDS College, Dixie College, and the other junior colleges under Church control as institutions saving state funds by providing education for the young. There is perhaps an air of irony in Merrill making these statements while he was simultaneously working to pass these assets on to the state, but the fact remained that the Church had borne a great part of the educational burden of state for the better part of its history.

Merrill must have known the most serious part of Williamson's charges consisted of the church and state violations of the seminary program. Recognizing this, his strongest arguments were saved for this issue. Comparing seminaries to private schools he wrote:

It is the practice of the public schools of America to give credit on transfer from private schools; and further, the public schools accept credit on transfer from reputable private schools for subjects that they themselves do not teach. This is common practice in America. To regard this practice as illegal seems a draught on the imagination. The schools of America have established their relations upon a basis of confidence. The public school has confidence in the honor and integrity of the reputable private school, so private school certificates are commonly accepted by the public school.²³⁶

Merrill readily admitted that the Utah Constitution prohibited the use of public funds for religious purposes but he also acknowledged liberal interpretations of the

²³⁵ Ibid., 9.

²³⁶ Ibid., 11.

provision abounded. For example, the Utah Legislature paid for the salaries of its chaplains, the State Senate opened with prayer, chaplains were allowed to pray in the United States Army and Navy, and so forth. Merrill asked, “Does this violate the Constitution? Literally, yes, a layman might say; in spirit, no, we believe every court would interpret it.”²³⁷

Next Merrill observed that it was general practice for colleges throughout the country to grant credit for Bible courses taught in a non-sectarian manner. Merrill cited several cases of universities in Iowa and Montana. He cited the warm reception the Institute program had received at the University of Idaho and the Utah Agricultural State College as examples of how well state institutions worked with the Church’s religious education programs. Further, Merrill presented a study showing that twenty-six other states allowed credit for religious education. Only fifteen had no form of religious instruction affiliated with public schools. In most states public school time was being used for religious instruction. Quoting a Columbia University study, statistics were cited to prove this:

In reviewing this data with regard to the use of ‘public school time’ for religious education, we note: that thirty-four states are using public school time; that in fourteen states public school time is not used, being restricted by legal or official educational decisions in five states, while no adverse statute, opinion, or decision restricting this practice in the other nine states of this group, exists. Seven states, in the first group, have legal or official sanction for using public school time, four of these states having adopted specific statutes toward this end. Within the last three years, bills have been introduced into the legislatures seven other states providing for the use of ‘public school time’ . . . this practice is growing in legal favour, and . . . there is a tendency to interpret our school laws not with a ‘blind adherence to the strict letter of the statute,’ but with ‘the broad intent of the law’ in mind . . .²³⁸

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid., 16-17.

Merrill then used an article from the *International Journal of Religious Education* to show released time to be common practice in states from all over the nation. Examples were provided from Bridgeport, Connecticut; White Plains, New York; Dayton and Toledo, Ohio; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Oak Park and River Forest, Illinois; Kansas City, Kansas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Portland, Oregon.²³⁹

Merrill pointed out that the virtues of the seminary system even received praise from the U.S. Commissioner of Education:

On a visit to Utah, when he was United States Commissioner of Education, Hon. J.J. Tigert said to Mr. Robert D. Young, who at the time was a member of the State Board of Education, that he had made some study of the LDS seminary system in cooperation with public high schools and thought it one of the finest arrangements in the land. He said he believed this method of religious character training would, in the near future, be adopted by the whole United States.²⁴⁰

Going back to his experience with the first seminary at Granite High School, Merrill explained how the program had received unanimous approval from the local school authorities, including the Superintendent of Public Instruction. In addition, the state had passed a law on January 5, 1916, allowing credit for Bible study.

Merrill candidly admitted that the Williamson report was correct in some particulars, and explained action being taken to correct these faults. He wrote:

It may be that the teaching of the Bible has not always been free from sectarianism. But the office of the LDS Department of Education has urged that the teaching be non-sectarian. This has been the objective of the Department. We are quite sure that departures from this kind of teaching have not been frequent or general, even though the Inspector infers to the contrary. We have data on this point from every seminary teacher. We know whereof we write. Revised lessons on the Old and New Testaments, now in the course of preparation, will certainly be free

²³⁹ Ibid., 17-18, A full citation for which specific issue of the *International Journal of Religious Education*, though it is cited as the official publication of the International Council of Religious Education, and was written by Myron C. Settle, the council's director of Vocational and Weekday Schools.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 19-20.

from sectarianism. Samples of these lessons have recently been furnished members of the State Board.

He raised a valid point in asking if it was possible for any subject, at any school, to be taught without some measure of religious, atheistic, or political bias attached to it. Too narrow an interpretation of the law could act as a two-edged sword. It was valid to suggest that secularism in itself was a kind of religion.

Questioning the inspector himself, Merrill asked why, as far as could be ascertained, he had not spoken personally to any high school or seminary principals about the problem before submitting his report. Why were all those involved not consulted before charges were made? In the past the LDS Department of Education asked him to contact them if he found anything questionable in their practices.

Merrill's next appeal was to the public sense of justice. The Church had thrown its entire support toward public education. Church academies had been abandoned and in many cases donated to the state, in large measure helping to give birth to Utah's public schools. In many cases buildings had been generously given to provide housing for public schools. This transfer took place in large measure *after* the 1916 law, in good faith that the right to released time and Bible credit were assured. If the Church had known the state would go back on its word, it would never have abandoned its academies in the first place. Merrill felt the assurance of continued religious education side by side with state education had played a key role in brining LDS citizens to the support of the public school system.²⁴¹

Speaking boldly, Merrill addressed the issue that perhaps the report was colored with sinister tones. Was the report motivated by religious intolerance? Was it an attack

²⁴¹ Ibid., 21-22.

on the legality of released time religious education, or the cultural dominance of the LDS Church in Utah? Such suggestions may have been uncomfortable for the state board, but it was impossible to ignore this figurative “elephant in the room.”

The adoption of the committee’s suggestions means the death of the seminary, and the enemies of the seminary all know it. But why do they want to kill something that every high school principal and school superintendent of experience says is good, being one of the most effective agencies in character training and good citizenship that influences the students? Is religious prejudice trying to mask in legal sheep’s clothing for the purpose of stabbing the seminary, this agency that has had such a wonderful influence in bringing a united support to the public schools?²⁴²

The report, concluding with such incendiary language, clearly indicating to the Board that Merrill was not going to let their resolutions pass without a fight. It also presented compelling evidence for the legality of the seminary program. Challenged in court, the Church held a good chance of winning.

In the aftermath of Merrill’s rebuttal, the Board did not show much inclination to back down either, though it now had to consider the consequences of legal action if it did move to end credit and released time. In June 1930, the Board briefly considered the possibility of a “friendly lawsuit” to answer the constitutional questions raised by the Williamson report, and briefly initiated a search to find a taxpayer who would bring the suit.²⁴³ Merrill also expected that the fate of seminary might ultimately have to be decided in court and he was ready for the challenge. In July 1930 he told a gathering of BYU students that the Church would “fight to the bitter end” to save its seminaries, and that the controversy might eventually end up in the Supreme Court.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Ibid., 23-24.

²⁴³ “Status of Church Seminaries Seek Court Decision,” *Deseret News*, June 28, 1930, 3.

²⁴⁴ “LDS Church to Wage Seminary Fight to Finish,” *Salt Lake Telegram*, July 3, 1930, 6.

In the months that followed, the Church continued its offensive to save the seminary program. In September 1930 an editorial appeared in the *Deseret News* laying the case before the public. Many of the arguments in Merrill's report were repeated, with some new appeals. The editorial stated that the United States was a Christian nation, and spoke of the ill effects of the nation's youth being raised without religion.²⁴⁵ In November, Merrill gave a major address at the LDS tabernacle in Salt Lake City defending the Church's educational policy. He quoted a Utah educator, who said:

The ideal situation would be seminary near every high school where there are sufficient numbers of LDS Church members. The Church never was a leading competitor of the state in education. The value of the human soul cannot be measured and leading educators are coming to see that public schools must have allies. The public schools are not permitted to teach doctrine and I think rightly so, but I think it will be the seminary that will supply the need.²⁴⁶

In spite of the threat of its impending demise, Merrill continued to expand the seminary program. When LDS College closed at the end of the 1931 school year, the seminaries expanded in the Salt Lake area to provide for the influx of LDS students who would now be attending public high schools. However, since released time was still restricted in Salt Lake City, the announcement of this move served to prod the Board into changing its mind. It read, "It is necessary that the seminary classes will be held at the hours specified (before and after school), since Salt Lake City schools *do not follow the precedent of the other schools in the state and the nation in giving released time during the school hours for this type of study.*"²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ Buchanan, "Masons and Mormons," 79.

²⁴⁶ "Church Works to Educate All Its Members," *Deseret News*, Nov. 3, 1930, 4. Unfortunately, the name of the educator who made this statement is not mentioned in the article, and I have been unable to locate the original text of the speech.

²⁴⁷ "Church Extends Programs at Three Seminaries in Salt Lake to Make Up for LDS College Closing," *Deseret News*, Aug. 8, 1931, emphasis added. See also Buchanan, 81.

The State Board Decision - 1931

The Church offensive had given the Utah State Board pause. Perhaps unaware that the issue would stir up such a hornet's nest of opposition, it was more than a year after Merrill made his appeal that the Board met and voted on the question. The vote came out six to three in favor of continuing the credit policy for seminary.²⁴⁸

Demonstrating how divisive the issue in the community had become, all six of the board members favoring retention were Latter-day Saints, while the three dissenters were not.²⁴⁹ The victory, however, came with a cost. The Board unanimously agreed to adopt two rules designed to increase the separation between the schools and seminaries. First, the Board ordered a complete disassociation of the seminaries from high schools as to physical plants, faculty records, and publications. Next, local boards of education were ordered to limit the time given to seminary instruction to no more than three hours a week during the regular high school hours.²⁵⁰

The Board felt this fix was only temporary – that someday it would have to be resolved in court. C.N. Jensen, the board chairman and state superintendent of public instruction, accurately diagnosed that the issue would “continue to arise until the legal and constitutional issues involved were settled by judicial decision.” Jensen was correct, though neither side could have possibly guessed how much time would transpire before that day came.

Skirmishes continued in the ensuing decades. A year after the Board's decision, Oscar Van Cott, a principal at Bryant Junior High School, gave an incendiary speech regarding seminaries at the annual convention of the Utah Educator's Association.

²⁴⁸ “State Retains Credit Rating of Seminaries,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sept. 24, 1931.

²⁴⁹ Buchanan, “Masons and Mormons,” 80.

²⁵⁰ *Tribune*, August 8, 1931.

VanCott minced no words regarding his feelings, saying, “Church seminaries as they are currently functioning in conjunction with the public schools are an evil more subtle, farther reaching, more dangerous and unwise than the cigarette evil, the Church is encouraging and fostering a direct violation of the state constitution and statute in operating the seminaries, and school officials who allow the functioning of the seminaries are guilty of a crime.”²⁵¹ The Church responded with a *Deseret News* editorial repeating the basic arguments for the legality of seminary. The controversy eventually sputtered out, though it did serve to illustrate how heated feelings were on the part of some educators.

When Merrill departed in 1933 to serve as European Mission president the battle continued to rage. When he returned, Merrill served on the Church General Board of Education, even helping to coach his successors through similar crises. When a similar debate sprang up in 1948, Merrill counseled Franklin L. West, the current Church commissioner of education, to adopt his old strategy of sending questionnaires about the seminary program to the local superintendents.²⁵²

In the end, the final question was decided long after Merrill’s death. Released time was finally granted in the Salt Lake school district in 1956.²⁵³ Institute credit continued with varying degrees of success, until the early 1970s when it was de-emphasized by the Church.²⁵⁴

The final decision regarding the legality of released time and credit for Bible study came in 1978, by a decision made by Judge Clarence A. Brimmer, in Logan, Utah.

²⁵¹ “Teacher Flays Seminaries at UEA Session,” *Deseret News*, October 29, 1932, 3.

²⁵² Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin L. West, Salt Lake City, April 21, 1948, Merrill Papers, Accn. 1062, Box 57, Folder 10, Special Collections, U of U.

²⁵³ Buchanan, “Masons and Mormons,” 111.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

In a suit between certain citizens of Cache County and the Logan Board of Education, the judge ruled that the practice of granting students released time for religious study was legal. He also ruled that the practice of the local high school providing credit for Bible study was illegal under constitutional provisions for the separation of Church and State.²⁵⁵ The decision was later upheld by the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals in Denver in 1981.²⁵⁶ Though the decision technically only affected one school district, the Church chose to withdraw from seeking credit for Bible study at every high school.²⁵⁷

Legacy of the 1930-31 Crisis

While Merrill and his contemporaries may have felt that the 1931 decision by the Utah School Board was only a temporary fix, it established an important legal precedence for seminary. In the smallest sense, Merrill had delayed the decision for at least a generation. It was forty-seven years before the question was finally settled. The battle was fought on and off in the Salt Lake district, but the growth of the seminary program remained stable elsewhere. Its fallout, however, would continue to impact Church education until the present.

Merrill felt strongly that released time *and* the guarantee of credit were critical to the survival of seminary. In light of the seminary's successful continuance today without the offer of credit, it must be asked, why did Merrill feel so strongly about the retention of seminary credit? There are several possibly reasons why he developed this attitude. First, he had gone to great lengths in 1912 to ensure students enrolled in seminary would receive credit for Bible study and defended it vigorously during the crisis. In addition,

²⁵⁵ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 188.

²⁵⁶ Buchanan, "Masons and Mormons," 111.

²⁵⁷ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 17.

there were many indications the allowance of seminary credit helped compel educators to support seminary. Writing to T. Edgar Lyon in 1931, Merrill commented on this issue:

I am a little bit amused at the attitude of your high school principal in preferring that our courses of study remain just as they are. You did not have to give his reasons, but there is only one reason that I can imagine that he would have any right to have. This is the reason that some few other high school principals have expressed, namely, all the work that first year high school student does should be credit work. Now, since Church History and Doctrine does not receive credit from the high school, there are some principals who prefer that the students for the first year or two take some other than this subject. For this reason, nearly all of our students will find it advisable to have one or more classes the coming year in either the Old or New Testament, in some cases in both.²⁵⁸

Finally, Merrill simply believed seminary would be too great a sacrifice without a promise of some school credit. In his report to the state board he wrote, “But suppose credit be denied and released time be given. If this would not kill the seminary then it would certainly greatly aggravate the conditions the inspector complained of – overloading the student with work.”²⁵⁹ His desire to retain credit led him to make some compromises that today might seem contrary to the current LDS philosophy of education, but Merrill was willing to make sacrifices to ensure the continuation of credit for Bible study.

To comply with his promises made to the state board to eliminate sectarian teachings in the credit classes, Merrill formed committees to rewrite the Bible courses and eliminate any references from the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price. Merrill appointed Guy C. Wilson, Obert C. Tanner, John Henry Evans, and other seminary teachers to rewrite materials. Tanner was given the specific charge of the New Testament course of study, which resulted in a new manual, *The New*

²⁵⁸ Joseph F. Merrill to T. Edgar Lyon, May 9, 1931, Salt Lake City, Box 17, Folder 15, Reel 10, T. Edgar Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Special Collections, BYU.

²⁵⁹ *Merrill Report*, 24.

Testament Speaks. The new volume contained no quotations from Latter-day Saint scriptures.²⁶⁰ The non-credit course, “Church History and Doctrine,” was expected to cover these works. Merrill insisted on greater adherence to the non-sectarian policies by seminary teachers. Even before the crisis, Merrill authorized the Old Testament course to begin with Abraham, rather than Adam and the Garden of Eden.²⁶¹ This practice was continued by his successor, Franklin L. West.²⁶² In order to compensate for the loss of this material, a supplement to the Church History textbook was published in 1933 which quoted many of the LDS scriptures relevant to the Old and New Testament.²⁶³ The textbook for Church History, *The Heart of Mormonism* by John Henry Evans underwent revisions also, with revised editions published in 1933 and 1935. In a foreword to the 1935 edition, Guy C. Wilson indicated that the revisions took place to enable “a change of emphasis from the details of Church history and doctrine to a clear understanding of the message and mission of the Church and the means by which the great objectives for which it was founded may be realized.”²⁶⁴

Administrative changes were also initiated to comply with the wishes of the state board. Registration was carried out in a separate building, seminary photographs and activities were not allowed to be shown in high school yearbooks, and seminary teachers

²⁶⁰ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 45.

²⁶¹ It was already Church practice to begin Old Testament studies in seminary with Abraham. The Old Testament textbook in use at the time, which was published in 1930, begins with the life of Abraham, leaving out any earlier history. See Ezra C. Dalby, *The Land and Leaders of Israel*, Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1930, 1.

²⁶² Milton L. Bennion, *LDS Seminary Years*, Oral History Interview by Frederick S. Buchanan, 1983, Box 59, Folder 10, Buchanan Collection, AO149.xml, Special Collections, U of U.

²⁶³ see Ernest E. Bramwell, *Supplement to the Heart of Mormonism*, Salt Lake: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Department of Education, 1933.

²⁶⁴ John Henry Evans, *The Heart of Mormonism*, 2nd ed., Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1935.

were forbidden from seeking any privileges not already available to any citizen in their respective communities.²⁶⁵

Was credit so vital that such changes needed to be made? Merrill felt it was. In this judgment he may have been misguided. When credit for seminary study was abolished in the 1970s, the Church feared a serious drop in seminary enrollments. When the move came enrollments were not seriously affected, in large measure because of Church action taken to involve local authorities in recruitment and enrollment.²⁶⁶ However, while enrollment remained stable, the long lasting effect on the lack of credit concerning class discipline, scholasticism, and engagement can perhaps never be measured.

Conclusions and Summary

The Williamson report to the Utah State School Board in 1930 presented a serious threat to the continued survival of the seminary system. The situation was critical on the Church's part because it came during the final stages of its efforts to divest itself of its colleges and schools and relied solely upon the seminary and institute systems to provide religious instruction to its youth. With Church finances making the return of an academy system impossible, it became imperative to defend the legal right of released time seminary and credit for Bible study. Merrill moved to counter the Williamson report by presenting his own study to the state board which showed many inconsistencies in the original report. While debate went on for several months, the state board ultimately chose to continue released time and credit, a victory for the Church. At the same time, the board moved to bring about a greater separation between the state's high schools and

²⁶⁵ Berrett, *A Miracle*, 46.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

the seminaries. Merrill complied with this directive by making similar changes himself. He further worked to retain credit by appointing committees to rewrite seminary curriculum so it was less sectarian in nature. While the question was not decided with finality until the 1970s, Merrill's fierce defense of the legal rights of the seminaries put off the decision to eliminate credit and established part of the legal justification for the continuance of released time religious education today.

CHAPTER SIX

JOSEPH F. MERRILL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS

While the legislative, legal, and logistical challenges of the office of Church Commissioner of Education occupied a great amount of Merrill's time, he also spent a good deal of time working to provide training and secure employment for the educators serving under him. Providing quality religious education was the foremost concern of Church leadership. With the onset of the Great Depression, Merrill found himself struggling to keep the teachers employed. In the face of severe financial challenges, Merrill pushed the system to retain as many teachers as possible, while ensuring the growth of the system. He was also able to launch programs to ensure higher education for religious educators. Under Merrill's leadership Church education successfully navigated the dangers of the Depression and gained a new sense of professionalism.

Merrill's Expectations for Church Education

Merrill had clear ideas of the type of men he wanted serving as religious educators. Writing on behalf of the department of education in 1931 he listed requirements for seminary teachers as a "college graduation, fulfillment of State Board requirements for senior high school teaching, honorable release from a mission for the Church, and activity in Church work in the stake or ward where the applicant lives."²⁶⁷ In addition to these standards, Merrill also spoke of the less tangible elements looked for in possible candidates:

²⁶⁷ Joseph F. Merrill, "Department of Education News," Aug. 29, 1931, Box 1, Folder 3, Joseph F. Merrill collection, Accn. 1062, Special Collections, U of U.

Character and scholarship are fundamental, but so also is personality. A successful seminary teacher must be a lover of young people and a person who is attractive to and respected by them. He must be a natural leader of the young. In high school, students usually accept any teacher provided them as a matter of course. Their studies are largely prescribed and they follow them without much question. Not so in the seminary. Students do not have to attend. They may go if the teacher is agreeable and attractive, otherwise they will remain away. Hence the seminary teacher is continually faced with a challenge, one that continually keeps him “on his toes.” In consequence seminary teaching is usually very good teaching. This is a fact that will be of interest to students and parents alike.²⁶⁸

Expounding on this concept of teacher charisma, Merrill also wrote:

Scholarship and technique of the teacher are necessary, but success is dependent upon the personality of the teacher. A dictionary is a storehouse of information, but it does not move one to tears. A weak personality may have both technique and scholarship yet fail completely to develop any interest in learning in his pupils. And if his pupils fail to progress satisfactorily, who is to blame?

. . . It is the task of the teacher to make dry things vibrate with life. Can this be done? A really good teacher does this. Should the teacher who fails to do this remain in the classroom? Has he not missed his profession? He has a “job” but he has failed in this opportunity.²⁶⁹

He felt strongly that lessons should be applicable to the student’s lives. He wrote, “Every lesson should, if possible, be made ‘practical’ – be connected with, or made to apply to, some situation, affair, conduct, emotion, etc. of the class members.”²⁷⁰

Merrill was serious about raising the level of teaching in the seminary system. Shortly after accepting the position, he wrote to an former colleague from the University of Utah, requesting the latest books on classroom teaching. Expressing some

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Joseph F. Merrill, Article draft for *Education Review: NEA*, January 4, 1932, Box 11, Folder 3, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Special Collections, BYU.

²⁷⁰ Joseph F. Merrill, “How May the Church Assist in Character Education?,” Article draft for the *Deseret News*, December 7, 1929, Box 11, Folder 1, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Special Collections, BYU.

exasperation, he wrote, “We have a few teachers whose teaching technique must greatly improve if they remain in our system.”²⁷¹

His desire for improvements in the educational system stemmed from his beliefs about the absolute necessity of passing faith from one generation to the next. He is known to have said, “If we save the youth of the Church, we have saved the Church.”²⁷² He felt strongly about the vital nature of the seminary as well, and laid plans to rapidly expand it. In 1930 he wrote, “Sooner or later it is hoped to have a seminary at every public high school, college or university where there is a sufficient number of LDS students to justify the maintenance of a seminary. By this means it is hoped to offer the advantages of week-day class work in religion to every high school or college boy and girl in the Church. The ideal would be every student in seminary.”²⁷³

Relationships with Religious Educators

Merrill adopted a “hands on” approach when it came to his dealings with religious educators, corresponding and meeting with the personally on a regular basis. Initially, most of the teachers in the system were wary of the new commissioner. Russell B. Swensen, a seminary teacher at the time later recalled, “Joseph F. Merrill came along and he didn’t quite have that warmth and liberal perspective [Adam S. Bennion had] but he was a solid scholar.”²⁷⁴

Such an attitude was common upon first meeting Merrill. However, as time went on most of the educators who worked with him learned to appreciate his dedication.

²⁷¹ Joseph F. Merrill to LeRoy E. Cowles, May 6, 1929, Salt Lake City, Box 4, Folder 2, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Special Collections, BYU.

²⁷² Joseph F. Merrill, Address given at Bishop’s conference, April 4, 1947, original copy in Box 2, Folder 39, Merrill Papers, Special Collections, U of U.

²⁷³ Joseph F. Merrill, Article for *Centennial History*, 1930, original draft in Box 1, Folder 12, Merrill Papers, Special Collections, U of U, emphasis in original.

²⁷⁴ Russell B. Swensen Oral History, interview by Donald K. Nielson, Sept. 13, 1978, UA OH 32, Special Collections, BYU, 108, punctuation added.

Obert C. Tanner, another teacher who served under Merrill, wrote: “I came to revere, respect, and love him for his confidence in me. He was not an easy man to become acquainted with. His formality and reserve were difficult to break through. But occasionally I caught a smile on his face and then I knew he approved of what I was trying to do.”²⁷⁵

T. Edgar Lyon, a former student of Merrill’s at the University of Utah who was later hired by Merrill to teach seminary, spoke along similar lines. “It was a wonderful thing to get to know President Merrill. He was a quiet man, but once you got to know him his heart was gold. He was a powerful figure, a man of great spirituality.”²⁷⁶

Those who served with him later on his life noted the same qualities. Future Church President Gordon B. Hinckley, who served under Merrill’s leadership in the European Mission shared his observations on Merrill’s style of leadership:

During the first few days of our acquaintance we regarded him as an austere man. In fact, we thought him severe. But each morning we knelt with him in prayer. Then we studied together for an hour, and worked through the day. The ice melted, and we discovered in our president a remarkable warmth and depth—an example of integrity and loyalty that has helped us over almost a score of years since.

His drive, his Spartan ways, his aloofness, and his searching mind all became understandable when we learned his background—likewise, his unflinching devotion to the Church, and his loyalty to the faith of his pioneer forebears. And when we knew of his achievements in the face of great odds, our own young hearts were quickened to higher endeavor. He did not tell us of these things. The broad facts were gleaned from published sources, and these were readily at hand for a man of Joseph F. Merrill’s distinction. The more intimate details were revealed when occasionally we shared experiences, as missionaries are wont to do, even men with boys when they are working together in the closeness of missionary life.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ Obert C. Tanner, *One Man’s Journey in Search of Freedom*, Salt Lake: The Humanities Center at the University of Utah, 1994, 108.

²⁷⁶ Lyon, Oral History, 108.

²⁷⁷ Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Church Mourns the Passing of Elder Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 145.

Personal visits to classrooms were commonplace for Merrill. Tanner, Lyon, and others spoke of Merrill taking the time to go to seminaries to oversee the work and express his confidence in teachers.²⁷⁸ He often went to great lengths to recruit men he thought were the right teachers for the job. G. Byron Done recalled Merrill traveling all the way to Yellowstone National Park, where he was working as a park ranger, to enlist him to teach seminary in Blackfoot, Idaho. Done accepted the assignment, taught in Blackfoot for eight years, and later became influential in expanding the seminary program into California.²⁷⁹

Merrill worked constantly to ensure the best materials were available for the teachers to use, and expected excellence. Under his direction, all of the textbooks used in the junior and senior seminary courses of study were rewritten.²⁸⁰ Six different texts, with authors ranging from Adam S. Bennion to his brother, Amos N. Merrill, were produced during his tenure as commissioner. Obert C. Tanner, author of three of the texts, offered some insight into Merrill's motives for rewriting the curriculum: "As I talked with Commissioner Merrill in his office, I quickly discerned that one of his major interests was character education, the practical manner of teaching boys and girls to become responsible adults. He mentioned wanting a textbook that fostered discussion among the students."²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ See Tanner, 106-7, also Lyon, Oral History, 86.

²⁷⁹ David B. Rimington, *Vistas on Visions: A Golden Anniversary History of Church Education in Southern California*, Anaheim, CA: Shumway Family History Services, 1988, 1.

²⁸⁰ William E. Berrett, *CES History Resource Files 1899-1985*, CR 102 174, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Five of these six texts were begun before the 1930-31 seminary crisis, though most were revised and released in new editions after Merrill's agreement to more closely monitor the curriculum following the crisis.

²⁸¹ Tanner, 107.

Merrill experimented during his service with new ways of teaching youth. In an effort to eliminate problems with enrollment in released-time seminaries, he instructed seminary principals to teach only one subject each year: Old Testament first, then New Testament, and finally Church History and Doctrine, and then to repeat the sequence. Teachers disliked teaching the same subject every hour. As a result of the experiment, students of different ages were placed in the same class, which many teachers felt intimidated the younger students. The idea may have been ahead of its time. It is interesting to note that almost all released-time seminaries operate on this plan today.²⁸²

In that era, all specifically sectarian doctrine received attention in the Church History and Doctrines. There was so separate course, for example, on the Book of Mormon, a fact which might seem shocking considering the emphasis study of this work is given by Church leadership today. Such an attitude was fairly common at this time. This experiment was eventually abandoned after two years. LDS scholar Teryl Givens notes:

As recently as the pre-World War II years, even Brigham Young University and LDS Institutes did not feature the Book of Mormon prominently or regularly. Brigham Young University would not require that students study the Book of Mormon until 1961, and only in 1972 did churchwide study of that scripture become institutionalized in the Sunday school curriculum.²⁸³

Merrill himself was somewhat of an anomaly when it came to this trend. In a series of radio addresses given in 1931 and again in 1945, he devoted two weeks of his airtime toward testifying of the divinity of the Book of Mormon. He felt the validity of church claims rose and fell of the truthfulness of the book. He testified: “The Book of Mormon

²⁸² William E. Berrett, *A Miracle In Weekday Religious Education*, Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988, 45.

²⁸³ Teryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 241.

is the most marvelous book in print today. No other volume had such a miraculous origin. Is this not true? Then is the book not worthy of the most careful examination of all pertinent matters? Must not a sincere truth-seeker say, 'yes'?'²⁸⁴

Merrill expected faithfulness in the educators serving under him, asking for full compliance with Church standards. He laid special emphasis on the Word of Wisdom, the Church's health code, and the law of tithing, the donation of 10% of each member's income. Writing to the presidents of Church schools in 1929 he said,

The primary purpose of all our schools and seminaries is to develop and promote faith – to make Latter-day Saints. Of course this means that all who are engaged in this work should breathe the spirit of the Gospel, should live blamelessly, observing the teaching of the Church relative to personal conduct, service, etc. I have always believed that tithing and the observance of the Word of Wisdom combined to furnish a pretty reliable indicator of a Latter-day Saint.

As heads of our schools you are, of course, responsible for your faculty and other employees. May we now ask that you encourage all these people to live lives that can be thoroughly approved from the Church point of view? This means, of course, that they should be observers of the Word of Wisdom, as commonly understood, and honest tithesayers. Those who cannot conscientiously do these things should not, we believe, be encouraged to remain in the employ of the Church school system.²⁸⁵

Merrill felt strongly about Church educators practicing what they preached. Integrity, he felt, was the key to good character. These admonitions began early in his service as commissioner. Unknown to him, a serious test of character for all involved was about to begin with the onset of the Great Depression.

Facing the Great Depression

The Great Depression severely affected Church funding for education.

Fortunately for the Church, the process of removing itself from the field of secular

²⁸⁴ Joseph F. Merrill, *The Truth-Seeker and Mormonism*, (Salt Lake: Zion's Press, 1946), 236.

²⁸⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to presidents of LDS Church schools, May 2, 1929, Harris Presidential Papers, cited in Ernest E. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols., Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975, 2:216.

education had already begun, freeing up some endeavors. In 1929, however, the transfer of most schools was still several years away, and so cuts were demanded from all sectors of the educational system. As tithing funds dwindled, it became clear that drastic measures might be called for.

In 1932, the General Church Board of Education announced a cut of ten percent in the salaries of all administrators and teachers in the Church department of education. Franklin S. Harris, the president of BYU, wrote to Merrill expressing the willingness of BYU employees to submit to the cuts. Merrill responded, attempting to explain the reasoning behind the decreases. According to Merrill, the First Presidency had chosen to reduce salaries and retain all of its employees instead of closing any departments or seminaries. Merrill assured Harris that all Church employees were undergoing similar cuts, not just those from the department of education. He reassured him that “a restoration will be made at the earliest feasible time” and explained that “no one wants to cut your budget, at all, but the income of the Church is going rapidly from bad to worse, resulting in the First Presidency looking with very grave concern upon every item of expenditure.”²⁸⁶

While Merrill attributed the plan to the First Presidency, it is likely the “reduce and retain” method originated with him. A year earlier, in 1931, Merrill wrote a letter published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* that suggested the same plan be followed to reduce government expenditures. He wrote:

Instead of reducing expenses by dismissing employees, thus adding to the depression flame, let public and private administrations keep their employees and divide the money available for services among them. This means during the period of depression a reduction in salaries, but it

²⁸⁶ Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, May 2, 1932, Harris Presidential Papers, cited in Wilkinson, 2:226.

means more property owners will be able to pay taxes this fall and it means to keep dire want from the door of many a home.²⁸⁷

Merrill's solution presented here represents his basic strategy for keeping Church education intact during the Depression. As a result few lost their positions, though everyone was asked to make sacrifices.

Merrill saw a spiritual dimension to the problems of this era, believing the Depression was prolonged not simply because of economic factors, but as a result of selfishness. His diagnosis of the problem reflects his mixture of gospel ideals and practical application, along with his own unique brand of optimism:

A cure for [the] depression can be found by providing a job for all who should work for a living. This means short hours of labor, small returns on invested capital, the reduction of all salaries to the requirements of a modest livelihood, and a willingness to regard every man as a brother, all which shall be expressed by a complete observance of the "Golden Rule." This means, of course, that capital, labor, and all individuals shall become unselfish – a revolution involved in our human relations.

. . . If selfishness is to continue unabated then chaos will surely come. I see no other result. But my confidence in the forces of righteousness is too great for me to believe that chaos will come.²⁸⁸

Such noble ideals could be difficult to implement on a practical level. While still better than the unemployment, the effect of the plan upon some educators was grave.

William E. Berrett, seminary teacher at the time, recalled:

The depression affected us in many ways. Our salary for the 1930-31 school years was cut 20% and the contract read "Subject to Cancellation on 30 days notice." There was no certainty that the Church could continue its educational institutions as tithing dwindled. The contract for the 1931-32 school year was reduced another 20%. I had previously reached the unbelievable salary of \$2,380 after five years of

²⁸⁷ Joseph F. Merrill to *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 29, 1931, Salt Lake City, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 11, Folder 1, Special Collections, BYU. In this letter Merrill attributes the creation of this plan to the Bennett Glass and Paint Company.

²⁸⁸ Joseph F. Merrill, "Can the Depression Be Cured?," *Improvement Era*, Nov. 1932, 5-6.

teaching. Now it was cut to \$1700.00. It would be another ten years before my salary again reached the \$2,380 mark.²⁸⁹

Salaries for seminary teachers went into a steep decline during the early years of the Depression. From an average of nearly \$2100 dollars a year in 1932, they dropped to a low of just under \$1600 in 1935, representing a cut of almost a quarter of the total salary.²⁹⁰

In the midst of such hard times, Merrill continued his call for all Church educators to become full tithe payers. Writing to the presidents of Church schools in 1931 he said:

According to reports, there is all too great a number of teachers who pay only a part, if any, tithing. Since all the schools are maintained out of the tithing to the Church, and primarily as agencies in teaching religion to the students, it is felt that the teachers ought to be sincere Latter-day Saints – and the payment of tithing is one test of sincerity. We believe, therefore, that the matter of tithing payments and settlements is a subject for careful consideration.²⁹¹

At Merrill's request, faculty meetings were called at all Church schools to stress the importance of the payment of tithing. As Merrill charged, a surprisingly low number of Church educators were full-tithe payers. At BYU, for example, out of 102 members of the faculty and staff, 49 were full tithe payers, 33 were part tithe payers, and 7 paid no tithing. There were no records for 13 of the faculty, and 1 was not classified.²⁹² During the rest of his service, Merrill continued to urge BYU and the other schools to only employ full-tithe payers and active Latter-day Saints.

²⁸⁹ William E. Berrett, *My Story*, unpublished manuscript, BX 8670.1 .B458m, Special Collections, BYU.

²⁹⁰ Milton Lynn Bennion, *Mormonism and Education*, (Salt Lake: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Department of Education, 1939), 223.

²⁹¹ Joseph F. Merrill to presidents of LDS Church schools, Dec. 4, 1931, Harris Presidential Papers, cited in Wilkinson, 217.

²⁹² Wilkinson, 2:217.

More sacrifice was asked of the school system employees in 1933. That summer the General Board decided to cut salaries by an additional twelve and one-half percent.²⁹³ After so many reductions, the move was demoralizing. One BYU faculty member remarked, “One could almost feel a collective slump of the members [of the faculty] in their chairs.”²⁹⁴ To introduce the move, Harris held a special meeting with the BYU faculty. In spite of the hardships invoked by the move, they expressed their support. Merrill was hopeful that no further cuts would be needed. He wrote to Harris, expressing his hope that “we have now reached the very bottom of the Depression as it affects the Church . . . We hope that this curve will soon take an upward turn.”²⁹⁵ For the most part, Merrill was right, faculty salaries were increased by five percent in 1934-35, though BYU employees received no more general raises until 1942.

Merrill’s plans for expansion of the system were severely limited by the economic crisis. Only five new seminaries were established during his time as commissioner, and after 1931 Church funds were so restricted that no other seminaries were established for several years. With an air of melancholy Merrill wrote to T. Edgar Lyon, “How long are present conditions going to last? Last year and the coming one we are permitted no increase in the number of seminaries, though twenty-five have been asked for. This year there is not opportunity, under the instructions we have, to bring in a single new teacher.”²⁹⁶ Merrill was forced in some cases to be flexible with how seminaries were run, in order to keep them functioning. In 1932 when the enrollment of the seminary in

²⁹³ Ibid., 227.

²⁹⁴ Lowry Nelson, *Eighty – One Man’s Way There: A Memoir*, (privately published, 1973), 87, cited in Wilkinson, 227.

²⁹⁵ Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, May 11, 1933, Salt Lake City, Harris Presidential Papers, cited in Wilkinson, 2:227.

²⁹⁶ Joseph F. Merrill to T. Edgar Lyon, April 21, 1931, Salt Lake City, Box 17, Folder 15, Reel 10 T. Edgar Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Special Collections, BYU.

Blanding, Utah dipped below Church requirements, he allowed the seminary to continue if they could find proper teachers who would be willing to serve for half pay. Seminary continued under this arrangement in Blanding until 1954.

Merrill was conscious of the needs of Church educators and strove to insure greater benefits for them. During his tenure he suggested that a retirement policy for teachers be adopted. He was ordered by the General Board to investigate the matter, but was unable to initiate the program, most likely because of the extreme economic conditions accompanying his time in office. The move was finally implemented by his successor, John A. Widtsoe, in 1936.²⁹⁷

Growth of the seminary program, which had been exponential in the 1920s, was greatly diminished due to the Depression. Only five seminaries were established during Merrill's service, with three specifically designed to offset the closing of LDS College in Salt Lake City. Such stagnant growth must have been discouraging for Merrill. Yet the fact that the programs did not shrink in the face of such economic hardships is remarkable. The only exception seems to be the divestiture of the Church junior colleges, which had been planned long before the Depression began. Indeed, in the light of such difficult times, the transfer of the Church schools turned out to be an incalculable benefit. Without the closure of the academies and the transfer of the junior colleges, it is unlikely the seminary and institutes could have survived.

The BYU “Summer School” for Religious Educators

While Adam S. Bennion was still Superintendent of Church Schools he launched a program to better educate the Church's religion teachers. A six-week “summer

²⁹⁷ William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education*, (Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), 41.

school”, held at BYU’s Alpine Summer School at Aspen Grove near BYU, began in 1927. The purpose of the program was to enrich and harmonize the intellectual and theological mindset of all the teachers.²⁹⁸ The main lecturer at this first seminary was LDS apostle John A Widtsoe, who presented a series of five lectures on theological topics.²⁹⁹ This first school was a resounding success. The next summer, with Bennion resigning from his post earlier in the year, and John A. Widtsoe departing to serve as the president of the European Mission, the school continued under Merrill’s direction.³⁰⁰

The year 1929 marked the beginning in a significant movement in Church scholarship. Influenced by Sidney B. Sperry, who had recently received his Master’s degree at the University of Chicago, Merrill invited a teacher from that school, Edgar J. Goodspeed,³⁰¹ to instruct the teachers at the summer school. This marked the first time an outside scholar was brought to instruct religion teachers of the Church. T. Edgar Lyon, a young teacher at the time recalled that though some of the older teachers scoffed at the idea of outside scholarship, the younger teachers were electrified by Goodspeed’s approach to the Bible.³⁰² Lyon later recalled:

He was a marvelous lecturer. I was amazed at the way he had these timed. He would never allow any interruption in the classes. He was of the old school of real scholars. He had a question box and if you

²⁹⁸ Russell B. Swensen, “Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School: A Personal Reminiscence,” *Dialogue*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Summer 1972), 39.

²⁹⁹ The topics presented by Widtsoe were based mostly on the reconciliation of science and religion. For an extensive discussion of all five lectures, see Alan K. Parrish, *John A. Widtsoe: A Biography*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 2003), 364-373.

³⁰⁰ Unfortunately, I have been unable to identify who the main speaker was at the 1928 summer school. Widtsoe had by then departed for Europe, though it is likely that Bennion, who spoke at the 1927 school and remained in Utah, was a participant.

³⁰¹ Goodspeed had been teaching at the University of Chicago since 1902 and was the author of thirty-one books and over forty articles when he taught at the school. He was an expert in Greek and Aramaic, and had already translated the entire New Testament from original languages. See T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., *T. Edgar Lyon: A Teacher in Zion*, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 121.

³⁰² T. Edgar Lyon, *T. Edgar Lyon Oral History*, Interviewed by Davis Bitton, 18 and 25 Nov. 1974, 2, 9, 16 and 30 Dec. 1974, and 6, 13, and 20 January 1975, SLC UT, Special Collections, BYU, T.E. Lyon Collection, Box 2, folder 1, 90.

put a question in he'd answer it the next day, but when he started to talk you didn't interrupt his talking. He would start lecturing and he'd finish his lectures on the last sentence and the bell would ring. I haven't seen anything so well timed in all my life. Then on Friday's we'd have a free-for-all discussion on what we wanted.³⁰³

Other teachers were similarly impressed. Milton L. Bennion recalled, "I've never listened to a person more beautifully prepared to lecture."³⁰⁴

Goodspeed introduced "higher criticism" to the Bible, an approach designed to lead students to see the Bible and other scriptures as a text open to the same kind of criticism as Shakespeare's plays. Lyon described his method as explaining "a background of the culture and the politics and the religious movements of the time without destroying the idea of divinity or inspiration."³⁰⁵

Goodspeed's own religious convictions were more nebulous. Lyon recalled that he was "not enough of a believing Christian to believe there was one church that was right although he was nominally a member of the Baptist Church."³⁰⁶ Goodspeed himself came away with a positive impression of the experience. From his vacation later that summer he wrote to Sidney B. Sperry, "It was very kind of you to think of me as a possible lecturer at Provo, and I don't think I ever taught a more significant group in my life. In fact nothing less than such an opportunity would have drawn me from this island retreat for 6 weeks work."³⁰⁷

The experiment proved so successful that Merrill engaged another scholar from the University of Chicago, William Creighton Graham, to teach the next summer.

³⁰³ Ibid., 93.

³⁰⁴ M. Lynn Bennion, *Recollections of a School Man: The Autobiography of M. Lynn Bennion*, (Salt Lake: Western Epics, 1987), 85-87.

³⁰⁵ T. Edgar Lyon, *Oral History*, 91.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 93.

³⁰⁷ Edgar J. Goodspeed to Sidney B. Sperry, Aug. 5, 1930, Paradise Island, Wisconsin, Sidney B. Sperry Collection, UA 618, Box 1, Folder 2, Special Collections, BYU.

Graham was an Old Testament scholar, and similar to Goodspeed, espoused methods of biblical criticism as a way of understanding the text. One student present described his method as emphasizing “the human equation in the development of the moral and religious ideals of the Bible.”³⁰⁸ The next summer two more academics from Chicago, John T. McNeil and William C. Bower, were engaged to teach. McNeil was medieval church historian, and Bower a specialist in religious education.³⁰⁹

Why this sudden outpouring of outside scholarship into the environment of Church educators? One significant factor was the influence of Sidney B. Sperry. Sperry first became a seminary teacher after graduating from the University of Utah, and serving in World War I. Almost immediately he became dissatisfied with the elementary sources available to him and his own lack of training. He began to seek a suitable school, where he could obtain graduate level schooling, finally choosing the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. In doing so, he sought the counsel of several General Authorities, whose responses to his request were almost unanimously negative. Nevertheless, Sperry persisted and enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1925, eventually receiving an M.A. degree in 1926 in Old Testament languages and literature. After a stint teaching for a year at the newly founded Moscow Institute, Sperry returned to Chicago, obtaining a PhD in 1931. Upon completion of his degree, Sperry secured a leave of absence and spent the 1931-32 traveling in Palestine. At the same time he studied at the American School of Oriental Research and the Hebrew University at Jerusalem.³¹⁰ Sperry’s connections and

³⁰⁸ Bennion, *Recollections*, 85-87.

³⁰⁹ Swensen, *University of Chicago*, 38.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

influence must be considered as a major factor in initiating the movement to have outside scholars come to summer school at Aspen Grove.³¹¹

The second major factor was the open academic environment existing in the Church at the time. At BYU, President Franklin S. Harris had created a remarkably open setting. One teacher recalled, “During the 1920s and 1930s, the academic atmosphere at BYU was remarkably free of restraints.”³¹² Influential men in the Church hierarchy contributed to this new openness as well. M. Lynn Bennion recalled, “I believe it was rather remarkable that Dr. Merrill was permitted to provide this kind of program, although the climate for this experience at that time was exceptionally good. Anthony W. Ivins, first counselor in the First Presidency, was open to various points of view; and since he was a powerful influence in the church, this opened the possibility of scholarly approaches to religious education.”³¹³ In this vein, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was at the time filled with more former college professors than perhaps at any other time in its history. Such academic luminaries as James E. Talmage, John A. Widtsoe, Richard R. Lyman, all former associates of Merrill’s from the University of Utah, filled the ranks of the Twelve. Merrill himself was called as an apostle in October 1931.³¹⁴

Merrill’s own educational experiences had made him more open to seeking experts outside the Church. In his own addresses, he quoted extensively from sources outside the Latter-day Saint community.³¹⁵ Merrill was enamored with Sperry’s scholarship and trumpeted his achievements at the University of Chicago by having

³¹¹ Ibid., 40.

³¹² Nelson, *Eighty*, 93, cited in Wilkinson, 262.

³¹³ Bennion, *Recollections*, 85-87.

³¹⁴ Arnold K. Garr, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard O. Cowan, *The Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 2000), 737.

³¹⁵ For an example of this, see Joseph F. Merrill, “Why a Religious Education?” *Deseret News*, Saturday, March 24, 1928.

dispatches from Sperry published in the Church News section of the *Deseret News*.³¹⁶ He was enthusiastic about having a corps of highly trained men in the faculty of the institutes and the department of religious studies at BYU. It seemed natural to him that a man asked to teach religion should seek a degree in divinity. This view is well stated in a letter to the committee seeking Sperry's replacement at the Moscow Institute:

Our Director should have a scholarship in the Biblical and religious field comparable to the scholarship that the University would demand of any one appointed to head on the departments. For example, if the University is looking for some one to head the department of Physics, it will limit its search to a trained physicist. Two years ago Brother Sperry was probably the only available man in the Church who could meet this requirement.³¹⁷

Clearly Merrill wanted men to establish a department of religious studies at BYU primarily for training seminary teachers. At the time of Merrill's appointment of Commissioner, there was no department of religion at BYU. The only professor of theology was George H. Brimhall, former president of BYU. Faculty members from other departments handled all other religion classes. Merrill began to initiate changes to begin a Department of Religion early in his tenure. In the 1929-30 school catalog, the title *theology* was changed to *religious education*. In March of 1930 Merrill wrote to Franklin S. Harris, saying "The Department of Religious Education must have its staff of teachers, specialists in the field, who are devoting their whole time to this work. This of course would not exclude teaching help from other departments. But sooner or later the

³¹⁶ Joseph F. Merrill, "Department of Education Saturday News," Aug. 29, 1931, original draft in Merrill Papers, Accn, 1062, Box 1, Folder 13, Special Collections, U of U. For nearly every week of the years 1931-32, the department of education section in the Church section of the *Deseret News* contained a dispatch from Sperry's travels in the Middle East.

³¹⁷ Joseph F. Merrill to Dr. E.J. Call, Professors G.L. Luke and W.V. Halversen, April 18, 1931, Salt Lake City, Sperry Collection, UA 618, Box 1, Folder 2, Special Collections, BYU.

teaching of this department must be done mainly by specialists in the department.”³¹⁸

Even while he penned these words, Merrill was preparing to launch a controversial program, which would affect the course of Church education for decades.

The University of Chicago Experiment

In the spring of 1930, Merrill selected three men, Daryl Chase, Russel B. Swensen, and George S. Tanner to attend the University of Chicago. His letter to Swensen is probably typical of the invitation all received:

You want to go on with graduate work. We are wondering if you can make it possible to begin such work at the University of Chicago Divinity School at the beginning of this summer quarter. We hope you can. We have certain positions in the higher division of our work which we must prepare suitable men as soon as possible.

If you can go we shall try to secure for you next year half salary and if you need additional funds we think we can help you from the Education Loan Fund.

If you were ready this fall we could place you as Director of one of our Institutes. Will you proceed at once to get ready? The University of Chicago is offering this summer a very fine program in the field of religious education.³¹⁹

The invitation came as a complete surprise to the men, even though after studying under Goodspeed many had expressed a desire to pursue graduate work.³²⁰ Each man was offered half salary and a position when he returned from Chicago. Merrill also made it clear that he expected them to maintain their faith in the Church. Swensen recalled, “Brother Merrill made it emphatic, ‘If you change your point of view in your loyalty you can’t be guaranteed a position.’ He gave me fair warning.”³²¹

³¹⁸ Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, March 28, 1930, box 26, folder M, Harris Presidential Papers, cited in Wilkinson, 2:286.

³¹⁹ Joseph F. Merrill to Russel B. Swensen, March 10, 1930, Salt Lake City, Swensen Collection, MSS 1842, Box 2, Folder 12, Special Collections, BYU.

³²⁰ Swensen, “University of Chicago,” 40.

³²¹ Swensen, “Oral History,” 1.

In sending the men to the University of Chicago Merrill was taking a calculated risk. T. Edgar Lyon, who later joined the experiment wrote, “The University of Chicago is noted as being the most liberal (and that means Modernism) school in America.”³²² Swensen remarked, “because of its emphasis on research, the Divinity School was noted more for its scholarly publications than for its devotional or promotional religious activities.”³²³ Knowing this, why send them there? A large factor must have been Sperry’s previous experience at the school. At the time these three men were sent, Sperry had returned to the University of Chicago to complete his doctorate. Lyon’s biographer points out the irony that only an extremely liberal divinity school would even consider enrolling Latter-day Saint students, who had no design of becoming professional clergy.³²⁴ Even in the liberal environment of Chicago, the men faced religious prejudice. Sperry later confided that as the only ‘Mormon’ at the school he “either made enthusiastic friends or enthusiastic enemies.”³²⁵

Another deciding factor may have been the cost. When Lyon sought advice on where to seek his Master’s degree Merrill wrote back that the University of Chicago would be the cheapest place, with the possible exception of BYU.³²⁶ The Depression was in full swing at this point and, Merrill’s offer to the men of half salary must have seemed an unlikely act of largesse, considering the circumstances. Swensen recalled, “That

³²² T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., 131.

³²³ Swensen, “University of Chicago,” 41.

³²⁴ Ibid., 132.

³²⁵ Sidney B. Sperry to Russel B. Swensen, Nov. 20, 1930, Moscow ID, Swensen Collection, MSS 1842, box 2, Folder 13, Special Collections, BYU.

³²⁶ Joseph F. Merrill to T. Edgar Lyon, Jan. 31, 1931, Box 17, folder 15, Reel 13, Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Special Collections, BYU

generosity and the low prices of the Great Depression, proved to be a great boon to me.”³²⁷

Upon their arrival at the University, the three found a remarkably open and accepting atmosphere. Swensen later wrote, “At no time were we Mormons subjected to blunt inquiries as to our faith and theology. The younger students were very much like our returned-missionary friends in college. They were very friendly and outgoing.”³²⁸ They also kept in constant contact with Merrill, who offered encouragement in their studies and admonitions to keep the faith. “We are glad to find that the religious atmosphere there is full of sympathy and is not wholly critical and scholastic. We trust that there will be no change in this respect. After all, religion is not based upon faith. And religious faith, of course, does not rest wholly upon demonstrable facts. We live in a world of mystery. The more we learn about it the more cause we have for wonderment and astonishment.”³²⁹

The initial results were encouraging. Chase, Swensen, and Tanner all took enthusiastically to their studies. All three chose LDS topics for their master’s theses: Chase writing on Sidney Rigdon, Tanner on “The Religious Environment in Which Mormonism Arose,” and Swensen on the “Influence of [the] New Testament on Latter-day Saint Eschatology.”³³⁰ Merrill encouraged the men to send dispatches home to be published in the *Deseret News*, offering guidance in helping the men prepare their work for presentation to the LDS community in Utah. To Swensen he wrote, “You use the word in the title of your thesis that sends me to the dictionary, and so when you report the

³²⁷ Swensen, Oral History, 1.

³²⁸ Swensen, “University of Chicago,” 41-42.

³²⁹ Joseph F. Merrill to Russel B. Swensen, July 21, 1930, Salt Lake City, Swensen Collection, MSS 1842, Box 2, Folder 12, Special Collections, BYU.

³³⁰ Swensen, “University of Chicago,” 42.

matter for home consumption I suggest you use a sub-title explaining what eschatology is.”³³¹

Merrill also hoped the men would build bridges for the Church to members of other faiths. He wrote, “One thing we believe you boys are doing – creating a friendliness among the instructors of the Divinity School for our people.”³³² With encouraging results, more teachers were sent to Chicago. A total of eleven seminary and institute men earned degrees at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s.³³³

Edgar J. Goodspeed acted as kind of shepherd to the LDS students at Chicago, intervening on their behalf sometimes. His experiences at the BYU summer school left a deep impression on him. Swensen recalled:

At one noteworthy meeting in the autumn of 1930, the president of New Testament club introduced Dr. Edgar J. Goodspeed as the speaker and added he had just returned from Utah where he had been trying “to convert the Mormons.” A titter of laughter broke out. Dr. Goodspeed’s face was red with indignation when he arose and with considerable warmth he asserted he had met some of the finest people and had one of the most enjoyable experiences of his life in his summer at Brigham Young University. He also spoke of his great admiration for the Mormon religion, of its great vitality, its fervent zeal for Christian service, and the dynamics of its lay leadership which bought such a high proportion of men into religious leadership and activity.³³⁴

Goodspeed’s liberality was an asset that benefited the LDS students in opening doors which would otherwise have been closed. Lyon recalled:

When Russ Swensen was back there and wanted to write his masters thesis on the Book of Mormon, he made applications to his committee and Goodspeed was the chairman of the committee. He was

³³¹ Joseph F. Merrill to Russel B. Swensen, June 15, 1931, Salt Lake City, Swensen Collection, MSS 1842, Box 2, Folder 12, Special Collections BYU.

³³² Ibid.,

³³³ T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., 136. The names of the eleven participants were Anthony S. Cannon, Daryl Chase, Carl J. Furr, Therald N. Jensen, Vernon Larson, Wesley P. Lloyd, T. Edgar Lyon, Heber C. Snell, Sidney B. Sperry, Russell B. Swensen, and George S. Tanner. See T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., Chapter 6, footnote 40.

³³⁴ Swensen, “University of Chicago,” 42.

going to write it on the eschatology of the Book of Mormon. I'm quite sure that's the title of his thesis – that is, the idea of the coming of the Messiah that's in the Book of Mormon. A member of the committee objected and said, "That's not a book of scripture." Goodspeed said to them, "It's just as much scripture as any that you have or we have. It's an ancient record or purports to be. That's what we've got in our scriptures here. What's the difference?"³³⁵

All of the teachers who had taught at BYU lauded the quality and vitality of Mormonism.

Graham, the Old Testament Scholar, even remarked to Swensen and Chase that he believed Joseph Smith was inspired of God.³³⁶ When questioned about a set of LDS scriptures given to him by the participants of the BYU summer school, Goodspeed allegedly remarked that they were scriptures, just like the Bible.³³⁷

Despite all the ecumenical benefits of their schooling at the University, there were more disturbing developments taking place as well. T. Edgar Lyon wrote a cutting indictment of what he saw as the problems of the school and its professors:

Down in their hearts they are all either . . . infidels or agnostics . . . I fail to see how a young man can come here to school, and then go out after graduation as a minister of a church, and still preach what we call Christianity. . . All religion is taught as product of social growth and development, and anything supernatural is looked upon as merely a betrayal of one's own ignorance and primitive mind. They make no attempt to harmonize science and the Bible – they merely throw the Bible away, and teach scientific "truths" as the only thing to follow. I have taken a course called "Systematic Theology" this summer. It consisted of a brief discussion of the God of the Old Testament, who was merely a sign of the fear of the Hebrews, how He grew into the Gods of the New Testament, and then Dean Matthews informed us that he only existed in the minds of the believers. . .

Their God, here at this University, is "the cosmic force of the Universe", "the personality producing force of the cosmos," the "in all and all" and a few more phrases just as unintelligible and meaningless. I readily see why the modern preachers talk about psychology, sociology, astronomy, prison reform, etc., in their churches on Sunday – that is all there is left to talk about after they have finished robbing Jesus of His

³³⁵ T. Edgar Lyon, Oral History, 93.

³³⁶ Swensen, "University of Chicago," 40.

³³⁷ T. Edgar Lyon, Oral History, 93.

Divinity, and miracles, and resurrection. In fact, around the Divinity School, the professors are always talking of “the Social Gospel.” I am glad that I do not have to accept such rot, and that I do not have to study [it]. . .

The more I see and hear of it, the more it makes me appreciate the simple truths and teachings of . . . “Mormonism”, even though we are called primitive. I am able to see so many places in the lectures each day that seem to me to be so obviously clear and simple for us to accept, yet these “learned men” pass right over them and can not see anything but their own view. I think they are just as narrow minded in their interpretations as they claim we are in ours.³³⁸

Even more disturbing, in Lyon’s mind, was the reaction of the other LDS students toward these philosophies. He wrote:

We have several of them [LDS students] here on campus who think that they are outgrowing our little narrow-mindedness about our doctrines, and try to go with the world by attempting to take all of the supernatural elements out of our religion . . . I suppose that I am too old fashioned to accept their way of thinking, but I fail to see how we can ever discard these views that have been the building force of the Church. Brother Sperry, who receives his Doctor of Philosophy degree here next Friday, and I are the two “Orthodox Mormons” around here, and many of the others laugh at us, for our simple trusting faith. . .

I am really worried what the outcome of the next thirty years will mean to the church. Even many of the BYU professors are going over to this view, and teaching things that are far more radical than those taught by Peterson and Chamberlain at the time they were dismissed from that institution.³³⁹

Lyon was also concerned about how the research his colleagues were conducted would be received by the Mormon community. Writing to Merrill, Lyon expressed his discouragement at seeing the “indifference of so many of our students from the West.”³⁴⁰

As cracks began to appear in Chicago, there were also indications that all was not well at home. When Merrill, still an enthusiastic supporter of the venture, started to

³³⁸ T. Edgar Lyon to parents, Aug. 21, 1931, Chicago, cited in T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., 131.

³³⁹ T. Edgar Lyon to parents, Aug. 21, 1931, Chicago, cited in T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., 132, 141. Ralph Chamberlain, Joseph Peterson, and Henry Peterson were three BYU professors dismissed by the Church in 1911 after publicly teaching controversial concepts at BYU. See Wilkinson, 1:412-432.

³⁴⁰ T. Edgar Lyon to Joseph F. Merrill, March 1, 1932, Chicago, Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, box 17, folder 16, Reel 13, Special Collections, BYU.

publish the student's writings in the *Deseret News*, the feedback was not positive.

George Tanner remembered:

The topic for my Master's thesis was the religious environment in which Mormonism arose. Now this was exactly the type of thing that Joseph F. Merrill wanted us to get into because here was the genesis and the beginning of the Mormon Church. I was a little amazed when I got in to find some things. For instance, I'd always been taught that the Word of Wisdom . . . was just like lightning out of a clear sky.

I might say when I got back, Joseph F. Merrill asked me to make up an abstract of this thesis and turn it in, which I did and it was printed in the *Deseret News*. I got nasty letters from all over but I had the evidence there.³⁴¹

Merrill was fighting an uphill battle to keep the Chicago program going. The finances of the Church were worsening, making it more difficult to provide funding for the Chicago group. When T. Edgar Lyon requested to go to Chicago, Merrill could not offer half salary, as he had for Chase, Swensen, and Tanner. All Merrill could promise was a position upon Lyon's return, and a limited loan from the department's education loan fund. Merrill's letters to Lyon while he studied in Chicago reflect the deteriorating state of Church finances. In 1931 he wrote, "The income of the Church had dropped off so greatly that our financial outlook is very gloomy."³⁴² A year later the news was no better, "Material conditions are not improving here, but are getting worse."³⁴³ When Lyon returned Merrill had to go to great lengths to find him a position. Difficult times had made teachers more hesitant to leave their posts. Merrill finally was able to place

³⁴¹ George S. Tanner Interview, 1972, OH 9, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

³⁴² Joseph F. Merrill to T. Edgar Lyon, Jan. 31, 1931, Salt Lake City, Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Box 17, Folder 15, Reel 13, Special Collections, BYU.

³⁴³ Joseph F. Merrill to T. Edgar Lyon, March 8, 1932, Salt Lake City, Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Box 17, Folder 15, Special Collections, BYU.

Lyon at Ricks College; partially because the school supporters felt another master's degree would increase their chances of being transferred to the state.³⁴⁴

Merrill was also taking fire from other Church leaders who were skeptical of the Chicago venture. He later told Swensen, "Everybody but me was critical of the Chicago educational adventure."³⁴⁵ Increasing pressure put a stop to the visits of the Chicago professors at the BYU summer school. With Sperry and Swensen returning to serve at BYU, there was no longer a need for outside help.³⁴⁶ The expense of bringing the professors to Utah and paying their salaries may have seemed superfluous with Sperry and Swensen at hand. Another reason may have been the withdrawal of support from the Church hierarchy. Merrill's influence was gone when he left to become the president of the European mission in August 1933. When Anthony W. Ivins passed away the next month, it seemed that the era of openness was at an end.³⁴⁷ J. Reuben Clark took Ivins' place in the First Presidency in 1934. John A. Widtsoe replaced Merrill as Commissioner of Education. Neither of them showed any interest in continuing the Chicago experiment.³⁴⁸ With these two changes, the LDS venture at the University of Chicago came to an end.

Legacy of the Chicago Educational Venture

How can the Chicago experience be evaluated in the wider scope of LDS educational history? Its impact is difficult to measure. Of the original eleven men to embark on the venture, five, Sperry, Lyon, Snell, Swensen and Tanner, remained with Church education. Tanner became director of the Moscow Institute, where he remained

³⁴⁴ T. Edgar Lyon, Jr., 137.

³⁴⁵ Swensen, Oral History, 1.

³⁴⁶ Wilkinson, 2:288.

³⁴⁷ *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History*, 559, 736-737.

³⁴⁸ Lyon, Oral History, 90.

for many years. Sperry became distinguished for his role in shaping the department of religion at BYU, as did Swensen. Lyon taught briefly at Ricks College, before leaving in 1933 to serve as the president of the Netherlands mission. Upon his return he resumed what would become a long and fruitful career in LDS education. Some of the men took up careers entirely outside the field of education. Snell taught in the institutes for the rest of his career. Carl J. Furr and Therald N. Jensen took positions outside entirely outside of the field of education. Cannon taught in Church education until 1941, when he joined the Federal Bureau of Investigations. He later became a professor of sociology at the University of Utah.³⁴⁹ Wesley P. Lloyd later became dean of students at BYU. Today an award for distinction in graduate education at BYU is named in his honor.³⁵⁰

Upon their return to Utah, there were some disturbing indications that the philosophies, which had dominated at the University of Chicago, had crept into the returning teachers' way of thinking. In a letter to T. Edgar Lyon, Daryl Chase wrote, "I used to think that I knew how to teach Old Testament to high school students but after my work at the University of Chicago, I discovered what an impossible task it was to teach the Old Testament as it actually is, and at the same time feed the religious life of young boys and girls. For that reason I persuaded my associate teachers to relieve me of all Old Testament duties."³⁵¹ Chase taught in the LDS educational system until 1944, when he left to become to serve as the Dean of Students and later the Director of the College of Southern Utah. Then he served as the president of Utah State University from 1954 to 1968. Even some of those who stayed with Church education seemed affected by

³⁴⁹ Swensen, "University of Chicago," 46.

³⁵⁰ <http://avp.byu.edu/HTML/lloyd.html>(accessed Feb. 13, 2007)

³⁵¹ Daryl C. Chase to T. Edgar Lyon, Feb. 18, 1933, Salt Lake City, Lyon Collection, MSS 2341, Box 17, Folder 17, Special Collections, BYU.

the experience. In later letters, Tanner wrote somewhat sarcastically of the “Chicago Three,” and his difficulty understanding those who are “happy with total orthodoxy.”³⁵²

Speaking of this period of Church education, Boyd K. Packer, a former Church educator and member of the Council of the Twelve offered this evaluation:

There was encouragement, both for the men in the institute program and the teachers of religion at Brigham Young University, to go away and get advanced degrees. “Go and study under the great religious scholars of the world,” was the encouragement, “for we will set an academic standard in theology.”

And a number of them went. Some who went never returned. And some of them who returned never came back. They had followed, they supposed, the scriptural injunction: “Seek learning, even by study and also by faith.” (D&C 88:118.) But somehow the mix had been wrong. For they had sought learning out of the best books, even by study, but with too little faith. They found themselves in conflict with the simple things of the gospel. One by one they found their way outside the field of teaching religion, outside Church activity, and a few of them outside the Church itself. And with each went a following of his students – a terrible price to pay. I could name a number of these men . . . Somehow the mix was wrong: too much “by study” and too little “by faith.”

Happily though, some of those who went away to study returned magnified by their experience and armed with advanced degrees. They returned firm in their knowledge that a man can be in the world but not of the world.³⁵³

As Packer suggested, the experience varied from person to person. Wesley Lloyd wrote, “The PhD program was a rugged, basic and thrilling academic experience in which I found increasing evidence that intensity of feeling is no substitute for a reasoned faith in the Gospel. A mind that is free may tend to lose its fear but not its faith to live by.”³⁵⁴ Anthony S. Cannon recalled:

³⁵² George S. Tanner to Russell B. Swensen, Nov. 20, 1980, Salt Lake City, Swensen Collection, MSS 1842, Box 2, Folder 15, Special Collections, BYU. While this letter does not explicitly state who Tanner was referring to as the ‘Chicago Three,’ it is likely he meant himself, Swensen, and Chase, the first three students to attend the University of Chicago at the Church’s request.

³⁵³ Boyd K. Packer, *That All May Be Edified*, (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1982), 43-44.

³⁵⁴ Swensen, “University of Chicago,” 47.

One did not look for an ultimate theology there – but learned much that helps one to look carefully at data, to separate theory and hypothesis from facts and eternal truths, and to cling to the satisfying realities of being a participant observer of the Mormon way of life – and the meaning of the Church of Jesus Christ to its members, investigators, and to the world. Such training is ideal in preparing a faithful Latter-day Saint to be able to teach and counsel with the growing youth in a modern, changing world.³⁵⁵

Several of the students praised Merrill for his strong support, and spoke enthusiastically of the benefits of the exchange. George S. Tanner wrote:

The LDS department of Education was fortunate in the late 20s and early 30s in having as its Commissioner of Education an eminent scholar who was also a member of the quorum of the Twelve Apostles – Dr. Joseph F. Merrill. Elder Merrill accepted the 13th article of faith, which states, “if there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report . . . we seek after these things,” . . .

The four quarters I spent in Chicago are easily the highlight of my intellectual life. There we were studying with the men who wrote the textbooks . . . Instead of hunting in the bible to find a passage to prove some theological notion, we studied the book itself. Who was the author, to whom was he writing, what message did he have for his audience? It is surprising how clear many passages in the bible became when the whole context is taken into account.

At the same time we were in Chicago, the LDS Department was bringing scholars from there to the BYU campus. I think this resulted in mutual benefit, that is, benefit to the scholars who came and the students they met. The net gain to the LDS department was considerable; we learned that non-Mormon scholars were honest, sincere, and interested in our welfare. We got acquainted with a number of their scholarly books and liked them.

Though there may be some among us who doubted the wisdom of this exchange with the University of Chicago, I feel that Apostle Merrill’s judgment was vindicated. Daryl Chase and Russell Swensen remained at Chicago to complete doctoral degrees while I returned home to become director of the LDS Institute at Moscow, Idaho. Dr. Swensen later became chairman of the history department at BYU and Dr. Chase president of Utah State University. Not a bad record for three Mormon boys from Utah.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ *Collected Statements of former students at the University of Chicago, 1971*, Collected by Russel B. Swensen, Church Archives, MS 206, emphasis in original.

Despite his objections to the philosophies of the professors at the school, T. Edgar Lyon also spoke positively of the experience:

It appears to me that the securing of graduate degrees . . . represents a landmark in an educational outreach which the Church had never known before, and which has profoundly influenced the teaching in the seminaries and institutes since that day. . . It was a time of an intellectual and spiritual awakening which was the entering wedge that put the Church educational system in contact with the ongoing mainstream of Christian scriptural and historical research. This outlook has aided in the metamorphosis of the LDS Church from a sectionally oriented to a worldwide Church in less than forty years.³⁵⁷

Heber C. Snell gave more of a mixed review of the experience of interacting with Chicago scholars:

It was inspired insight, I think, on the part of our Church Commissioner, Dr. Joseph F. Merrill, to bring to the BYU, during three or four summers, eminent scholars from the Chicago Divinity School. They came to teach classes composed of our seminary and institute instructors. Brought up, as our people have been, on a literal and dogmatic interpretation of the Bible, it was a great opportunity for our teachers of religion to learn a better way. . .

Regrettable as it may be, the effect of the visiting scholars on the Church as an institution appears to have been negative. Their work at the Church University seems not to have been appreciated by our Church leaders. As an indication of this, Dr. Edgar J. Goodspeed, eminent though he was as a world authority in manuscript study in the biblical field, was not given the opportunity to speak to a Church-wide audience. There were criticisms of the “Y” for bringing the Chicago men to teach in the summer school. In any case, the plan to continue the project was ended and no such program has been put into effect since.

Speaking only for myself, it is my belief that the scholars from Chicago were a beneficial influence on many who had contact with them.³⁵⁸

Snell was correct in recording the tumult that came from adopting more liberal methods. Public complaints continued, and Church leaders grew more concerned. At the BYU summer school held in 1938, J. Reuben Clark delivered his now famous address,

³⁵⁷ *Collected Statements.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

“The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” which admonished a return to fundamentals. Before giving the address Clark made a thorough review of the curriculum materials being used in Church schools, seminaries, and institutes, underlining phrases he thought were questionable. Clark felt that part of the curriculum were could by taken to imply that the teachings of Jesus Christ were purely ethical and not divine.³⁵⁹ Bringing this knowledge with him, Clark set out to admonish Church educators to emphasize faith. Clark stated that “students fully sense the hollowness of teachings that would make the gospel plan a mere system of ethics . . . you are not to teach the philosophies of the world, ancient or modern, pagan or Christian, for this is the field of public schools. Your field is the gospel.”³⁶⁰

Merrill never left those fundamentals and remained orthodox in his religious views throughout his service to the Church. When B. H. Roberts brought his controversial work, *The Truth, The Way, The Life* to Merrill, seeking an ally in its publishing, Merrill told him he would only approve it if a speculative chapter on pre-Adamites was dropped.³⁶¹ Writing to a concerned parent, he expressed his views on religious education:

If our schools and seminaries are not developing faith, but on the contrary are proving destructive to religious faith, then they have no right to exist. My feeling is that religious training is the most important kind of training and that religious teaching is more important than any other kind of teaching.

I have been talking this morning with two brethren, each at the head of a seminary or school, and expressed to them my own feeling, which is that we should let the mysteries slide and bear down heavily upon

³⁵⁹ Wilkinson, 2:243.

³⁶⁰ J. Reuben Clark, *The Charted Course of the Church in Education*, (Salt Lake: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), 12. For a summary of the circumstances surrounding the delivery of this speech, see Scott C. Espin, “Charting the Course: President Clark’s Charge to Religious Educators,” *The Religious Educator*, (Vol. 7, No. 1, 2006), 103-119.

³⁶¹ Joseph Raymond Dewey, *My Experiences With the General Authorities*, Church Archives, MS

fundamentals. Religious faith is entirely logical and the fundamentals of religion can be supported by the truths of science or truth from any other field of human endeavor. And we should employ truth from different sources as a means of developing religious faith. I have been so intimately in contact with certain fields of science that I have grown to the conviction that the truths of science are powerful tools to help us in the development of religious faith. But mysteries and theories should in so far as possible be left out of our theology classrooms.³⁶²

Merrill was Gordon B. Hinckley's mission president. President Hinckley wrote of Merrill: "He prayed as a humble, thankful man, and his requests were modest. His theology was likewise simple. The "mysteries" held no appeal for him. To discuss them was idle speculation. He dealt with basic fundamentals and taught as one without doubt—yet with a certain caution, restricting himself to what he could support from the standard works of the Church."³⁶³ Church President Harold B. Lee recalled an experience where a new General Authority approached Merrill seeking advice on a topic for a general conference address. In reply to this inquiry, Merrill smiled, and remarked, "My dear brother, I don't understand that you and I are expected to bring forth anything new."³⁶⁴ It is clear Merrill was firmly grounded in the faith, and had no love for theological speculation.

Why did Merrill endorse the Chicago relationship? Merrill had little fear of sending the students to Chicago because of his own experiences at Michigan and Johns Hopkins. He had successfully navigated the shoals of academic life and kept his faith intact, why wouldn't others be able to do so as well? Other Church leaders saw Merrill as a prime example of how a person could receive higher education without harming their faith. Church president Joseph Fielding Smith wrote:

³⁶² Joseph F. Merrill to Joseph S. Peery, Feb. 6, 1928, Salt Lake City, Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 4, Folder 2, Special Collections, BYU.

³⁶³ Gordon B. Hinckley, 144.

³⁶⁴ Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1996), 441.

Brother Joseph F. Merrill never lost sight of the kingdom of God. Nothing that he ever received in his secular training ever influenced him against the fundamental teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He learned to evaluate truth. He knew that not all truth was of the same importance—that some things were of far greater importance than others. No matter how great a truth may be, or how important it may be to the benefit of the human family, there is nothing that can be obtained through the secular education that can take the place of a knowledge of the kingdom of God.

Brother Merrill learned these truths, and to him the kingdom of God and the way to eternal life were far more important than all the learning, the training, that he received in the great colleges of the land.

It is not every man, you know, that can take courses such as were taken by Brother Merrill in the great colleges of this land, and still hold faithful and true to the fundamental teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ.³⁶⁵

Merrill believed in education, and may have simply seen the Chicago Divinity school as a place where science would be used to confirm orthodoxy. If he received any criticism from those selected to attend the university, it may have been for this unbounded faith in learning. George S. Tanner recalled:

I'm a bit puzzled today in view of some of the points of view to know why they took that risk [of sending the students to Chicago]. . . I've wondered about that and I'm going to be very candid. Daryl Chase says he thinks Joseph F. Merrill had so much faith in the gospel that he thought if we went there we'd be able to find the material so that we could positively lay out the proof for all of our claims. Of course when we got back there and go to digging into this and found that it didn't always lead in the exact direction that we had hoped it would lead, they were quite disappointed about it. Daryl thinks that Joseph F. Merrill was naïve enough to believe that that would lead us into proof positive of the various positions we had taken.³⁶⁶

Calling Merrill “naïve” may be a bit of an exaggeration. After all, he had warned the men that their future employment was based on continued loyalty to the Church. Chase was correct in believing that Merrill was unafraid of what the results of their scholarship might bring. Firmly rooted in the faith himself, Merrill did not believe that

³⁶⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation: Sermons and Writings of Joseph Fielding Smith*, 3 vols., ed. by Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:292-3.

³⁶⁶ George S. Tanner Interview, Salt Lake City, 1972, Church Archives, Salt Lake City, OH 9, 11.

anyone with a strong conviction of the divinity of the Church had anything to fear from research and inquiry. In his first general conference address as commissioner he said:

I know of my own self that God lives, that he does reveal himself to men, that he does direct men. And so I have such confidence in God, I have such confidence in this as being his divine work, that I stand ready to welcome investigators, research workers and truth seekers in every field of human thought and human endeavor, feeling assured, independent of what they may say or what their explanations may be, if they find truth in any field of endeavor whatsoever, that truth will be in harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ as we understand it. And so I feel that there is absolutely no reason for us to be afraid that our young people, if they are rightly led and taught in gospel truths, can ever be won away into infidelity by anything that men may teach that is contrary to the truth, because all truth is in harmony with truth.³⁶⁷

Merrill seems to have been willing to send students to Chicago in hopes of securing the benefits that might come from having genuine religious scholars in the Church. It was fortunate that the men had Merrill, who had already endured similar experiences, acting as a guide during their experience in Chicago. If any of the students became disillusioned with the Church the blame cannot be placed on Merrill, whose only fault in the matter may have been placing too much faith in the strength of their testimonies of the Church. In the case of Sperry, Lyon, Swensen, and others, the experience proved to be a great boon. If others drifted, the question must be asked of how firmly they were grounded in the faith. It is possible they may have developed doubts even if they had not gone to Chicago, though this question can never fully be answered.

Merrill seems to have never harbored any regrets in having launched the venture. Russel Swensen recorded a poignant moment with Merrill, years after the episode. “I saw Brother Merrill just before he died and thanked him for what he’d done for me in

³⁶⁷ Joseph F. Merrill, in Conference Report, April 1928, 39.

opening my eyes. I think the Chicago experience really was one of the greatest things of my life. At that time he said, 'I still believe I was right. Unfortunately, I'm the only one of the authorities who could see that way.'"³⁶⁸

For all the controversy it generated, the venture also succeeded in one of its primary aims: creating a corps of scholars who could begin a religion department at BYU. Merrill clearly wanted such a department, as evidenced in a letter written to Franklin Harris upon Swensen's completion of his training in Chicago:

Since Brother Swensen, according to the action of your Executive Committee, will be added to your staff the coming year, we hereby renew the suggestion that we have made before – that you give Brothers Wilson, Sperry, and Swensen a full program in necessary courses in the department of Religious Education. This will involve, of course, placing the Department of Religious Education in the same category as that of English, for example. That is to say, the classes of these three teachers of religion will be distributed all through the day just as your classes of English are, so that each of these three men can have a full program of necessary courses in his own department. English teachers are not asked to go outside of their department to get a full teaching load.

Of course we do not suggest that in these strenuous times that new courses in religion be added, only that essential courses be allowed and given to these three men in so far as necessary to give each of them a full program – 15 hours say. This will involve some change in the inherited plan of giving courses in religion. It will, of course, relieve some of your teachers from the necessity of teaching courses of religion, but it will make in the University a real department of Religious Education, which department the General Board desires to be made outstanding in the BYU. We trust the suggestions made herein will be worked out to the satisfaction of all concerned.³⁶⁹

When Merrill left the post of Commissioner in 1933, the Department of Religious Studies was fully functioning at BYU. If Merrill had stumbled in its creation, his

³⁶⁸ Swensen, Oral History, 1.

³⁶⁹ Joseph F. Merrill to Franklin S. Harris, April 19, 1933, Salt Lake City, Sperry Collection, UA 618, box 1, Folder 2, Special Collections, BYU. 'Brother Wilson' refers to Guy C. Wilson, an educational pioneer in the Church. He succeeded Thomas J. Yates at the Granite seminary in 1913. He had also studied at the University of Chicago in 1902, and Columbia University in 1912 and 1913. He had served as president of Latter-day Saint University from 1915 to 1926 and supervisor of religious education for the Church Department of Education from 1926 to 1930. Besides George Brimhall, he was the only full-time religion teacher at BYU before Sperry's arrival. See Wilkinson, 2:286.

mistakes were fully understandable. If a miscalculation was made, it may have been to assume that divinity training was the best background for the school's religious scholars. This was a natural misconception, though, given Merrill's application of the logic that a physicist should head the department of physics and so forth. Today the religion faculty at BYU is an eclectic mixture of scholars with degrees in varying fields. Higher education, though, has proved a key asset to the department's success, just as Merrill believed. Though the Religion Department has had numerous struggles and course corrections over the years, it has long been an integral part of the University.³⁷⁰ In time it became a remarkable producer of the type of studies Merrill had sent the group to Chicago to produce in the first place. Most importantly, the religious instruction provided there is a strengthening and edifying force upon the youth of the Church.

Conclusions and Summary

Joseph F. Merrill faced a wide range of problems during his service as Church Commissioner of Education. Part of the challenges involved raising the skill level of the educators in the system, overseeing the creation of new curriculum, and handling individual concerns of teachers. Merrill adopted a hands-on approach, building trust with his subordinates through personal contact. Some of the most difficult decisions of his service stemmed from effects of the Great Depression, which greatly limited funding of Church education. Rather than closing schools or laying off employees, Merrill's strategy asked all employees to sacrifice part of their salaries in order to keep everyone's positions intact. Merrill sought help of outside scholars in instructing educators of the Church, a move which eventually resulted in close ties with the University of Chicago

³⁷⁰ For a brief history of the religion department at BYU, see Boyd K. Packer, "Seek Learning Even by Study and Also by Faith," *That All May Be Edified*, (Salt Lake: Bookcraft, 1982), 41-55.

Divinity school. Several men were chosen by Merrill to attend the Divinity school, with hopes that they would form a corps of professional religious scholars to staff the new institutes of religion and create a department of religion at Brigham Young University. The venture ended in a mixed results, with some of the students being adversely affected by liberal methods of the Chicago school while others were strengthened and gained a new perspective on religious studies. The association between the University of Chicago and the Church educators ended when Merrill was sent to preside over the European mission in 1933. However, by this time there existed a small group of scholars who formed the nucleus of the religion department at BYU, and who would have an immeasurable influence on the succeeding generations of Church educators.

CONCLUSIONS

Joseph F. Merrill served as Church Commissioner of Education during one of the most demanding periods in Church education. There were significant changes at every level, including the realignment of official Church colleges, the removal and transfer of several junior colleges, the beginning of the Institutes of Religion, the adoption of released time seminaries, and the discontinuance of elementary religion classes. There were tremendous changes in how Church education functioned and an intellectual blooming that has blessed the Church. Contained in the triumphs and failures of the Merrill are many lessons which, when properly applied, have and will help avoid similar battles in the development of Church Education.

Departing the Post

After more than five years as Church Commissioner of Education, on July 18, 1933, it was announced that Joseph F. Merrill would be released to replace John A. Widtsoe as president of the European mission.³⁷¹ Shortly before his departure for Europe, in August 1933, a banquet, attended by the First Presidency and many Church officials, was held to honor Merrill's work as commissioner and wish him success in Europe. Speaking to the Church General Board of Education, Merrill expressed his own sentiments about his work:

I would like to express my grateful appreciation for the forbearance you have shown me in my efforts to carry on. I want to say that in my professional career I have never enjoyed my work as well as I have during the past five and one-half years. It has increased my very great respect and admiration for all of you. You are the finest type of men

³⁷¹ "Dr. Joseph F. Merrill Succeeds Dr. Widtsoe in Europe," *Deseret News*, July 18, 1933.

I ever had anything to do with, animated by the highest and finest motive – nothing mean, nothing low, nothing selfish at all.³⁷²

In the face of widely divergent opinions on what direction Church education should go in, the General Board, the Advisory Board, and Merrill had been united and supportive of each other.

Did the Church leaders approve of Merrill's work? Though impossible to gauge each individual's feelings, it is clear that Merrill's efforts were greatly appreciated. Every decision had to receive Advisory Board as well as General Board approval. Most were probably glad they did not have to press forward the decisions that had to be implemented. Speaking on behalf of the General Board Anthony W. Ivins offered this assessment of Merrill's labors:

I think that Brother Merrill is entitled to a great deal of credit for having accomplished the work that he has since he came into his present position. It was about then that we finally decided to dispense with our Church schools, and he was instructed to work to that end. From that time he has endeavored to find means by which that could be done with the least possible disturbance, and I think he has handled it with great wisdom. He has accomplished the purpose which was especially assigned to him.³⁷³

The last line of Ivins' statement may partly capture the reason why Merrill was released in 1933. He had accomplished what he was asked to do. With the exception of the retention of BYU and the lingering difficulties with Ricks College, all of the Church junior colleges had been successfully transferred to state control or discontinued. The Institute program was off to a successful start, with its philosophical foundations firmly in place. The battle over the legality of released time and credit seminary had been successfully waged, and the practice was safe for the time being. Even if the final fate of

³⁷² General Board Minutes, Aug. 18, 1933, cited in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols., (Provo: BYU Press, 1975), 2:212.

³⁷³ General Board Minutes, Aug. 18, 1933, cited in Wilkinson, 2:212.

the seminaries might not yet have been decided, Merrill's actions put them on secure legal ground. The skyrocketing costs of Church education were now at a stable and manageable level. Finally, the genesis of a professional corps of LDS religious scholars was in place at Brigham Young University, Ricks College, and the Institutes of Religion.

How did those who worked under Merrill's leadership evaluate him? The interim commissioner following Merrill's departure, E. Ernest Bramwell, field supervisor of seminaries, offered this summary:

For three years past, I have worked for and under and with Joseph F. Merrill. In such close-up contact, I have learned to know him, as I have known few men. This means that I have learned to admire and love him.

In addition to the personal element, Joseph F. Merrill has rendered at least three marked services to the entire seminary system. In the first place, he has stabilized it. Under his forceful leadership, the seminary has become, more than ever before, one of the Church's finest and balance wheels, and a real force in the uplift of human kind. In the second place, he has mapped out a specific objective. Now, as never before, the teacher knows, in matters of classroom aims, where to go, why to go, how to go, and what to do when he gets there. In the third place, he has unified the entire seminary system, both senior and junior. That is, figuratively speaking he has taken many strands, theretofore more or less loose and dangling, and he has woven them into a unified fabric.³⁷⁴

Merrill was expected to carry over the work he had accomplished as commissioner and apply it to the European mission. T. Edgar Lyon served as president of the Netherlands mission, one of eleven missions Merrill supervised in Europe. Lyon recalled Merrill sharing some details of his call, and what he perceived of his personal duty to the Church as mission president:

He said to me, "Brother Lyon, you know we're in tight financial circumstances. When we left home President Grant said to me, 'Now President Merrill, you're going out in the midst of an economic depression, and tithing funds are getting lower and lower every year. I want you to go over there and reduce the expenditures of the European Mission. I want you to do everything you possibly can to make things go

³⁷⁴ E. Ernest Bramwell, "A Personal Tribute," *Deseret News*, Church section, Aug. 16, 1933, 3.

as they should, and do it as cheaply as possible, as feasible.’ I could come here to live in a tent in England, but that isn’t where I should be. But I’ll rent the upper two floors of a five story building.” The bottom two stories were run by the British Mission office, the next one above, the European Mission office, and then he was up above that. So this was his motto.³⁷⁵

Stories of Merrill’s frugality during his service as commissioner and apostle became legendary in his time. Gordon B. Hinckley shared some observations about as a missionary under Merrill’s supervision in the European mission office:

His life was almost Spartan. He lived carefully in a fourth floor apartment, with no elevator. Cold water for shaving was the invariable rule, although he never objected to our using hot. His meals were simple—little meat, mostly grains, fruits, and vegetables. He never missed a day from illness, never suffered from a cold, never took a nap. Early in the morning we could hear him in the room above—"One, two, three, four!"—as he swung his arms in setting-up exercises. Invariably of an evening he walked a mile or so along the gas-lit streets, oblivious to fog or rain. Morning gymnastics and evening walks, with newspaper reading after each—these were his chief means of relaxation from the tensions of his office.

Impatient of waste, he suggested that we turn off the lights when we left the room, and he reminded us that the bills of the mission were paid from the consecrations of the people.³⁷⁶

Hinckley identified an important belief behind Merrill’s actions. He believed in consecration, in personal sacrifice to benefit all. He was fiercely loyal to the Church, and to that end displayed an overwhelming sense of awareness when it came to how Church funds were spent. Merrill’s feelings in this regard made an indelible impression upon those whom he served with. President Hinckley has spoken of several times when he heard Merrill’s words coming to him during crucial moments of decision, saying, “I will be more careful with the Church’s money than I will with my own.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ Lyon, Oral History, 108.

³⁷⁶ Gordon B. Hinckley, “Church Mourns the Passing of Elder Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 144.

³⁷⁷ Sheri Dew, *Go Forward With Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1996), 218-219.

Of note also was Merrill's willingness to serve wherever and whenever called upon. Near the time of his release as president of the European mission he wrote to his family members, expressing his faith in the divine nature of Church callings. "We want to be where the Lord wants us to be. His servants have called us to return and, of course, we are ready to respond."³⁷⁸ Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "I marveled at his energy. Apparently he never got tired; he loved the truth. He loved the truth of science, but he loved more the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ . . . He had a strong will, was pronounced in his opinions, but he was always submissive to the majority decisions of his brethren."³⁷⁹

Merrill was the president of the European mission for three years, 1933-36. He served as an apostle until his death in 1952. Hinckley worked with Merrill in numerous assignments after their return from the European mission. He offered this tribute:

Few men in the history of Mormonism have given more generously of themselves to the cause of the Lord. He was often to be found at the Church office building at 7:30 in the morning, and he usually remained until the same hour at night. Holidays counted for nothing. If he were in town, he would be at the office, willing to interview, counsel, ordain, or set apart, as the case might be. If out of town, it was on the Lord's errand. No stake conference was too far away; the weather was never too bad; he was never too tired to go where assigned. His sense of duty was as rigid as his code of honesty. When one of his associates sympathetically inquired whether he did not weary of traveling to conferences week after week, Elder Merrill replied, "Not at all, that's my job." His testimony of the gospel was unequivocal; and his diligence in the work of the Lord was consistent with his belief.³⁸⁰

Merrill died suddenly on February 2, 1952. He recorded his final journal entry a week before. There is no precognition, no sense that his life was about to

³⁷⁸ Joseph F. Merrill to the Merrill Family Association, July 28, 1936, London, England, Merrill Papers, Accn 1062, Special Collections, U of U.

³⁷⁹ "Tributes Paid Elder Merrill," *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 205.

³⁸⁰ Gordon B. Hinckley, *Improvement Era*, 203.

come to an end. More consistent, there is only a mention that he was about to depart for another stake conference, a notation of the latest of long series of Church assignments.³⁸¹ He passed away in his sleep shortly after attending the conference he was assigned to. Joseph Fielding Smith remarked of this, “There was no journey that was too long for him to take, no labor that was too difficult for him to perform, and no complaint ever passed his lips because of any assignment. His motto was, I want to die in the harness, and this wish was granted.”³⁸²

The First Presidency best summarized Merrill’s labors in the tribute they paid to him upon his death: “For years he has fulfilled every call made upon him, never excusing, never shirking, never complaining. He has been a minuteman in the service of the Lord, ready to meet every appointment given to him, equally ready, in case of emergency, to meet the appointment given to another.”³⁸³

What significance did Merrill’s experience as commissioner have on the greater whole of his life and contributions? There seems to be an irony in Church leaders calling Merrill, a secular expert, to oversee the final stages of the Church’s almost total withdrawal from secular education, and to establish in its place, a program restricted to religious education. Merrill and Church education underwent a dual transformation. As Church education moved away from the duties of providing secular academic training in favor of religious education, Merrill moved away from scientist to spiritual leader. As Commissioner Merrill grew from Professor to Apostle. He associated daily with apostles

³⁸¹ Joseph F. Merrill diary, in Joseph F. Merrill Collection, MSS 1540, Box 3, Folder 3, Special Collections, BYU.

³⁸² “Tributes Paid,” 205.

³⁸³ “First Presidency Pays Tribute to Elder Joseph F. Merrill,” *Improvement Era*, March 1952, 144.

and prophets who devoted full time to the temporal and spiritual welfare of the Church. In time he grew into one of them. When he left for Europe he was ready to carry out his apostolic duties.

He used his knowledge of the physical universe to enhance his understanding of the spiritual. The professor in him never left, nor did the young searching student. As an apostle he did not just deliver sermons, rather he framed them as discussions designed to help those souls wandering in wiles of academia to understand the spiritual truths which gave meaning to physical phenomena. He wrote:

Many of us believe that a sound religious faith, practically applied in our daily living, gives us balance, a guide and an inspiration to the believer that makes his life meaningful, courageous, and sweet – therefore entirely worthwhile. But such a faith comes to most people only by effort. They are not born with it. This faith is of such a nature, however, that those who possess it always have joy in helping their fellows to acquire it. If they succeed a priceless service has been rendered, some of us believe. “If it so be that you should labor all your days . . . and bring save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father!”³⁸⁴

As one who had made the journey through the Babylon of intellectualism and who came safely through, Merrill felt obliged to be a guide, and to establish an educational system to provide guides who could assist others in the journey.

Conclusions

This thesis was to answer two questions:

1. What were the contributions of Joseph F. Merrill as Church Commissioner of Education?
2. How can the lessons from Merrill’s administration be applied to the challenges facing Church education today?

³⁸⁴ Merrill, *The Truth Seeker and Mormonism*, 1.

Research Question #1: What were the contributions of Joseph F. Merrill as Church Commissioner of Education?

Merrill's service as Church Commissioner coincided with many of the most difficult decisions in the development of the Church Educational System. A summary of his contributions includes the following:

1. Influence on the philosophy, creation, and expansion of the Institutes of Religion.

The Institute program expanded from its beginning at the University of Idaho to a dynamic, international system of religious education for college-age students. As of the 2004-05 school year there were 367,034 students enrolled in the Institute program throughout the Church.³⁸⁵ The genesis of this program may, in part, be based in Merrill's 1912 innovation of released-time seminary, but it is more correct to say that Institute was the child of many parents, each working to find a way to provide college-age youth with a firm spiritual base. Some of Merrill's contributions stem from his own beliefs about the synthesis of faith and science. Once the Institute program had been successfully launched, Merrill pushed for its expansion in Logan, Utah, and Pocatello, Idaho. Despite dwindling funds for Church education in the face of the Great Depression, Merrill pressed on with other programs at the University of Wyoming, Northern Arizona Teachers College in Flagstaff, the University of Arizona, Tucson, and at Southern Arizona Teacher's College in Tempe, Arizona. During this time Merrill's efforts were crucial in defending the purpose and usefulness of the Institute program.

2. The successful transfer of Church junior colleges to state control.

When Adam S. Bennion left the position of Church Superintendent of Schools in 1928, the Church was still undergoing its withdrawal from the field of public education.

³⁸⁵ www.lds.org (accessed Feb. 7, 2007).

Though most of the Church-owned academies closed, several Church junior colleges remained open, operating at great expense to the Church. Board of Education minutes indicate a growing consensus among Church leaders that the junior colleges would eventually have to be closed or transferred to state control, but give only a vague notion of when or how this should occur. Merrill's contribution was to implement that consensus and put it into motion.

Board minutes further indicate that nearly every decision regarding the junior colleges was initiated by Merrill. He patiently accepted the decisions of the General Board. Merrill took action on this issue soon after his elevation to the position, forcing a formation of definite policy, which he then worked to achieve. Merrill's quick action on this issue led to a policy decision in February 1929, just seven months before the stock market crash that precipitated the Great Depression. In spite of earlier failures to arrange for the transfer of the junior colleges to state control, Merrill persisted and most Church schools were successfully transferred. Notable exceptions were LDS College, which closed, but endured in some form as LDS Business College, Ricks College, Juarez Academy, and Brigham Young University, which all remained under Church control. The fact that Merrill achieved this success during some of the darkest periods of the Depression makes it all the more significant.

3. Retention of Brigham Young University in the Church Educational System.

Merrill saw the merit of retaining one university, intending it to function as the pinnacle of the Church Educational System. Merrill envisioned Brigham Young University as a training school for seminary teachers, a home for Latter-day Saint scholars of standing and ability, and a showcase for the progress of the LDS faith. While

Merrill asked sacrifice of the faculty of BYU, it appears that he never seriously considered closing it. His efforts, with those of the faculty and other Church leaders played a significant role in its survival during the lean years of the depression and its continuance today.

4. Defending the legality of the released-time seminary program.

When the LDS seminary system came under attack in January 1930, Merrill led the effort defend the program's legality and ensure its continuance. Acting upon recommendations of its members, the Utah State Board recommended the complete severing of all relations between public high schools and Church seminaries in Utah, including the complete suspension of released time. Merrill quickly assembled several powerful and persuasive arguments for the legality of released-time system, swaying the state board away from completely ending released time. Through his efforts, Merrill was also able to ensure the continuation of school credit for Bible study carried out in seminaries. Credit continued to be offered in seminary programs until the late 1970s, when a court decision declared the practice illegal.

5. Bringing about a greater degree of separation between public schools and LDS seminaries.

In the wake of I. L. Williamson's report on seminaries, Merrill worked to investigate and correct any inappropriate relationships that may have developed between LDS seminaries and public high schools. Under his direction curriculum was rewritten to meet legal standards for non-sectarianism. LDS specific curriculum was also revised to compensate for any losses suffered because of these adjustments. Practices which violated state law, such as the sharing of seminary and high school physical facilities, sharing attendance records, and the use of janitorial personnel were also ended during

Merrill's service as commissioner. These actions prevented future disputes over the legality of released time seminary, and allowed seminaries to continue to give credit for Bible studies for several decades.

6. Opening the LDS system of education to outside scholars.

Merrill's efforts were influential in the introduction of world-renowned scholars to religious educators of the Church system. As a result, teachers began to forge relationships with religious scholars of other faiths, opening the door for a greater ecumenical exchange with other faiths. While not all of these interactions turned out to be positive, Merrill's effort led to a greater dialogue between Latter-day Saints and the greater Christian community.

7. Creation of a highly educated team of religious scholars in the Institutes and at Brigham Young University.

Merrill was a key driving force in creating a group of qualified religious specialists at the Institutes of Religion, and at Brigham Young University. Recruiting key groups of scholars to attend Divinity school at the University of Chicago, Merrill formed a core group which would eventually establish a professional department of religion at BYU. A mixed success, the venture saw several student's faith in the Church damaged by liberal attitudes manifested in the Chicago school. At the same time it resulted in a group of professional religious educators who were prepared to tackle religious subject from an LDS perspective.

Research Question #2: How can the lessons from Merrill's administration be applied to the challenges facing Church education today?

Lessons gained from experiences Merrill's administration continue to guide the course of Church education today. There are, however, three areas where Merrill's experiences are of particular interest:

1. The resources of the Church are best put toward providing religious, not secular education.

As the Church progressed and grew during the years following the Bennion/Merrill era, the wisdom of the Church's withdrawal from secular education became apparent. The growth of the Church accelerated in the post-World War II era, resulting in ever-expanding needs in education. With much of the Church's growth taking place internationally, the Church, while still retaining its core doctrines and principles, a radically different organization at the beginning of the 21st century compared to that of the early 20th century. As the Church expanded internationally, it continued its policy of providing secular and religious education until native governments could provide adequately for the educational needs of members. For example, as the Church expanded in Mexico, elementary and high schools were established to provide for the needs of Mexican Latter-day Saints. As government provisions for education increased, the Church gradually withdrew from this role, favoring institutes and seminaries instead. Between 1981 and 1984 the Church phased out all of its primary and secondary schools in Mexico, excepting those at Benemerito in Mexico City and at Colonia Juarez. Today the religious education for the Mexican Saints is provided by institutes and seminaries.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ William E. Berrett, *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education*, Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988, 150-1.

This same pattern has been followed in roughly the same manner in other developing areas including Central and South America and the Pacific. The latest example of this pattern was demonstrated when the Church announced the closure of the Church College of New Zealand in 2009.³⁸⁷ With enrollment in seminary and institute above 700,000³⁸⁸ it is clear it would be nearly impossible to provide both secular and religious education to such a vast amount of students. Seminary and institute allow the Church to pass on its core beliefs to its upcoming generations at a relatively low cost.

2. Released-time is the most desirable arrangement for providing religious education to students in high school.

If Merrill had lost the battles fought over released time and credit seminaries it is unlikely the defeat would have meant the total end of the LDS seminary system. Even while the legal maneuverings ensued, seminary was being taught in the Salt Lake school district before and after school, and it is likely a similar arrangement would have been made in other areas to ensure continuation of the seminary system. As previously noted, however, enrollment in Salt Lake City was only about 10 percent, compared to an average of 70 percent in other areas.³⁸⁹ Ending released time, which was the original intention of the state board, would have been devastating to the system.

However, Merrill felt just as strongly about credit for Bible study as he did about released time. When the practice of giving credit was ended in the 1970s, enthusiastic support from local Church leadership kept seminary attendance from slipping significantly. Is it therefore reasonable to assume that if released time seminaries were

³⁸⁷ Leann J. Walton, "New Zealand Church College to Close," <http://www.mission.net/new-zealand/ccnzclose.html>, (accessed Feb. 7, 2007).

³⁸⁸ Information accessed at <http://www.lds.org/newsroom/page/0,15606,4031-1---8-168,00.html> (accessed Feb. 7, 2007)

³⁸⁹ James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1976), 502-3.

switched to an early morning basis, that there would not be a significant drop in attendance? Church statistics say this is not the case. It is common in areas where released-time seminaries exist for enrollment to exceed 80 percent. Enrollment for early morning programs averages between 50 to 70 percent.³⁹⁰ The worldwide nature of the Church today means that cultural considerations may be a factor, but this cannot easily be measured.

Though the early morning programs typically enjoy enthusiastic support of local priesthood leaders, difficulties associated with early morning seminary lead to lower enrollments. It may therefore be concluded that Merrill made the right decision in choosing to fight for released time. As elevating academic requirements and opportunities for college level credit force more and more students to consider early morning as an alternative to released time, these figures should be considered. Where numbers may justify it, released time has consistently been shown to provide the greatest chance for enrolling the highest number of youth. Statistics provided by the Church Educational System support this conclusion. As of the 2005-06 school year, the Church worldwide graduation rate for released time was 76.2% of students enrolled, compared to 48.9% of home study students, and 60.3% of early morning students. Considering just those who are enrolled, 81.9% of potential students in released time were enrolled, compared to 43.4% for home study seminary, and 45.2% for early morning.³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, (New York: MacMillan, 1992), s.v. "Seminaries."

³⁹¹ These statistics provided by an email from Mollie Turner, CES Records and Reports, sent Feb. 9, 2007.

3. A corps of highly trained, professional religious educators is desirable in Church education.

Today the majority of students in the Church receive their religious education from a vast army of dedicated volunteer teachers. For all the good done by these volunteer teachers, the statistics quoted above also indicate that Merrill was correct in seeking for a highly-training, professional group of educators to form the core of Church education. In areas where released-time seminary is available, students are usually taught by full-time teachers. A college degree is still a minimum requirement for professional religious educators in the Church, with many taking advantage of generous Church programs to provide further education. It is possible that the influence of men and women who can devote full-time to their teaching duties are better equipped to provide religious training is a significant factor in the higher enrollment rate of released time. Higher education among Church educators is today openly encouraged. The lessons garnered from the Merrill years have showed the value of education, but also some of its dangers. Today, Church educators are admonished to seek learning, though with caution for their own spiritual well being. The following statement from Church president Gordon B. Hinckley, addressed to Church religious educators, typifies this attitude:

Grow in the knowledge of the eternal truths which you are called to teach, and grow in the understanding of the great and good men and women who have walked the earth and of the marvelous phenomena with which we are surrounded in the world in which we live. Now and then as I have watched a man become obsessed with a narrow segment of knowledge, I have worried about him. I have seen a few such. They have pursued relentlessly only a sliver of knowledge until they have lost their sense of balance. At the moment I think of two who went so far and became so misguided in their narrow pursuits, that they who once had been effective teachers of youth have been found to be in apostasy and have been excommunicated from the Church. Keep balance in your lives. Beware of obsession. Beware of narrowness. Let your interests range

over many good fields while working with growing strength in the field of your own profession.³⁹²

Suggestions for Future Study

The life and teachings of Joseph F. Merrill represent a rich, untapped area for future studies. This study, which concerned itself with only five years of his life, could easily have been expanded. The Merrill papers, available at the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU, contain vast amounts of information waiting to be utilized to shed light on this period of Church history. For example, a thick stack of correspondence between Merrill and his future wife are currently housed in the collection. In these letters Merrill extensively describes the pressures, struggles, and triumphs he experienced as one of the first young Latter-day Saints to seek higher education in the eastern United States. A fascinating study could be written on the experiences of young LDS students studying in Eastern universities in the late 19th to early 20th century.

In addition, Merrill kept an extensive journal, beginning at the time of his embarkation to serve in the European mission. His experiences there have been told in part by the missionaries who served under his leadership, including the most famous, future LDS Church president Gordon B. Hinckley.³⁹³ Other items in this extensive collection, include Merrill's personal correspondence, a fascinating look at how a respected scientist serving as an apostle reconciled the worlds of faith and reason.

Other areas mentioned in this study include the development of curriculum in Church seminaries and institutes, the struggles of Church education with intellectualism, and LDS relationships with outside religious scholars. The story of the legal battles over

³⁹² Gordon B. Hinckley, "Four Imperatives for Religious Educators," address to religious educators, Sept. 15, 1978, 3.

³⁹³ See Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward With Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley*, (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1996).

released time, which were waged well into the 1970s, merit much more study than can be provided here. So many larger than life personas inhabit this era in Church history, many of them relatively untouched by the work of researchers. I often found myself during the course of my studies wishing to dive into lives of such fascinating characters as Adam S. Bennion, Russel B. Swensen, Daryl Chase, Franklin S. Harris, Sidney B. Sperry, Richard R. Lyman, and a host of others who have not yet received adequate attention. It is recognized that this study was written from the perspective of one of the generals of era, with small perspectives given to the foot soldiers of the period. The individual efforts of communities to ensure continuing religious education for their youth is inspiring, but has of necessity been given little attention here. The community efforts in cities such as Rexburg, Idaho, and St. George, Utah to save their schools is another of the great untold stories of Church history. One of the great lessons gleaned from this study was that the modern history of the Church was filled with as many fascinating characters and dramatic events as were the early days of the Latter-day Saint movements. The history of the Latter-day Saints, from any era, is a rich tapestry of noble sacrifice, bold action, and inspired direction.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ESSAYS

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Major sources for this chapter include Milton L. Bennion's *Mormonism and Education* (Salt Lake City: Department of Education of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1939), William E. Berrett's *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988), and Frederick S. Buchanan's *Culture Clash and Accomodation* (San Francisco/Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates in association with Signature Books, 1996), Leon R. Hartshorn's *Mormon Education in the Bold Years* (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1965), and Scott C. Esplin's *Education in Transition; Church and State Relationships in Utah* (Ph. D. diss., Brigham Young University, 2006), Kenneth G. Bell, *Adam Samuel Bennion: Superintendent of LDS Education, 1919 to 1928* (Master's Thesis, Brigham Young University, 1969), Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975) was also immensely helpful in preparing this study.

Chapter 2 – Educational Background of Joseph F. Merrill

Sources on Joseph F. Merrill's childhood are few and difficult to come by, though two works produced by the Merrill family provide some insight. The first is *Utah Pioneer and Apostle Marriner Wood Merrill and His Family*, a biography of Merrill's father that contains brief biographies of each of Marriner Merrill's wives and children, written by his younger brother Melvin Clarence Merrill and published privately in 1937

(Salt Lake City: Marriner Wood Merrill Heritage Committee). The second is *Descendents of Marriner Wood Merrill* compiled by Joseph Merrill himself and privately published in 1938 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press). Brief biographical episodes are scattered throughout Merrill's writings and speeches, but as yet there exists no authoritative biographical work on Merrill's life. A large number of Merrill's faith, as well as his unique blending of the temporal and the spiritual may be found in his addresses from LDS General Conference, as well as *The Truth Seeker and Mormonism* (Salt Lake: Zion's Press, 1946), which is a collection of radio addresses given by Merrill.

Chapter 3 – Beginnings of the Institute Program

Sources for this chapter include Leonard Arrington's "The Founding of LDS Institutes of Religion (*Dialogue*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 1967, pp. 137-147) which also includes a helpful bibliographical list at the end. The most complete account of the founding of the Moscow Institute is found in Ward H. Magleby, "1926 – Another Beginning, Moscow Idaho," *Impact*, Winter 1968, pp. 22-32. The CES resource file collected by William E. Berrett, CR 102 174, as well as the *Moscow Institute of Religion Memory Book 2001*, CR 102 301 (Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City) were also helpful. The J. Wyley Sessions Papers (MSS, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University) provide many unique insights into this era of Church education. While the founding of the Moscow Institute is well documented, resources are sparse concerning the founding of most other institutes. Most of the information in this chapter on the Logan, University of Utah, Pocatello, and Wyoming Institutes were taken from Berrett's *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education* (Salt Lake City: Salt Lake Printing Center,

1988) and Gary A. Anderson's "A Historical Survey of the Full-Time Institutes of Religion of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1926-1966." (Ph. D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1966).

Chapter 4 – Continuing the Transformation of Church Education

The main sources for this chapter include Scott C. Esplin's *Education in Transition, Church and State Relationship in Utah Education, 1888-1993* (Ph. D. diss., Brigham Young University, 2006), *Weber College 1888-1933* by William Peter Miller (MSS 7643, Church Archives, Salt Lake, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), and *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, Vol. 2 (ed. Ernest L. Wilkinson, Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1975). Esplin's work is perhaps the most complete account of the struggles over the Church's struggle to transfer its junior colleges during the Merrill Era. Miller's work was immensely helpful because it contains a transcript of the minutes from several crucial meetings of the Church General Board of Education, which are currently restricted to researchers. Wilkinson's work was also written when access was allowed to the minutes, and contains transcripts of many key conversations from the period. The majority of Merrill's correspondence in this chapter may be found in the Joseph F. Merrill Collection (MSS 1540, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University) with most of the pertinent letters to this study being located in Box 5, Folder 3. Jerry C. Roundy's *Ricks College: A Struggle for Survival* (Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College Press, 1976) is also an excellent resource with many quotations directly from the Church Board of Education's minutes, and an exhaustive resource on the history of Ricks College. See also James R.

Clark, *Church and State Relationships in Education in Utah* (Ph.D. diss, Utah State University, 1958).

Chapter 5 – The 1930-31 Released Seminary Crisis

Credit for the research in this chapter must be given the Frederick S. Buchanan, who inspired this study with his article “Masons and Mormons: Released-Time Politics in Salt Lake City, 1930-56,” *Journal of Mormon History*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 1993, 67-114. The other major source is the Frederick S. Buchanan Collection (AO149.xml, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah). In Buchanan’s papers an abundant collection of the newspaper articles concerning the crisis were carefully catalogued and preserved. Using his article as an outline, I have attempted to flesh out the issue with the articles found in his collection and my own research. William E. Berrett’s *A Miracle in Weekday Religious Education* (Salt Lake: Salt Lake Printing Center, 1988) also contains an excellent summary of the crisis, and is used here as a major source. The two key source documents for this chapter, the 1930 Williamson Report, and the Church response, have been included in the back of this work as appendices, with Dr. Buchanan’s gracious permission.

Chapter 6 – Joseph F. Merrill and Religious Educators

Sources for this chapter come from the Joseph F. Merrill Collection (MSS 1540, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU), the Joseph F. Merrill Papers (Accn. 1062, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah), the T. Edgar Lyon Collection (MSS 1241, Special Collections, BYU), the Russel B. Swensen Collection (MSS 1842, Special Collections, BYU), and the Sidney B. Sperry Collection (UA 618, Special Collections, BYU). *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*,

edited by Ernest L. Wilkinson (Provo: Utah, 1975, 4 Vols.) was a major source for most of the information on Merrill's strategies dealing with the depression. Major sources for the University of Chicago venture include Russel B. Swensen, "Mormons at the University of Chicago Divinity School: A Personal Reminiscence," *Dialogue*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1972), and the T. Edgar Lyon Oral History by Davis Bitton in the Lyon collection at BYU. Also helpful was T. Edgar Lyon, Jr.'s biography of his father, *T. Edgar Lyon: A Teacher in Zion*, (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002).

Conclusions

Material utilized here is found primarily in Merrill's own documentation and writings. Some letters were taken from the Joseph F. Merrill Collection (MSS 1540, Special Collections, BYU), the T. Edgar Lyon Collection (MSS 1241, Special Collections, BYU). Current church statistics provided in this chapter come from information posted on the official Church website, www.lds.org, and accessed in February 2007. Additional figures came directly from the central office of the Church Educational System (CES), at the request of Corby Campbell, director of the Salt Lake South Area of CES, whose assistance in this study is greatly appreciated.

Appendices

Several appendices have been included to aid future researchers. An excerpt from the Church General Board of Education minutes, preserved by William E. Berrett, has been placed to show the crucial decision to for the church to divest itself of its remaining schools. The I. L. Williamson report has been transcribed from the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The original report was not difficult to locate, but features abnormally small type, and is extremely difficult to read. Minor spelling and grammatical revisions have been made.

Where the report was unintelligible, it has been noted. Next is included Merrill's response to the Williamson reported, which was presented before the Utah state board of education in 1930. This document was difficult to locate, and has therefore been included with the gracious permission of Frederick S. Buchanan. Last, a collection of photographs, courtesy of Church Archives in Salt Lake City, has been added to help the reader visualize the man whose labors this thesis has sought to illuminate. All pictures may be found in PH 5190, Joseph F. Merrill Portrait Collection.

APPENDIX B

1930 REPORT OF STATE HIGH SCHOOL INSPECTOR I. L. WILLIAMSON TO THE UTAH STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

(Transcribed from the *Salt Lake Tribune*, January 9, 1930)

In 1936 the standards to which public high schools were expected to conform in order to participate in the distribution of the state high school fund were revised, and a specific plan for accreditation by the state was adopted. At that time it was thought best to defer making definite lists of accredited and non-accredited high schools until a reasonable time had been allowed those schools which were financially handicapped fully to meet the standards adopted by the state board.

Marked progress in meeting some of those standards, especially the ones relating to certification of teachers, adequate equipment, and lengthened school term, has been made by the high schools throughout the state. It now seems, however, that it is still impossible to make up a list of accredited schools until certain perplexing problems have been analyzed and certain points definitely settled.

Analysis Based Upon Interests of Schools

The problems referred to grow out of the existence of religious seminaries maintained in close proximity to, and intimately associated with public high schools in the state of Utah. An analysis of the existing relationship between these religious seminaries and the public high schools is here set forth for your consideration.

This analysis is predicated upon the assumption that the interests of the public schools are of paramount importance, and it does not involve in any degree the question of religious freedom, religious rights, religious preferences or religious differences. Two

principles have become permanently established in America. One is the principle of religious freedom; the other is the principle of absolute separation of church and state, including the function of both known as public education. This analysis recognized an inviolability of both of these principles. Nothing in this report can be interpreted as being either for or against any particular religious institution or belief, as such.

In this analysis an effort has been made to discuss the typical situation. This means that some of statements contained herein do not apply to all schools in the state, and that some conditions existing in a few localities only, have not been discussed at all, because they are not numerous enough to be called typical. No attempt has been made to determine responsibility for existing relationships.

Analysis of Relationship from 1907 Onward

Prior to 1907 secondary education in Utah was largely furnished by the LDS Church, there being at that time only four public high schools in the entire state offering a full four-year course. Thus the church rendered an incomparable service by maintaining at enormous expense a system of secondary education which the state, presumably, was not financially able to maintain.

About 1907 the program of public secondary education in Utah began to expand and during the following years of combined secular and religious secondary schools was gradually discontinued. Public high schools have continued to multiply until now they have been established in all parts of the state and offer educational opportunities to all children of high school age.

As secular education was taken over by the state, the Church established seminaries for the purpose of giving religious education to children attending public high

schools. In close proximity to about 80 percent of the high schools of the state, frequently only a few yards distance, the church was built seminary buildings for the purpose of continuing the system of religious education which if formerly had combined with secular education. In a few schools where it has been inconvenient to build seminary buildings, the seminary classes are held in the high school building, side by side with public school classes.

Three Theology Courses Offered

In these seminaries three theology courses are given, one based on the Old Testament, one on the New Testament, and one on Church History and Doctrine. Each course occupies a full class period each day, the three courses extending over three of the four years of the pupil's high school career. Upon completion of the three courses, the church awards a diploma of graduation from the seminary. In the typical situation from 55 percent to 75 percent of the high school pupils are enrolled in these courses, although in some cases the percentage is much higher.

January 5, 1916, apparently upon request of representatives of the church, the state board of education passed a resolution authorizing local high schools to give not to exceed one unit of credit for Bible History and Literature taken in private schools.

Wherever seminaries have been established the practice is now followed of giving one half unit of credit for each of the courses in Old and New Testament, making one unit for both. No credit is given for Church History. The single exception to this practice is found in Salt Lake City schools, where pupils are neither excused during school hours nor given credit for theology courses.

Three Aspects of the Problem Analyzed

The inevitable close relationship of the seminaries to the public high schools presents a problem with three aspects to be analyzed. There is (1) The statutory and constitutional aspect; (2) the educational aspect; (3) the financial or economic aspect.

I. The statutory and constitutional aspect.

Chapter 95, Section 1, Laws of Utah, 1921, reads as follows:

“It shall be unlawful to teach in any of the district schools of this state while in session any atheistic, infidel, sectarian religious or denominational doctrine, and all such schools shall be free from sectarian control.”

Two questions are involved here. (1) Do the Old and New Testament courses given in the seminaries contain sectarian, religious or denominational doctrine, (2) If so, is it lawful to give credit in the public schools for courses which the law prohibits the public schools to teach?

The answer to the first question may be found by references to a few facts.

1. The books containing the outlines used by seminary pupils are entitled, “Outlines of Religious Education.” Prior to 1927 these books were called, “Outlines of Theology.”

2. The introduction to the outlines in the Old Testament, which is the first of the series, contains the following quotation:

“Basic aims in the teaching of theology, an abiding testimony: That God is our Father, that Jesus is the Christ and Joseph Smith and his successors are prophets chosen by Him to reestablish His gospel in the earth as the power of God unto salvation.”

3. These outlines are the same as the ones used for theology in the few remaining church secondary schools. The following quotation from the catalog of one of these church schools indicates that the courses are designated as courses in theology:

“Theology – II ab. Old Testament; III ab. New Testament; IV ab. Church History and Doctrine.”

“Required of all pupils.”

4. These two courses for which credit is given appear on the various high school records under a variety of headings as follows: Old Testament, New Testament, Seminary, Bible, Religion and Theology.

Sectarian Nature Shown by Paper

5. The religious and sectarian nature of the courses indicated by the following quotation taken from the high school annual published by the students of a local high school. The passage, presumably, was written by the seminary students and appears under the heading “Seminary” in that section of the annual in which the various courses of the high school are described.

“Seminary – The first class consists of freshmen. They studied the Old Testament. After that they read the Book of Ether, in the Book of Mormon.

“The second class consists of sophomores, as it is taken in the second year of high school. They studied the New Testament; they also read Third Nephi in the Book of Mormon.”

6. A casual glance at examination questions in the students’ notebooks, together with occasional visits to the seminary classrooms, indicates clearly that while the courses contain much that is valuable from the standpoint of Bible history, they also contain

teachings which, so far as known, would be accepted by no other religious body than the one under whose auspices the seminaries are conducted.

That the Garden of Eden was located in Missouri; that Noah's ark was built and launched in America; that Joseph Smith's version of the Bible is superior to the King James version, and that Enoch's city, Zion, with all its inhabitants and buildings, was lifted up and translated bodily from the American continent to the realms of the unknown may all be facts, but they are not accepted by the religious world in general, and consequently must be classed as denominational doctrine.

Would Be Barred in Public Schools

Unquestionably the seminary courses are of such a nature that it would be a violation of the law to teach them in public schools.

The second question now remains: Is it a violation of the law to teach them in the seminary and give credit for them in the public schools? Whatever the legal technicalities of the case may be, such a procedure would appear to be highly inconsistent and to be a violation of the spirit, if not the letter of the law. To some it might even appear to be an evasion of the law, and law evasion has long been recognized as the most pernicious form of law violation.

The constitutional aspect of the problem is, perhaps, even more serious than the statutory aspect. Article 1, section 4, of the constitution of Utah reads in part as follows:

“There shall be no union of church and state; nor shall any church dominate the state or interfere with its functions. No public money or property shall be appropriated for or applied to any religious worship, exercise, or instruction or for the support of any ecclesiastical establishment.”

Article X, section 13, of the constitution of Utah reads as follows:

“Section 13. Public aid to any church schools forbidden. Neither the legislature nor any county, city, town, school district or other institution controlled in whole, or in part, by any church, sect, or denomination whatever.”

All that has been said concerning the statutory aspect of the problem applies equally well to the constitutional aspect, with the following additional considerations:

Transported in Trucks of Public Schools

To most of the seminaries a considerable percentage of the pupils are transported in trucks at public expense. It is true that there is no added expense over that required to transport the pupils to high school, but, it is also true that the seminary benefits directly, to the extent of thousands of dollars, and therefore is supported in part by public funds.

For the sake of clearness a specific case may be cited. When a public school truck draws up between a school building on one side and a seminary building on the other and discharges its load, part of the pupils going to the school building for their first class and part going directly to the seminary, the situation is such as to justify a question as to its constitutionality. While this specific case is cited for the sake of clearness, if the spirit of the constitution is held sacred, it would seem that the situation is not materially altered, even though the pupils go to the school first and to the seminary later in the day.

Derives Direct Benefit From Schools

The seminary also benefits from directly from, and therefore is supported in part by, the public funds paid attendance offices. This again raised the question of compliance with the spirit, and perhaps with the letter of the constitution.

The problem becomes more complicated if account is taken of situations, significant in themselves because a principle is developed, but not numerous enough to be considered typical. Among such situations are the cases where public school buildings, including heat and janitor service, are used for seminary classes side by side with public school classes; cases where the church provides a separate seminary building, but the furniture, heat, and janitor service are paid for out of public school funds; cases where pupils coming from seminary with a Book of Mormon under one arm and the History of the Mormon Church under the other, enter a public school study hall, built, furnished, heated and swept through the use of public funds and presided over by a teacher paid from the same source, and spend all or part of the study hour preparing a seminary lesson; cases where conflicts between high school programs and seminary programs leads to an adjustment in favor of the seminary with consequent loss of efficiency and increased cost to the high school

Separate Status Under Question

Relationships So Intimate That Seminaries and High Schools Are Generally Thought of as One Institution: Thought of as One Institution: The above analysis has all been predicated on the assumption that seminaries are, as they are purported to be, institutions separate from the public schools.

The question then arises: Are they? If they are not, then the problem becomes still further involved. It is true that the church employs the teachers, determines the content of the course of study, and erects the buildings for the seminaries (except in those few instances where the seminary is held in the school building side by side with public school classes). Quite generally, however, the school and seminary are so intimately

linked together that in the minds of the public, pupils, and patrons, they are thought of as one institution. The buildings are side by side, the pupils ride to both buildings in the same truck, seminary courses are listed on the high school program, credits are entered on the high school records, seminary lessons are prepared in public school study halls, and the portraits of seminary teachers are published in the high school annuals side by side with members of the high school faculty, under the general heading, "Faculty." The permanent record card of one of the large high schools of the state contains the statement that "credits from other institutions are entered in red ink."

While theology taken in one of the few remaining church schools and transferred to this particular high school is entered in red ink, theology taken in the seminary connected with this school is entered in black ink, the same as other subjects taken in this high school.

It is not unusual to hear a seminary referred to as the "Blank High School Seminary." The official church paper, published in Salt Lake City, carries a column headed "High School News from All Utah." News of the seminaries is printed in this column along with other high school news.

While the intimacy of relationship may be somewhat intangible, nevertheless it has a vital bearing on the statutory and constitutional aspects of the problem. If the seminary and public school are so intimately associated as to appear to be one institution, the applications of the constitution quoted above would be even more pertinent.

Educational Aspect Deserves Study

In order to clarify the analysis of the educational aspect of the situation, it is necessary to offer some explanations as to what constitutes a standard high school course.

The high school course as standardized throughout the United States requires the student to spend four years in high school, completing in that time 16 units of work.

This means that an average student load consists of four to four and one-half units per year. The Utah standards state that four and one-half units shall be the maximum for all except a very small number of exceptional students.

The typical high school in Utah divides the school day into six periods of one hour each. Such major subjects of English, history, and mathematics each occupy one hour per day and are given one unit credit. This one hour period per day is spent in recitation and study. Some additional work is assigned to be prepared at home.

Upsets Requirements as to Credits

Now, what happens to this program of public education when the seminary becomes an adjunct of the high school? As state before, there are three theology courses given in the seminary, one in the Old Testament, one in the New Testament, and one in church history. The first course is usually given in the ninth grade, the second in the tenth and the third in the eleventh or the twelfth. One-half unit of credit is given by the high school for each of the first two courses, with no credit for the third. The 16 units of the high school course then are composed of 15 units of public education and one unit of religious education, with the additional course in theology for which no credit is given.

But the three theology courses occupy the pupil's time for one school hour per day with additional outside work each year for three years. The relative amount of time devoted by pupils to seminary, English, mathematics, science and history has been computed from data on file in this office of the state high school inspector. A random sampling which included more than 800 students in 12 representative schools, furnishes

fairly reliable data. Each student reported his own daily program, together with his estimate of the amount of time devoted to the preparation of each subject outside of school recitation periods. Including the entire time spent inside and outside of school the following is the comparative time distribution for the average student:

For each hour spent on English the average student spends 53 minutes on seminary; for each hour on mathematics, 55 minutes on seminary; for each hour on science, 60 minutes on seminary, and for each hour on history, 55 minutes on seminary.

Require as Much as Three Units

In other words, each of the three theology courses, in terms of the pupil's time, is the practical equivalent of one unit of public school work. Thus, the three courses require practically as much time as three units of regular high school work, although only one unit of credit is given. What appears to be 15 units of public education and one unit of religious education plus one theology course for which no credit is given, becomes, when expressed in terms of the pupil's time, 18 units to be completed in four years.

As it affects the pupil's daily program of work the situation is equally serious. The pupil who carries what appears to be the maximum load of four and one-half units, one-half unit of which is theology, is in reality carrying five units. The student with four and one-half units of public school work plus the course in church history, for which no credit is given, is, in reality, carrying five and one-half units.

What the implications for efficiency and scholarship? Are there any reasons to believe that the high school students of our state can scatter their energies over 18 units of work and do it as efficiently as students in other states who concentrate for four years on 16 units? Is there any reason to believe that the students of Utah can carry five to five

and one-half units of work per year in an efficient manner when the standard for American high schools is four to four and one-half units?

Lowers Standards of the Students

It is of no avail to turn to any of the several attempts that have been made to rank the states educationally and seek an answer in Utah's educational rank among the states. In none of these attempted rankings has scholarship, the finished product, the main thing for which the schools exist, been measured.

The fact that Utah ranks higher than some other states in length of school terms, for instance would not necessarily signify higher scholarship as represented by knowledge of high school subjects, when one-sixth of the pupil's time during the longer term is devoted to activities other than public school education.

The only comprehensive study of scholarship in Utah high schools as compared with other states was made by the U.S. bureau of education survey of 1926. This survey commission reported the scholarship of the county schools below the standard and the scholarship of the Salt Lake City schools above the standard.

Salt Lake City students, having used no time for seminaries, had devoted their entire time to high school subjects. Ogden, which does not have seminaries, was not included in the survey. The tests in English given to high school seniors by the state department of education this spring showed results similar to those obtained by the U.S. bureau of education.

There need be no controversy at this point over the relative values of religious education and public education, as this decidedly has no bearing on the question. If it were conceded that a single course in theology is of more value than the entire high

school course, the fact yet remains that the public schools are established and maintained for the sole purpose of furnishing public education and the constitution specifically provides that this function shall not be interfered with, and that no part of the burden of religious education shall be borne by the state.

Financial and Economic Aspects Considered

The taxpayers of Utah are making a supreme effort to raise sufficient funds to finance public education adequately. Farmers, business men, and other property owners are burdened almost to the breaking point. Any factor which affects in any way the financial burden of the schools becomes a matter of grave concern.

While the state bears no part of the cost of instruction in the seminaries, nevertheless, in one respect the seminaries are costing the taxpayers of Utah thousands of dollars.

As has already been pointed out, the theology courses increase what appears to be a maximum student load of four and one-half units to an actual load of five units when either the Old or New Testament courses are taken, and to five and one-half when the church history course, for which no credit is given, is taken. Examination of student record cards in high school files reveals in the aggregate many cases of very low grades and of failures in one or more subjects. Where failure and low grades exist the cost of education is materially increased.

Threatens Failure In Some Subjects

A simple illustration will make the point clear. Student A is enrolled for English, algebra, biology, history, and theology, devoting one hour per day of school time besides his home preparation for each subject.

For each of the public school courses he receives one unit credit and for theology one-half units, but an actual load of five units.

In an attempt to carry a similar load for three years, student A failed in part of his work and spends an extra year in high school in order to graduate. The cost to the taxpayer of this student's education is increased 25 percent due to his presence in the school of five instead of four years. It is probably that he could have carried successfully his four units of public school work and thus have graduated in four years. The one-half credit unit, actually a full unit, of theology each year for three years, in no way increased his knowledge of public school subjects.

Another illustration may be used further to clarify the situation. Student B is enrolled in the same course as student A, but instead of failing he graduates in four years, with very low marks. Upon graduation he enters the state university and, due to his low marks in high school is unable to carry university work successfully. His failures in the university add a tremendous load to the already overburdened taxpayer.

Arguments Proved by Actual Records

Students A and B are not hypothetical cases. Record cards by the hundreds can be found in high school and university files to represent students A and B. Twenty-two percent of the entering class of freshmen at the university this fall were required to take a make-up course in English because their preparation was inadequate to meet the standards of freshmen English work.

For the 1928-29 freshmen class at the state university the following percentage represents hours of work rated as unsuccessful during the first quarter of the subject named. The percentages include the work receiving the marks incomplete, [report

unreadable at this point], English, 14 percent, chemistry, 11 percent, mathematics, 13 percent.

Of course, there is no implication that all the failures and poor scholarship in high school and university are due to the seminaries. It is true, however, that included among the failures of many students who in high school have scattered their energies over 15 units of public school work and three units of theology, making 18 units in all, instead of concentrating on 16 units of school work. It is also true that, with such a high percentage of pupils devoting only part time to public school, the quality and amount of work required of all pupils must be adjusted to meet the pace set by the students who are attempting to take 18 units instead of the standard load of sixteen units.

Could Have Gone Further in School

With reference to student B, it is interesting to note the possibilities had he devoted full instead of part time to the public school. His course, it will be remembered, was made up of 15 units of regular school work and three units of theology.

If he had devoted full time to his regular high school course he might have taken an additional unit in each of the three subjects, English, mathematics and science, or have devoted one-sixth more time to these subjects in the course he did take.

Would it not be reasonable to expect that this extra preparation would have enabled him to do his university work successfully and thus have avoided the extra expense to the state and to himself due to his failure?

There is, perhaps, no way on determining definitely the added financial burden imposed on the state's educational system though the extra work required and extra time expended by students who are attempting to complete a secular and religious education in

the time usually devoted to secular education. Since students A and B, referred to above, can be counted by the hundreds, its perhaps conservative to say that the added cost amounts to many thousands of dollars.

Economy Makes Matter Vital

The financial phase of the question is especially important at the present time. The citizens of all sections are now interested in devising some plan for equalizing educational opportunity throughout the state. One striking phase of present inequality is the wide variation in length of school terms in the various districts. In this connection many points of justice and equity have been discussed, but one point seems to have escaped attention altogether. If students in certain schools devote one-sixth of their time to theology and five-sixths to the public school, then a 36-week term with theology becomes the equivalent of a 30 week term without theology.

From the standpoint of equity, should taxpayer A, who lives in one part of the state, and who may be vitally interested in public education, but not in theology, have his taxes increased in order to lengthen the school term of a district in another part of the state, in which the pupils devote only five-sixths of the lengthened term to public education and one-sixth to theology? Would it not be more just to the taxpayer to have a 30 weeks' term with theology, since, in terms of public education, one is the equivalent of the other?

Destroys Principle of Equalization

The equalization of educational opportunity presupposes an equitable application of state standards and state approval of schools receiving equalizing funds. Yet, as long as theology courses in some schools increase the maximum student load of four and one

half units to an actual load of five and one-half units, and convert 36 weeks' term into the equivalent of 30 weeks' term, any attempt at measuring the schools by state standards is inconsistent and impossible. It is largely for this reason that it has been found impossible, up to date, to make definite lists of accredited and non-accredited high schools.

It should be noted here that the whole financial aspect of the problem runs also into constitutional complications. If a direct use of public funds for religious education is unconstitutional, is it not reasonable to suppose that a financial burden imposed directly by religious education is also unconstitutional?

A word should be said here with reference to the junior seminary. The church has recently begun the establishment of junior seminaries in which theology is extended downward in into the seventh and eighth grades. The past year the number of junior seminaries has increased at a rapid rate. The course given this year is entitled "What It Means to Be a Mormon." In many places the work is given during school hours, but in some places after school hours. In some places, a separate building is provided, in other places the junior seminaries are held in the school buildings. Up to date the time in most places has been limited to one meeting per week.

Time Has Come to Probe Matter

The state junior high school course of student is based on the assumption that students will attend all of their school day in public school activities. Any interference with this program results in a loss of efficiency and added cost to the state.

The time has arrived when the whole question of the relationship seminaries to the public schools should receive careful consideration. It should be emphatically

reiterated that the problem is purely a constitutional, educational, and financial one and does not involve in any way the question of religious beliefs, which is a personal matter, or the importance of religious education.

Since the state now distributes a large state fund for the support of local schools, the whole question has a state as well as a local significance.

The constitutional aspect is highly significant because of the marked laxity toward law observance characteristics of our times. The church and the school are naturally expected to take the lead in standing solidly behind the constitution and fostering a sentiment favorable to law observances. It should be stated here that the writer of this report does not presume to speak with finality where intricate legal technicalities are involved. However, the attorney general did rule in 1914 that the Utah constitution prohibits the use of public money for religious education and the teaching of religion in public school buildings.

That the spirit, and perhaps the letter, of the constitution is violated by the practice of giving credit in the public schools for something which the constitution prohibits being taught there, and of making religious education an indirect burden on the public taxpayer, is only the opinion of one layman. It is sufficient to raise the question and suggest the case with which the point might be settled by the state judiciary.

The educational aspect is highly significant. Utah is known throughout the nation for its firm belief in education. Her educational system is recognized as having many points of superiority in organization and general policy. Any factor which affects her scholarship, therefore, constitutes a serious problem.

The financial and economic aspects are significant because of the splendid efforts put forth and the tremendous hardships endured by the taxpayers in order to support public education. Anything which increases this burden without an adequate return in terms of public education becomes at once a matter of vital importance.

APPENDIX C

A Reply to Inspector Williamson's Report to the State Board of Education on the Existing Relationship Between Seminaries and Public High Schools in the State of Utah and Comments Thereon by a Special Committee of the Board, issued as a letter to the Utah State Board of Education, May 3, 1930, Box 57, Folder 13, Buchanan Collection, AO149.xml, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.
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CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

47 EAST SOUTH TEMPLE STREET
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

JOSEPH F. MERRILL, COMMISSIONER
GEORGE H. BRIMHALL, SUPERVISOR
GUY C. WILSON, SUPERVISOR

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A Reply to Inspector Williamson's Report to the State Board of Education
on the Existing Relationship Between Religious Seminaries and Public High Schools
in the State of Utah and Comments Thereon by a Special Committee of the Board.

May 3, 1930.

To the Utah State Board of Education,

Lady and Gentlemen:

On January 8, 1930, State High School Inspector I. L. Williamson, reported to the State Board "On the Existing Relationship Between Religious Seminaries and Public High Schools in the State of Utah". This report was referred to a committee of the Board which made a majority report to the Board on March 24, 1930. We shall refer to these two documents as the Inspector's report and the Committee's report, respectively.

In summarizing his Report the Inspector says:

"The time has arrived when the whole question of the relationship of seminaries to the public schools should receive careful and thoughtful consideration. It should be emphatically reiterated that the problem is purely a constitutional, educational, and financial one..... Since the State now distributes a large state fund for the support of local schools, the whole question has a state as well as a local significance. The constitutional aspect is highly significant because of the marked laxity toward law characteristic of our times. The church and the school are naturally expected to take the lead in standing solidly behind the Constitution and fostering a sentiment favorable to law observance..... The Attorney General did rule in 1914 that the Utah Constitution prohibits the use of public moneys for religious education and the teaching of religion in the public schools.

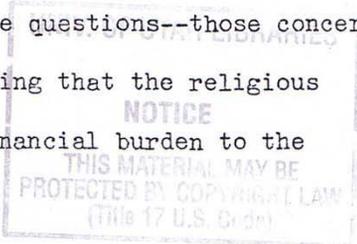
"That the spirit, and perhaps the letter, of the Constitution is violated by the practice of giving credit in the public schools for something which the Constitution prohibits being taught there, and of making religious education an indirect burden on the public taxpayer, is only the opinion of a layman..... It is sufficient to raise the question and suggest the ease with which the point might be settled by the State Judiciary.

"The educational aspect is highly significant. Utah is known throughout the Nation for its firm belief in education. Her educational system is recognized as having many points of superiority in organization and general policy. Any factor which affects her scholarship, therefore, constitutes a serious problem.

"The financial and economic aspects are significant because of the splendid efforts put forth and the tremendous hardships endured by the

taxpayers in order to support public education. Anything which increases this burden without an adequate return in terms of public education becomes at once a matter of vital importance."

In his Report the Inspector thus raises three questions--those concerning scholarship, finances, and the Constitution--claiming that the religious seminary is a scholastic handicap to the student, a financial burden to the school district, and a violator of law.



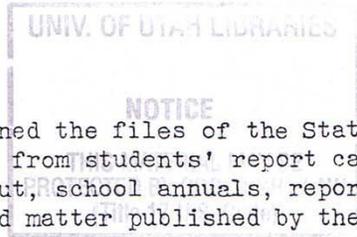
The Committee's report uses this language:

"In his report the High School Inspector made the following

STATEMENT OF FACTS

'.... In one respect the seminaries are costing the taxpayers of Utah thousands of dollars. An illustration will make the point clear. Student "A" is enrolled for English, algebra, biology, history, and theology, devoting one hour per day of school time besides his home preparation to each subject. For each of the public school courses he receives one unit of credit, and for the theology course one-half unit. This makes an apparent load of four and one-half units, but an actual load of five units. In an attempt to carry a similar load for three years Student "A" fails in part of his work and spends an extra year in high school in order to graduate. The cost to the taxpayer of this student's education is increased twenty-five per cent, due to his presence in the school for five instead of four years. Another illustration may be used to further clarify the situation. Student "B" is enrolled in the same course as Student "A", but instead of failing he graduates in four years with very low marks. Upon graduation he enters the State University and due to his low marks (representing inferior work) in high school, is unable to carry university work successfully. His failure in the University adds a tremendous load to the taxpayer.

'Students "A" and "B" are not hypothetical cases. Record cards by the hundreds can be found in high school and university files to represent Students "A" and "B". Twenty-two per cent of the entering class of freshman at the University in the fall of 1929 were required to take a make up course in English because their preparation was inadequate to meet the standards of freshman-year work. For the 1928-29 freshman class at the State University, the following percentage represents the hours of work rated as unsuccessful during the first quarter in the subjects named. The percentages include the work receiving the marks incomplete, condition, failure, and dropped: English 14%, chemistry 11%, mathematics 13%. There is no implication that all the failures and poor scholarship in high schools and university are due to the seminary. Included among the failures, however, are many students who in high school have scattered their energies over fifteen units of public school work and three units of theology, making eighteen units in all instead of concentrating on sixteen units of public school work. With such a high percentage of pupils devoting only part time to the public school, the quality and amount of work required of all pupils must be adjusted to meet the pace set by the students who are attempting to take eighteen units instead of the standard load of sixteen units.'



The Committee goes on to say:

"Your committee has carefully examined the files of the State High School Inspector, and have found therein from students' report cards, students' answers to the questionnaire sent out, school annuals, reports from principals and teachers, and from printed matter published by the seminary officials, evidence sufficient to satisfy us that the statements made by the High School Inspector are, with one exception, on which there was no documentary evidence, true and correct. The exception referred to is the statement made in the Williamson report that 'In a few of the schools where it has been inconvenient to build seminary buildings, the seminary classes are held in the high school building side by side with high school classes.' These cases were isolated, as explained to us by Mr. Williamson, and are considered of no importance, for the purpose of this report."

Thus the language of both reports conveys the impression that the Inspector had made a careful and extensive investigation and was reporting only the facts as they exist. But unfortunately this was not the case. The facts are that the scholarship of seminary graduates is superior to that of non-seminary graduates, both in high school and in college, and that the seminary is a financial help rather than a financial burden to the high school. We secured data from every high school in Utah where we have a seminary--fifty-two in number-- and found that in 1928 there were 2017 graduates from these high schools. Of these 1109, or 55%, were also seminary graduates. These students, according to the high school records, had an average scholarship grade of 83.3. The 908 high school but non-seminary graduates had an average grade of 81. In 1929 there were 2292 high school graduates from the schools where there were seminaries of whom 1197, or 58%, were also seminary graduates. These had an average scholarship grade of 83.6. The 1095 high school but non-seminary graduates had an average grade of 81.6.

Further, we followed these graduates into college. We obtained from twenty of the largest high schools in the State where there are L.D.S. seminaries the names of the graduates of 1928 and of 1929 who had gone to college and the names of the institutions entered. There were 962 who entered college. Of these, 385 entered the Brigham Young University. 205 were seminary as well as high

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school graduates. Under date of February 25, 1930, Registrar Hayes of the B.Y.U. reported that the average scholarship grade of these 205 students was 75.6 and that the average grade of the 180 high school but non-seminary graduates was 71.3. There entered the Utah State Agricultural College 373 of these high school graduates, of whom 213 were seminary graduates. Under date of March 20, 1930, Registrar Bell of the College reported the average grades of these 213 students as being 81.42. The average grade of the non-seminary graduates was 79.36.

The remainder of the 962 graduates who went to college--204 in number-- entered the University of Utah. Of these 92 were seminary graduates and 112 were non-seminary graduates. A request for the average grade of the two groups was officially denied "because of a long established policy of the University not to make public the grades of students--such being considered a confidential matter between the institution and the student--that it is impossible to give out the information for which you have asked." In our letter to the University we said: "We are not concerned with the standing of any individual, but we are greatly concerned with the average standing of these groups." The declination of the University to give us the standing of these two groups was surprising, for we were asking only for the kind of information published by the University from time to time. In the main hall of the Park Building is posted for public inspection the average scholarship standing during some years past of various fraternities and sororities. The University "Chronicle" and the Salt Lake City papers occasionally publish the average grades of students, sometimes even the grades of individuals. For instance, in the Deseret Evening News of Jan. 15, 1930, is published the information that Captain Davis of the football team in two quarters secured grade A in twenty-four hours work, grade B in eleven hours, and grade C in two hours, an average of 2.54 or A-. The grades of Jimmy Hodgson, Bob Davis, and Marvin Jonas are also published. The "News" article also said the school average for 1928-1929 was 1.32, the fraternity average 1.43, the sorority

average 1.61, and that of the football squad 1.65. As recent as Saturday, April 26, 1930, on reporting the results of the student-body election of next year's officers the Deseret Evening News, page 5, speaking of Wesley Anderson, the successful candidate for president, said: "Since entering the University Anderson has maintained an average grade of 'A minus' in all of his studies and has also been outstanding in athletics." On receiving the declination from the University we wrote again that the nature of our request must have been misunderstood, for we said we were not asking for the grades of individuals but only for the average grade of two groups. This second request met with no response.

It is fortunate for us that all the high schools and the other two senior colleges in the State were willing to give us scholarship data, otherwise we would have been denied, in part at least, a constitutional right--the right of defense, defense against a publically made charge by a public officer.

Now the average grade of the 1928 and 1929 graduates of all the Utah high schools where there were seminaries shows that the seminary graduate had a higher standing than the non-seminary graduate. Furthermore, the college records (B.Y.U. and U.S.A.C.) show the same thing. Hence the charge that seminary work is a scholastic handicap to the high school is ^{true} false. The charge that it handicaps the work of the student in college is also ^{true} false, so far as is shown by available records. Seminary work does not in any way diminish the number of days or recitations devoted to the student of English, mathematics, chemistry, or other prescribed subjects of the high school curriculum. Then is not pure fancy responsible for the inference that poor scholarship in these fundamental subjects is chargeable to the seminary? The records do not support the inference.

But from the standpoint of scholarship, the Inspector's reported data on the time spent by students on their studies indicate an unfavorable condition. From the standpoint of scholarship the data do not indicate that students spend too much time to earn their credits in Bible History, but too little time to earn

their credits in other studies. Herein the colleges will find an explanation for the unsatisfactory preparation of their freshmen in English, mathematics, etc. "There is no excellence without labor", "no royal road to learning." Longer hours of study seem to be a crying need in high schools. At least the credit in Bible study seems to be earned, something for which we are thankful. Too little study and not the seminary is to blame for failures in college.

And the charge that the seminaries are costing the taxpayers of Utah thousands of dollars is also ~~false~~ ^{untrue}. The fact is that they are annually saving these taxpayers many thousands of dollars. How could it be otherwise? There are fifty-two seminaries in Utah, serving an equal number of high schools. They give a unit of credit for seminary work. This is one-sixteenth of the work required for high school graduation. This sixteenth of the work is costing many thousands of dollars, not one penny of which the public schools are paying.

Mr. F. W. Kirkham, now Director of the National Child Welfare Association, with offices in New York City, and for many years Superintendent of the Granite School District, wrote relative to the Inspector's report:

"It is unfair.... casting reflection upon the ability, integrity, and even honesty of the school superintendents of Utah, of whom I have been a member..... No school superintendent in the State of Utah would knowingly decrease the efficiency of his school in a single unit of credit with any plan of cooperation with the seminary. No superintendent would knowingly increase the taxes of the State of Utah for the benefit of a religious organization..... The plan which now permits one unit of credit for Bible study out of a total of sixteen does not in any way interfere with the standards of the remaining sixteen units..... A sufficient answer is the fact that the Granite High School has for many years been an accredited member of the Northwest Association of High Schools. It was the first high school in the State to permit its students to enroll in one unit of Bible History. This national association saw no difficulty in accrediting it because of this fact."

Letters were sent out from this office, under date of March 27, 1930, to a considerable number of superintendents of schools of representative districts where there are seminaries, asking two questions:

"1. Are the L.D.S. seminaries in your district a financial burden to the public school funds? That is, if they should cease to exist would the

expense of operating your high schools be increased, diminished, or not affected?

"2. Is the influence of the seminary helpful or hurtful to the high school and the students? That is, does it handicap or otherwise high school discipline, efficiency, and morals?"

To question number 1 nearly all said the expense would be increased if the seminaries were to be discontinued. Not one said the expense would be diminished. Two of the sixteen superintendents answered "not affected". To the second question nearly all answered: "The influence is helpful to high school discipline, efficiency, and morals." Two replied that they had no evidence one way or another. We wrote the superintendents that their names would not be used with the information they returned. However, two of them voluntarily authorized the removal of this restriction. One of these was Supt. R. V. Larson of Cache County. He wrote, under date of March 28, 1930, in part as follows:

"Should the two seminaries in Cache District cease to function it would cost the district an additional \$6,000 per year at least. I am considering salaries only, and not the additional room that would be needed at the North Cache High School. Two additional rooms would be needed at North Cache High School, at a cost of four to five thousand dollars per room, and the situation would be such that it would be inadvisable to build two rooms alone, so four rooms would be built, at a cost of \$16,000 to \$20,000.

"Our high schools were a fair size when the seminary work was introduced. Immediately principals and teachers commented on the wholesome effect they seemed to have on the student body. There was evident a better tone in the high school and a higher moral plane. It could not be otherwise with most of the students coming in daily contact with a high class teacher, who was emphasizing ideals of right-living.

"For twenty years I have been partly responsible in an administrative way for the introduction of changes in the course of study in the State as a whole and in the Cache schools in particular. I have seen highly lauded schemes introduced and have seen them fail, and we have silently buried them. The seminaries were expected to give the high school pupil a foundation for moral integrity and character development. They are doing so to a surprisingly successful extent. They seem one thing that is coming up to expectations."

Dr. Henry A. Pace, Superintendent of North Summit District, wrote under date of March 31, 1930, in part as follows:

"The L.D.S. seminary is not a financial burden in this district nor in other districts where I have worked.....

"From past observation, the seminary work has been helpful in creating a better attitude in our schools. Invariably this attitude relieves many of the administrative problems that are noticed where seminaries

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do not exist. It has further been my experience that boys and girls who excel in seminary work are rank leaders in other classes."

Another superintendent wrote, under date of April 8, 1930:

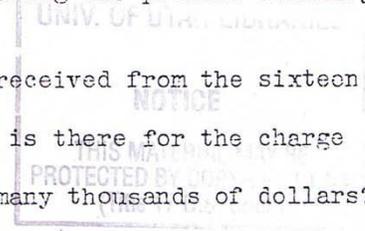
"I can state positively that if the _____ Seminary should cease to exist expenses of operating the _____ High School would be increased at least by the cost of an additional teacher."

We quote from the letter of another superintendent, written under date of March 28, 1930:

"In answer to your inquiry of March 27 I am very glad to say that we consider that a portion of our teaching load is being carried by the seminaries. We consider ourselves fortunate in having the present seminary arrangement."

These indicate the character of the answers received from the sixteen superintendents who wrote us. What foundation in fact is there for the charge that the seminaries are costing the taxpayers of Utah many thousands of dollars? Why did the Inspector charge that they do?

By reason of their seminary work do students fail in high school and have to return a fifth year to graduate? The Inspector concludes they do. And thus these repeaters throw heavy financial burdens on the taxpayers. This was another point on which we sought information. We went to the records of all the high schools in Utah where we have seminaries for the years 1928 and 1929. We found in 1928 there was only one student who failed to complete in the regular four years the requirements for high school graduation by reason of taking seminary classes; that is, this was the only case in which it could even be assumed the seminary was the cause of failure. In 1929 there were three students who assigned this as the cause of their failure to graduate in the regular four years. And this presents the case at its worst. And for each of these years only one of these failing students returned for a fifth year of high school work. "Sometimes there is a very wide gap between fact and fancy." Can there be any justification for a school official making grave charges against an institution without having facts to substantiate his charges?



But it was reported that seminaries are benefited by bus transportation. It was admitted, however, that the existence of seminaries did not increase the cost of bus transportation. Then why was the subject mentioned? We repeat, it is a fact that seminaries not only cost the public schools nothing, but on the other hand save them many thousands of dollars annually in teachers' salaries and in the cost of classrooms and their maintenance. Their existence, then, saves the taxpayers directly many thousands of dollars.

As to bus transportation, we admit frankly that the seminary is benefited by the transportation system of the high school. So is the corner grocery, the refreshment stand, the shop, the business house, and the town as a whole in which the high school is located. It could not be otherwise. But within the meaning of the law no sane person would assert that because these places are benefited by the presence of the high school in the community they are therefore supported, in part, in any legal sense whatsoever, by the money of the taxpayers.

While considering this point of expense let us indicate how the taxpayers of Utah are beneficiaries to the extent of hundreds of thousands of dollars annually by the expenditures of the L.D.S. Church for education. First let us mention Salt Lake City. The City Board of Education has been receiving from the State from \$20,000 to \$25,000 annually for the education of students whom it does not educate, for they attend the L.D.S. College, a private school. Not only this, but the City Board has been saved a hundred thousand dollars annually or more because it has not had to educate these students. It has provided no teachers, it has provided and maintained no classrooms in which to instruct them.

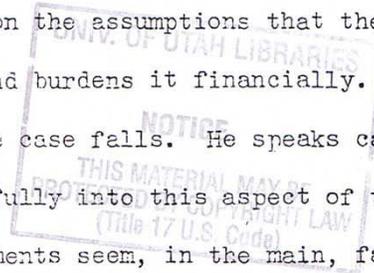
One reason for the maintenance of Dixie College by the Church is that the district thinks itself hardly able to maintain a 4-year public high school. Here again the school district has had its apportionment from the State for students it was not educating. For ten years or more the public school in Blanding has had the free use of two or three classrooms and a big gymnasium, all owned by the Church.

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Other examples might be given, but we pass them and call attention to the fact that the Church is giving annually a college education to about two thousand Utah students. How much is this saving the taxpayers of Utah? Several hundred thousand dollars, as all educators know. In view of the above facts does it not seem like a mockery for the Inspector to charge that the L.D.S. seminaries are a financial burden to the taxpayers? But another phase of this question will be considered further on.

The Inspector builds his case upon the assumptions that the seminary handicaps the high school scholastically and burdens it financially. Since these assumptions are baseless in fact, his whole case falls. He speaks cautiously of the legal phase. The Committee enters fully into this aspect of the case. But to a layman the Committee's legal arguments seem, in the main, far-fetched. There is here no case of public moneys being spent for religious instruction. There is no sectarian religious teaching in the schools. The seminary is entirely apart from, and independent of, the high school. It is a separate and distinct institution, for the support of which not a dollar of public money is used. Hence most of the legal cases, as cited by the Committee, appear to a layman as having no bearing upon the case.

The public school may not legally teach religion, but to give a limited amount of credit on transfer for Bible study taught from a non-sectarian point of view is an entirely different thing from teaching the Bible in the school by public school teachers at public expense. True, the school does not have supervision of this Bible study, nor could it legally have supervision. Nor does the public school have supervision over the teaching in any private school. Yet it is the practice of the public schools of America to give credit on transfer from private schools; and further, the public schools accept credit on transfer from reputable private schools for subjects that they themselves do not teach. This is common practice in America. To regard this practice as illegal seems a draught on the

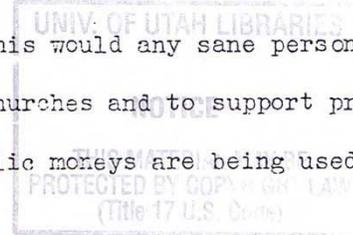


imagination. The schools of America have established their relations upon a basis of confidence. The public school has confidence in the honor and integrity of the reputable private school, so private school certificates are commonly accepted by the public school at their face value.

The Committee report quotes the Utah Constitution: "No public money or property shall be appropriated for or applied to any religious worship, exercise or instruction." We believe the courts in the United States try to give sane and liberal interpretations to all constitutional and statutory provisions. The Utah Legislature appropriates money for the salary of its chaplains. The State Senate opens daily by prayer--a religious exercise. Does this violate the Constitution? Literally, yes, a layman might say; in spirit, no, we believe every court would interpret it. Does the support of and praying of chaplains in Congress, in the army and the navy of the United States, violate the Constitution of our country?

By law the property of churches used for purposes of worship, etc. is exempted from taxation. The property of private schools used for school purposes is also exempted from taxation. Because of this would any sane person assert that public moneys are being used to support the churches and to support private schools? Is it not just as far-fetched to say that public moneys are being used to support the seminaries?

From a fair and reasonable point of view we believe our State Constitution does not prohibit the public school from giving credit on transfer from a private school for Bible courses conducted in a non-sectarian manner. And this is the view that American educators are more and more coming to take. The colleges of the country generally, as do our Utah colleges, give entrance credit for Bible study completed in church schools. If it is legal for the state colleges to accept for entrance this credit on transfer, is it not legal for high schools to do the same thing? But what logic is there in asking Utah State colleges to refuse what state institutions elsewhere may grant? Constitutional provisions respecting separation



of church and state, sectarian religious teaching in the public schools, etc. are essentially the same in other states as they are in Utah.

Particularly enlightening on this subject is a pamphlet entitled "The Study of Religion in State Universities", by Dr. H. L. Searles of the University of Iowa, published in October, 1927, as one of the studies in character education made by the University of Iowa. In the first chapter Dr. Searles says:

"The principle of the separation of church and state is recognized throughout this work, but no such issue is raised by the introduction of the non-sectarian study of religion into the state university..... A survey of the present curricula of state universities will show that there has been a significant beginning in the study of religion in a large majority of the state universities of the United States.

In chapter 4, page 34, he says:

"The anomaly of an educational system recognizing the importance of religion and yet being unable to promote its study and teaching, gradually led many leading educators to recognize and acknowledge that a gap existed in our educational system. The recognition of this gap has been, and is, an important factor in bringing about an open-minded attitude toward the solution of the problem on the part of the state universities."

Dr. Searles then gives a brief historical outline of the development of the teaching of religion in state universities, and says (page 40):

"Another evidence that we are now in a period of cooperation between the church and state universities is the movement known as the school of religion movement."

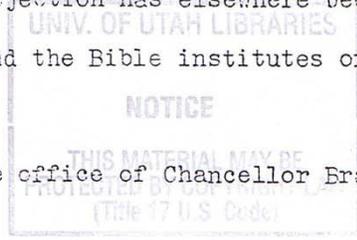
On page 46 he continues:

"All of the tax supported universities of the United States, numbering forty-two, are covered in the present study. Of this number nine give no courses in religion, nor are accredited courses in religion elected by their students in outside institutions..... Of the remaining thirty-three, thirty offer courses in religion as a part of the university curriculum, supplemented in the cases of Ohio University, the University of Illinois, the University of Michigan, the University of Iowa, and the University of Texas [and now the University of Idaho], by courses offered in Schools of Religion. At the Universities of Missouri and North Dakota the courses in religion are offered exclusively by Bible Colleges and at Kansas and Montana by Schools of Religion for which a certain amount of university credit is given. At the University of Oklahoma, the work is given in the Department of Education but supported by the churches.

"The institution at which the largest number of courses is offered is the University of Illinois where there are fifteen given by three denominational Foundations."

That is to say, these Bible institutes and schools of religion conduct

courses that the universities themselves may not legally teach, yet the universities accept their credits and count them toward graduation in the university. This is exactly the relationship, with respect to credit, between the Utah high school and the seminary. And, so far as we know, no legal objection has elsewhere been made to this arrangement between the state universities and the Bible institutes or schools of religion.



In a circular recently received from the office of Chancellor Brannon, of the University of Montana, we read:

"Three hours elective credit for each quarter is allowed by the University to each registered student for satisfactory work done in the School of Religion. A student can earn 15 credits in the School of Religion towards his University degree."

This circular describes six courses in the School of Religion accredited by the University. One of them is "24R. Essentials of Religion for Today. A study of Christian teaching concerning God, Christ, man, the Kingdom of God, etc. This counts towards a major in psychology or philosophy." What would the enemies of the Utah seminary say if they lived in Montana? But we need not go that far from home. There is a school of religion near the campus of the Utah State Agricultural College. The non-sectarian courses in religion taught in that institution are accredited by the College. (But no request to accredit a course similar to '24R' will ever be made.) A decision to accredit these courses was made only after a thorough investigation was conducted of the practice of publicly supported colleges and universities in the United States. Concerning this school of religion (called an institute) near the Agricultural College, President Elmer G. Peterson writes, under date of April 2, 1930:

"This occasion gives me the opportunity to say that I am particularly pleased with the relationship between the work of the College and the work of the Institute here. It will be necessary for us to be particularly careful to avoid technical violation of law, but I think this can be done and at the same time most cordial encouragement given the development of the Institute here.

"I think the work of the Institute is contributing largely to the ethical, moral and religious education of our students, and is to me an expression of that legal guarantee that all people have for the free exercise of their religious beliefs."

As mentioned above, a religious institute has existed at the University of Idaho during the past two years. At the time of the dedication of this Institute, Sept. 25, 1928, President F. J. Kelly wrote, among other things, as follows:

"Please be assured that the University of Idaho welcomes your efforts and will be happy to cooperate in every way possible to forward the combined program of religious and secular education which this beautiful structure signifies."

We quote from another letter of President Kelly, written under date of March 15, 1930, with respect to the Institute:

"I have been delighted, therefore, to observe how well the L.D.S. activities have integrated with the university life. The L.D.S. building has served with increasing effectiveness the general social and religious needs of the student body."

The University of Idaho, as is common practice among other state universities, likewise accredits several of the non-sectarian courses taught at the Institute.

In the concluding chapter of his "Study of Religion in State Universities" (page 61), Dr. Searles says:

"The conclusion of the present work is that there is a place for the study and interpretation of religion in the state universities of the United States..... We have come to look upon religion not as something handed down once for all, but something which is a living and growing divine-human experience in all time, and the property of humanity, rather than the exclusive possession of any one sect or all the sects."

Dr. Searles regards the university-seminary plan as the most satisfactory method of cooperation between the state and the church (see page 52). It is the plan now existing at several of the state-supported institutions. It is the plan the L.D.S. Department of Education is officially invited to inaugurate at the University of Wyoming, at the University of Arizona, and at Arizona Teachers College at Flagstaff, Arizona.

In a book published in 1928, entitled "Religious Education and the State", Professors Jackson and Malmberg, working under the direction of Professor Coe of Columbia University, made a very careful survey of religious education in the United States in cooperation with public schools. We have quoted from Dr. Searles relative

to the study of religion in state universities. The book from which we now quote studies the relation of classes in religion and public schools--elementary and secondary. On page 60 of this book we read:

"Progress from 1917 to 1925.

"Comparing the above data with that reported by Wood, we notice what Squires calls 'a notable progress in this period of eight years'. From six states receiving official sanction in 1917, there is an increase to 19 states in 1925. Squires' survey shows that the 11 states, following to some extent the practice of giving high school credit for Bible study in 1917 without official sanction have granted official sanction to this practice since 1917. Ten other states have been added that were reported as giving credit for Bible study in some of their high schools, although this credit was not specifically sanctioned by state authority."

(Title 17 U.S. Code)

"Status of Movement in 1927.

"Reviewing the data collected through this present investigation from these forty-eight states, the status of this movement shows further growth since 1925. The following Tables..... indicate the changes from 1925, and give additional data....."

"TABLE NO. 8

"High School Credit for Bible Study--1927 (26 States)

Alabama	Maryland	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Michigan ¹	Oregon ¹
Colorado ¹	Mississippi ¹	South Dakota ¹
Idaho	Missouri	Tennessee
Illinois	Montana ¹	Texas ¹
Indiana ¹	Nebraska	Utah
Iowa ¹	New York	Virginia ¹
Kansas	North Carolina	West Virginia
Maine ¹	North Dakota ¹	

"¹ In each of these states an official syllabus of Bible study is, as a rule, the basis."

"Reported as Not Giving High School Credit--1927 (22 States)

Arizona	Massachusetts	Rhode Island
California	Minnesota	South Carolina
Connecticut	Nevada	Vermont
Delaware	New Hampshire	Washington ¹
Florida	New Jersey	Wisconsin ¹
Georgia	New Mexico	Wyoming
Kentucky	Ohio	
Louisiana	Pennsylvania	

"¹ Court decision against giving such credit."

[As to Wisconsin see Supt. Keller's letter to Dean Bennion, page 18.]

On page 63 the following is found:

"Progress since 1925.

"Comparing Table 8 with the classification given by Squires, it will be noted that, in 1927, twenty-six states were giving high school credit for

"Bridgeport.

"One period of forty minutes per week of released time is granted by the public school authorities at the end of the day. Seventeen hundred children of the Protestant faith and forty-three hundred of the Roman Catholic faith are enrolled."

"Dayton.

"This city of nearly 200,000 population, largely 'American' in character, enjoys a unique reputation for weekday church school work. It has about 6,500 boys and girls under Protestant religious instruction within the city proper and 3,500 children in weekday schools in the surrounding country. In addition there are classes provided for high school boys and girls. Every public school in Dayton is served by a weekday church school."

"Toledo.

"The 'Toledo Plan' goes back to 1916 for its beginning, two years after the 'Gary Plan' started. It is the oldest weekday system in Ohio, a state in which weekday schools flourish like the proverbial green bay tree."

"Kansas City.

"Today practically 95% of the boys and girls of the public schools of Kansas City are under religious instruction. The total number is about 12,000, more than are enrolled in any other city in the country."

"Minneapolis.

"Like the Toledo weekday school, Minneapolis schools are under the general supervision of a Weekday Department of the local Council of Churches. Twenty-four hundred boys and girls receive one hour of religious instruction per week, although the state of Minnesota has legalized three hours of released public school time."

In the last paragraph of his article Mr. Settle says:

"Thus we find in nine widely separated communities as many distinctive features. Each community is carrying on its weekday work in much the same way and yet embodying features not universally employed."

In a public address, given April 7, 1950, on the attitude of leading educators towards week-day religious education, Dean Milton Bennion, of the University of Utah, among other things said:

"The attitude of leading and typical educators, as I have run across it in the past ten years, has generally been very favorable to religious education and favorable to some kind of cooperation between the churches and the public schools."

"As a typical example of that, very recently, in returning from the Atlantic Coast where I attended a gathering of the National Education Association, I happened to ride with Mr. Keller, Superintendent of Schools of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, and talked over this question with him. In his own city they have introduced a plan of religious education, relatively new but going strong, with 95% of the pupils in grades five to eight inclusive enrolled in religious education classes, which are held, at present, only once a week but held during a school hour--from three to four in the afternoon--the pupils being excused on request of their parents, and those who are not excused are held to carry on some kind of work in citizenship. Mr. Keller said that the churches were taking only one hour a week because they were not financially and

otherwise prepared to do more, but that they would be glad to have the work extended on through the high school..... I cite this opinion because I think it is typical of the very widespread opinion throughout the country."

"I have a verbal report, obtained within the last two months, from the Superintendent of Schools of Kansas City, Missouri, who has been in close touch with this work for a number of years. It is working very well there."

"In Oregon a law was enacted which aimed to compel parents to send their children to the public schools. That law was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. They now have a law which makes definite provision for parents to withdraw their children from the public schools for a brief time for religious instruction, and that plan is being operated rather widely in the State of Oregon. I have a letter, under date of April 2, from Harold S. Tuttle, Professor of Educational Sociology in the University of Oregon, who has been making a special study of this subject. He writes:

"In Oregon the movement is viewed with favor by the majority of schoolmen. The law permits dismissal of children during school hours not to exceed two hours per week for religious instruction, subject to the consent of the local school board."

Further on in his address Dean Bennion said:

"I have a letter from the Director of Week-day Schools of Religious Education in Dayton, Ohio, under date of April 2. The States of Ohio and Kansas have this work developed very highly in many places. I read from this letter:

"The plan has proven very satisfactory. At least, according to a statement by Superintendent Stetson of our public schools, made just last Friday, it is the most satisfactory plan at present. Superintendent Stetson also said that if this Council of Religious Education were not having the classes in Week-day Religious Instruction, the public schools would consider the work so necessary that they would go about finding some kind of character instruction in their schools."

Dean Bennion then continues:

"On the same general principle a plan for week-day religious education in cooperation with the public schools, but not in union with them, is welcomed by large bodies of citizens in many states of the American Union and is supported very heartily by many of the most eminent educators in the United States. The government does not hesitate to call for the cooperation and assistance of the church in time of war or other national crisis. In time of peace the government might very well welcome the cooperation of the churches in every feasible way in promoting the character education of its young people and the development of good citizenship, which is one of the ideals of religious education. I call attention to this sentiment which I think is growing and is in harmony with the development of education in the public schools."

On a visit to Utah, when he was United States Commissioner of Education, Hon. J. J. Tigert said to Mr. Robert D. Young, who at the time was a member of the State Board of Education, that he had made some study of the L.D.S. seminary system in cooperation with public high schools and thought it one of the finest arrangements in the land. He said he believed this method of religious-character training would,

in the near future, be adopted by the whole United States.

Discussing character and religious education, in the February, 1930, number of "Religious Education", Professor William Clayton Bower, of the University of Chicago, says (page 128):

"From this point of view it is assumed that character is not a system of ethical principles. It is a way of life.... So also religion is not a system of intellectual beliefs, of practices or emotional attitudes in isolation from the concrete movement of practical experience, but a quality of all the experiences which emerge from all the relations and functions of life. When morality and religion are dissociated from the normal range of concrete situations in all the areas of experience, they lose their essential qualities as morality and religion."

(See Insert)

Much more might be produced to show that the study of religion as one of the big vital interests of life is growing in popularity with leading educators in all parts of the country and that some form of cooperation between the public school and the church, in elementary and high school, college, and university, exists in the majority of the states. This cooperation is not something peculiar, therefore, to the schools of Utah and the seminaries. Constitutional and legal provisions of Utah relative to the separation of church and state, of the freedom of the public school from sectarian control and religious teaching are similar to those of the other states in the Union. Everywhere broadminded people are coming to see that the Bible and religion can be brought to function in the educational process in cooperation with the public school system in a way that does no violence to the spirit of the Constitution and the law. Educators are coming more and more to see that religion is a vital, if not a necessary, factor in character training. Hence week-day religious schools in cooperation with, but independent of, public schools are becoming the order of the day.

The seminary system in Utah has grown up under the sanction of the State Board of Education. The first seminary began in September, 1912, at the Granite High School, with the unanimous permission of the local school authorities. These authorities permitted from the beginning released time and credit for Bible study. This beginning was also made with the knowledge of the office of the Superintendent

(Insert)

In a 1930 book just received from the press entitled "Pupil Citizenship" by Diemer and Mullen of Teachers College, Kansas City, Diemer being the President, we have in the last, or 13th, chapter of the book entitled "The Higher Values of Education", beginning on page 297, a most excellent summing up of the previous twelve chapters. From this chapter we quote the following excerpts:

"The truly great of history have been those who have prized most those immeasurable values of soul and mind represented by such words as faith, hope, love, and brotherhood; and prizing these attributes themselves, they have striven to help their fellow men to attain a high degree of excellence in these qualities. To the degree in which man has possessed these qualities throughout the ages has he been happy.....

"No man, however, can possess these great qualities who does not recognize that above and beyond mankind is an Infinite Being who rules the universe with divine wisdom, love, and justice, and from whom man receives his own divinity. These sublime qualities which mankind alone possesses cannot be explained on a cold material basis or on a purely intellectual one. Just as the craving for bodily food and water is a response to natural law beyond man's control, so the soul's craving for peace, happiness, love, and brotherhood is beyond his control.....

"True, man can develop or he can stifle his sublime attributes. Man may descend so low into the material and grosser things of life that he apparently has lost all sense of love and pity.... To kindle in each individual these divine sparks of faith, hope, love, and brotherhood should be the highest and noblest aim of all educational procedure.....

"Calvin Coolidge sums up the whole matter in these words:

"'But under our institutions the only way to perfect our government is to perfect the individual citizen. It is necessary to reach the mind and the soul of the individual. It is not merely a change of environment, but a change of heart that is needed. The power of the law may help, but only the power of righteousness can be completely sufficient. I know of no way that this can be done save through the influences of religion and education. By religion I do not mean either fanaticism or bigotry; by education I do not mean the cant of the schools; but a broad and tolerant faith, loving thy neighbor as thyself, and a training and experience that enables the human mind to see into the heart of things.'

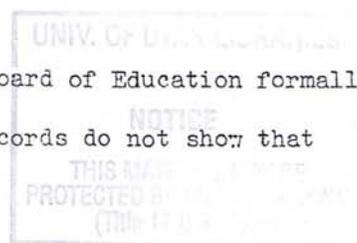
"Any scheme, therefore, which seeks to give training in citizenship must take into account the great spiritual values of life and must include in its program definite provision for inculcating these values.....

"The school should cooperate in every way possible with any agency or organization that is carrying forward a worth-while program for character education and spiritualization. Where such organizations are on a strictly sectarian basis, the school can lend moral support without becoming involved actively in the programs. Such moral support, however, must be extended to each sectarian group in the community.....

"Through the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America week-day schools of religious education are maintained in many of the cities of the country. The plan used is to locate such a school near a public school. By arrangement with the school authorities the children whose parents desire their attendance at the religious school are excused for a quarter of a day each week from their regular school work. The children excused are carefully classified and graded and given a regular course of instruction along religious lines. Some opposition has been aroused along sectarian lines, but the courts have upheld the right of a board of education to excuse the children to attend such schools. Where the privilege is accorded to all religious organizations on the same basis there can of course be no legitimate reason for sectarian opposition."

(Return to Page 20)

of Public Instruction. Later, Jan. 5, 1916, the State Board of Education formally authorized the giving of credit for Bible study. The records do not show that anyone objected.



It may be that the teaching of the Bible has not always been free from sectarianism. But the office of the L.D.S. Department of Education has urged that the teaching be non-sectarian. This has been the objective of the Department. We are quite sure that departures from this kind of teaching have not been frequent or general, even though the Inspector infers to the contrary. We have data on this point from every seminary teacher. We know whereof we write. Revised lessons on the Old and the New Testaments, now in course of preparation, will certainly be free from sectarianism. Samples of these lessons have recently been furnished members of the State Board.

The L.D.S. seminaries now serve the students of fifty-two Utah high schools outside of Salt Lake City, and application for several other seminaries are on file. Not one of these was, or will be, established except with the permission of the school authorities. This permission is responsible for the growth of the seminaries, and the growth of the seminaries has had a profound influence on the growth of the public high schools in Utah. The L.D.S. people are committed to the week-day religious training of their young people. With them this kind of training is a primary consideration. They believe that moral and religious training go hand-in-hand, that religion is morality in its best and highest form. The invention of the seminary system enables them to rally to the support of the public high school. It was devised for this purpose and has succeeded far beyond expectations. They turned their academies over at nominal cost to the public schools. Had public school officials refused credit and "released time" to prospective seminary students, the seminary would have had no beginning, no academies would have been abandoned, and many public high schools would be either non-existent or sorry things in comparison with what they are today.

The seminary system has brought the L.D.S. people unitedly and enthusiast-

ically to the support of the public schools, and this support has brought an era of peace and good will to Utah that was never known before. And this support has resulted in a public school system that is the pride of every loyal Utahn. The L.D.S. people want to live in peace and friendship with all their neighbors, with all men. But if this happy condition is to exist, then no attempt must be made to deny these people their constitutional rights or to insist upon a narrow interpretation of law that would infringe their liberties or handicap a proper functioning of the seminaries.

When the State Board voted to permit credit for Bible study in 1916 the same Constitution was in effect as now. Seminaries were in existence in 1921 when the legislature enacted into law Chapter 95. That legislature certainly had no intention of hurting the seminary by the passage of this law. Narrowly interpreted, this same law and a very similar one applying to the University of Utah would destroy freedom of teaching in the public school system of the State, for no atheistic, infidelic, or political doctrines are to be taught. If the law is narrowly interpreted much of the teaching in high schools and colleges is probably illegal, for under such an interpretation scores of people could be found in every school district that would swear to complaints against teachings in the University and in the public schools.

There is perhaps no state university in America that does not give courses in politics and current political problems. A popular and valuable course at the University of Utah is based upon the ethical teachings of the New Testament. In every state university there is probably some atheistic or anti-religious teaching. The departments of Literature, Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy, Biology, Political Science, etc. in the higher institutions of the State would have to reconstruct their courses if strict and literal interpretation of the law were enforced. Behavioristic psychology would have to be banned. Dr. John B. Watson and his school of psychologists would be unknown in Utah classrooms.

That there are some things in the relation of the seminary to the school

that need adjusting might be admitted. To some extent there is, we believe, in some places a tendency to regard the seminary as a department of the high school. But could not these things have been adjusted by the Inspector on his visits to the high schools? So far as we have been able to learn he has never given any instructions or even suggestions to high school principals, to seminary principals, or to the office of the L.D.S. Department of Education concerning these things, even though we have asked him to do so, if he found anything that was questionable.

We think the seminary should be regarded as an independent institution in theory as well as in practice. This, of course, definitely avoids bringing religious sectarian teaching into the schools. But, as pointed out above, the seminaries have grown up on the basis of released time and credit. To deny these now, and after the closing of the academies, the giving away of their property, the investment of large sums in seminary buildings--all to the profit of the schools--would be an injustice that is unbelievable and certainly one that you do not mean to impose. Especially is this true in the light of the fact that no public complaint has been made against the seminary, either by the patrons of the schools or their officials. These do not demand that the seminary be either handicapped or eliminated. On the other hand, all these officials testify to the good the seminaries are doing, to the fine influence they have on the discipline and morale of the high schools and want them continued. The Committee suggests the denial of credit for any Bible study and the refusal of released time for seminary classes. Upon credit and released time, needless to say, depends the life of the seminary. All school men know this. The adoption of the Committee's suggestions means the death of the seminary, and the enemies of the seminary all know it. But why do they want to kill something that every high school principal and school superintendent of experience says is good, being one of the most effective agencies in character training and good citizenship that influences the student? Is religious prejudice trying to mask in legal sheep's clothing for the purpose of stabbing the seminary, this agency that has had such a wonderful influence in bringing a united support to the public

schools? But suppose credit be denied and released time be given. If this would not kill the seminary then it would certainly greatly aggravate the condition the Inspector complained of--overloading the student with work, multiplying the difficulties by three. Minors up to eighteen years of age must attend school, not a public school only, but a school. Under the law the attendance may be wholly in a private school. Then cannot a part of it be in a private school--the seminary? The law does not specify that attendance shall be either wholly in the public school or wholly in the private school. It may be partly in one and partly in the other. Released time for seminary classwork is time released to a private school. Certainly no Utah legislature ever intended such an arrangement to be illegal. If it is, the next legislature is likely quickly to change the law.

Finally, as shown above, the seminary is no scholastic handicap to the high school. It is no expense to the school funds, but on the contrary saves to the schools many thousands of dollars annually. Its influence in the character training of the students is beneficent. It is not violative of the Constitution to accept on transfer its Bible credit and to grant released time to the students who, on parental request, care to attend its classes. We therefore respectfully ask your Honorable Body to permit the continuance of released school time where agreeable to local boards, and the giving of credit on transfer from the seminary for Bible study, one-half unit for Old Testament and one-half unit for New Testament, on condition that the seminary maintains the standards of the high school for the earning of credit. Under the constitutional and legal powers of the Board we believe you have the right to do these things. We believe your resolution of January 5, 1916, granting credit was not unconstitutional, and should stand.

Respectfully submitted,

I.D.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

By

Jose F. Merrill
Commissioner.

APPENDIX D

JOSEPH F. MERRILL PHOTOGRAPHS

Courtesy The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Church Archives, Salt Lake City, PH 6124, Joseph F. Merrill Portrait Collection.



Figure 1. Joseph F. Merrill in the 1890s. During this time he attended school at the University of Michigan, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Chicago.



Figure 2. Joseph F. Merrill near the time of his call to serve as Church Commissioner of Education.



Figure 3. Joseph F. Merrill in his later apostolic years.

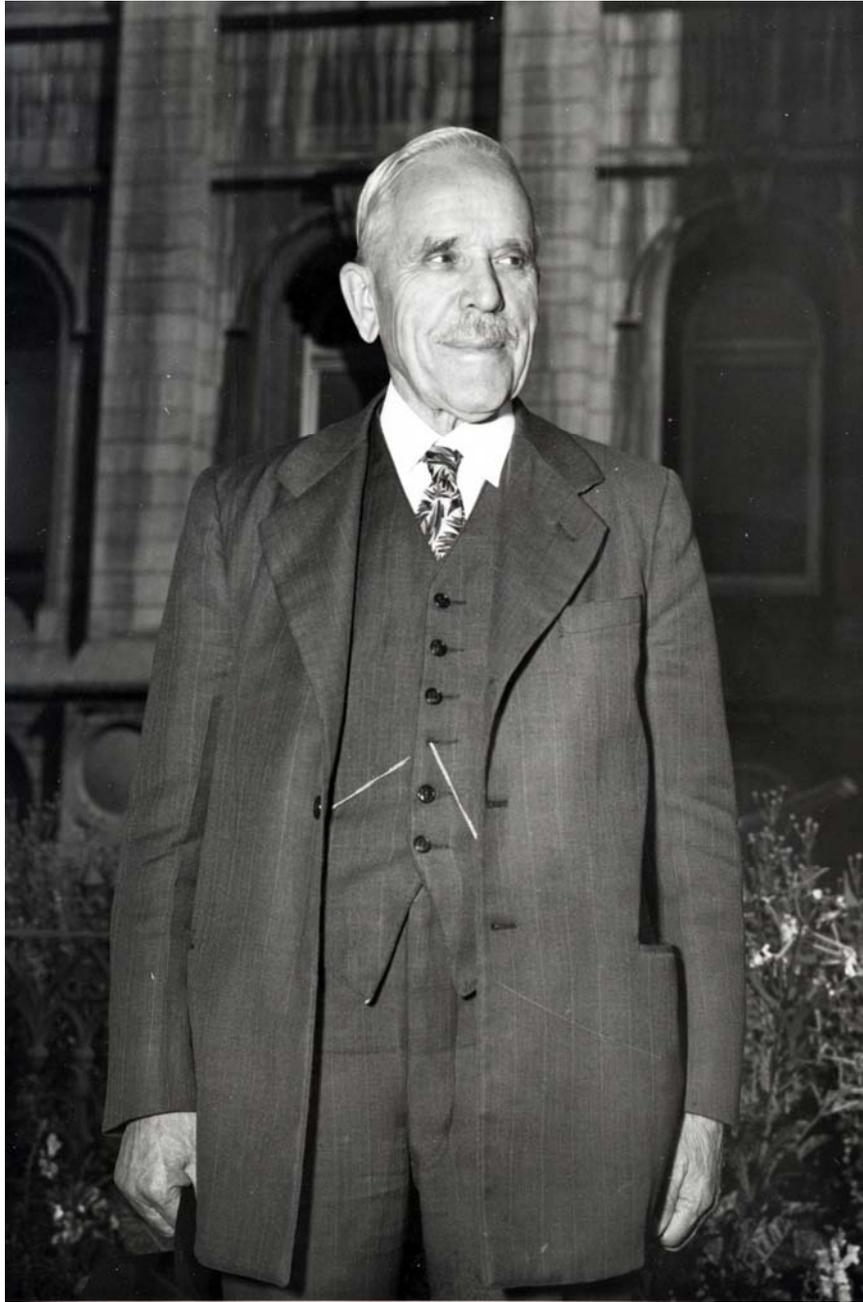


Figure 4. Joseph F. Merrill in the later years as his service as an apostle.

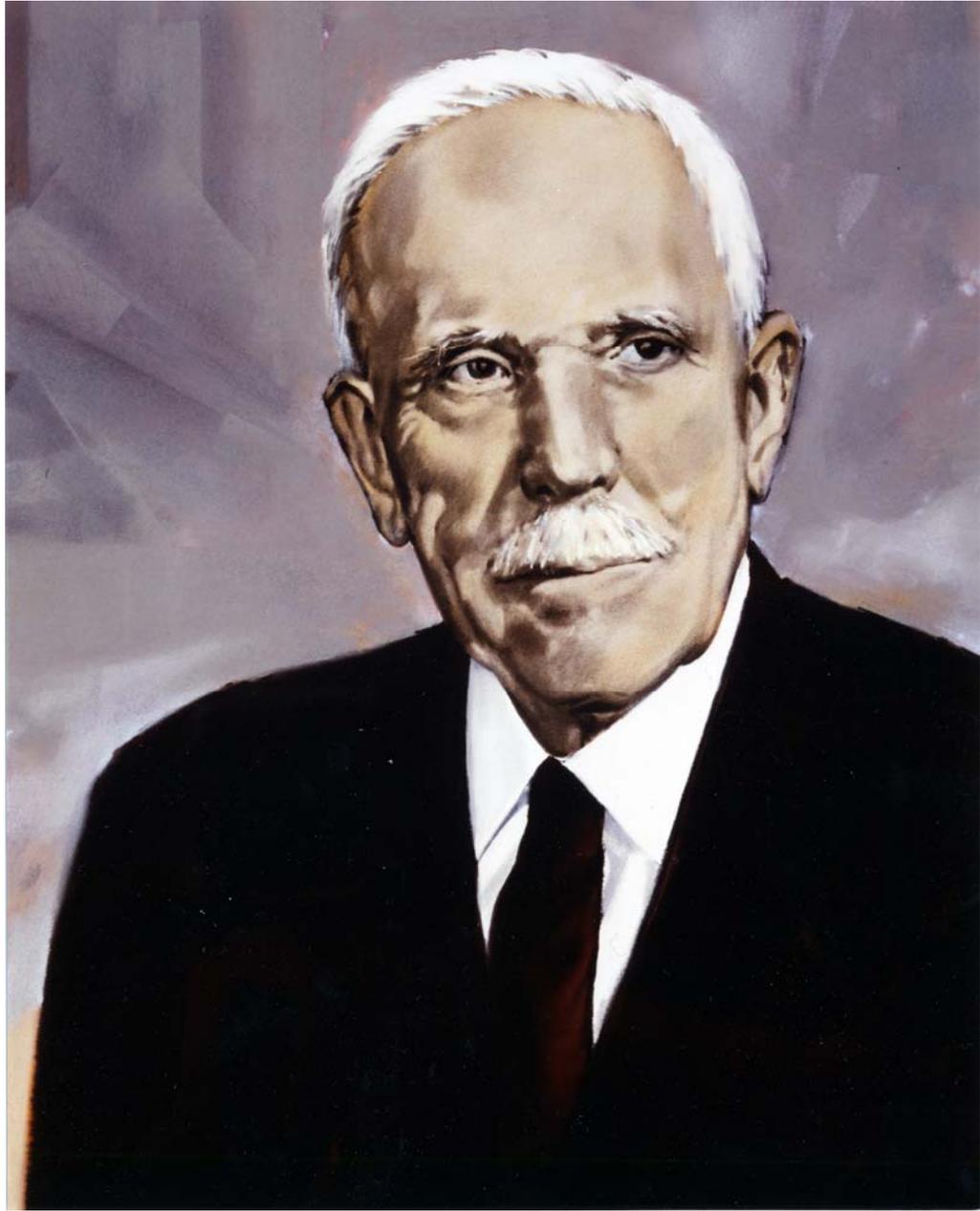


Figure 5. Joseph F. Merrill portrait.

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