

A VISIT TO THE SACRED GROVE

By D. Jeff Burton



*We asked ourselves what we would do
if we were in charge of the Sacred Grove.*

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, our mundane business completed in Rochester, New York, we took a drive over to the Sacred Grove in nearby Palmyra, a pleasant town of about 3,000 people. Its main attractions are religious. Four famous old churches face each other on the corner of Main and Church Streets. The Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Baptist churches all date back to the 1820s and 1830s, reminding us of Joseph Smith's story of the many "sects in that region of the country." The other attractions are the Mormon historical sites—the E. B. Grandin store where the Book of Mormon was printed, the Martin Harris home, the

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Peter Whitmer farm, the Sacred Grove, and, nearby, the Hill Cumorah.

At Palmyra we followed the signs south to the Joseph Smith Sr. farm house. It sits alone on about 100 acres of land owned by the Church. We pulled into a paved parking lot alongside a Nissan from New York, a Winnebago from Utah, a Cadillac from Wyoming, and an Alamo rental car. The two-story white house is placed centrally on a neatly manicured lawn under maple and locust trees. Gardens and fences are well maintained. A pair of missionaries from Buffalo and their two investigators sat on the grass with a picnic lunch.

The front entrance to the home was locked, but a sign instructed us to ring the bell. No sooner had we rung than the screen

door popped open, and a large hand extended from the darkness of the front hall. The hand belonged to Elder Brown, who drew us in and introduced us to Sister Brown. Both from Star Valley, Wyoming, via work and retirement in Long Beach, California, the Browns were a handsome couple, smiling and confident, they seemed extraordinarily satisfied with life in general. He, six feet tall, thin, rugged, graying with toupee, wore a blue suit coat, gray pants, and a mod-looking paisley tie. And a white shirt, of course. She, about five-four and slightly plump, wore a white blouse, brown skirt, and sturdy shoes. She had the comely look of a sturdy-but-beautiful ranch woman.

"We grew up in Star Valley, but you know how it is when you're only one of ten children," Sister Brown told us with a missionary smile. "We moved to Long Beach in 1950 to get a job." Elder Brown told us several times that they "always return to Star Valley every summer." We guessed correctly that the Cadillac in the parking lot was the Brown's.

Although we introduced ourselves as Salt Lake Mormons, hoping to avoid the proselytizing, Elder Brown stuck to his regular material. We heard all the wondrous stories from the beginning and were given the standard closing—a sit-down lecture (on little wooden benches in the parlor) and a stirring testimony. Overcome with emotion, Elder Brown shed tears twice: once when he described the trials of Joseph and once when he related the story of a curious visitor:

The man said he just turned in. He didn't know why the car wanted to turn in. But I talked with him about an hour, then I had to take care of some other people. So I asked him to fill out one of our referral cards, and he put the word "relieved" on the top of the form. I asked what that meant, and he said he was relieved to know that there was a prophet on earth again. He said he was going to go to Massachusetts and get his family and come right back.

It was at this point that Elder Brown became emotional again, so we held our questions until later.

This house is not the first Smith residence in Palmyra, the recently reconstructed log cabin they lived in when Moroni first visited Joseph. This frame house was built by Alvin Smith and finished by a hired carpenter after Alvin's untimely death. It has been restored to what it might have been in 1827 when Joseph and Emma moved out to New Harmony, Pennsylvania. (Joseph Sr. soon lost

the place, and it has been through a number of owners. The Church got involved in the early 1900s and has slowly acquired the surrounding properties.) Some of the surface details of the house are original—a stair railing, parts of the floor, a cherry wood doorknob. “I’m certain Joseph himself must have held the doorknob,” Elder Brown said. He gingerly placed his hand on the doorknob and held it reverently, carefully, and with a certain pride and mystical connection. We also held the doorknob and felt similar emotions.

The house is filled with period furniture and knickknacks—small tables and chairs (“They had to move a lot, so small furniture made it easier”), various tinned metal and carved wood containers, spinning wheels, butter churns, washing tubs, and the like. We were not allowed to touch anything or to enter rooms from the cordoned hallways. The first floor consisted of a parlor, a dining area, a kitchen, and a pantry. Climbing a steep stair to the second floor, we stood on a landing connecting four bedrooms. “The southeast bedroom was Joseph’s and Emma’s,” Elder Brown told us, pointing to the roped-off room. The room was sparsely furnished, but the comfortable-looking bed made Joseph’s and Emma’s time together in this house seem more than just a story. Elder Brown, sensing our wonderment and curiosity, glanced around, then moved the rope and invited us to step into the bedroom. It

seemed like a special gesture on his part, and we were grateful.

Standing near the bed, he told us about the origins of the Book of Mormon, and how this bedroom had played a part. “It was from this very bedroom that they walked carefully down the stairs, past Lucy sitting in the parlor, and into the darkness of the night to retrieve the golden plates from the Hill, which lies about four miles over there.” Elder Brown related the story with a hushed voice, and pointed southeast.

SUDDENLY, other visitors rang the front bell, and Elder Brown glanced anxiously down the stairs toward the door, so we excused ourselves, left the house, crossed the road to the west, and started on a ten-foot wide path to the Sacred Grove. The path was lined on both sides by a seventy-five foot grass strip and trees. Bronzed signs gave periodic instructions: “No vehicles.” “Pedestrians Only.” “Visitors should refrain from holding meetings or firesides in the Sacred Grove.” “Speak in subdued tones.” “Take the time to meditate and consider the vision the Prophet Joseph Smith experienced here in the Spring of 1820.” After about a quarter of a mile, the path turned to gravel, then to mulch, and entered a stand of trees. At the entrance to the trees, we saw a restroom off to the left and another sign directly in front of us:

Joseph Smith, a 14-year-old boy

who lived nearby on his father’s farm, came here in the Spring of 1820 to ask the Lord which of the many Christian sects he should join. In answer to his prayer, God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph in this grove.

We wondered why God’s answer wasn’t provided on the sign, too. Wouldn’t visitors be curious? We decided to ask Elder Brown.

The grove covers about five acres, is quite open, but contains hundreds of tall locust, beechnut, basswood, and maple trees. About sixty trees have survived from the time Joseph Smith lived nearby. During a recent ice storm which ravaged the area, about eight trees were lost, along with many branches. Many trees have had initials carved into them. T + D, RT ’83, PJ, FM WILLIS, LILLIAN, RIGO FAMILY, RODNEY AND AUDREA 82, LISANKA 91, among others, scratched mementos of their visits to the grove. How sacred was the grove to these visitors? we wondered. We also speculated about the difference between “a visit” and “a visitation.” Perhaps people visit, while God makes a visitation.

The path wound around the Sacred Grove, passing several clearings and benches. The Grove seemed a little spooky, but then, aren’t all woods a little spooky? And this was a place God had appeared to humankind, after all. We saw only two groups of people while in the Grove. One group, a mother and three girls, was hurrying back along the trail, apprehension on all their faces. We said hello, but they only hurried by, anxious to leave. Another couple was sitting stiffly on a bench, meditating and considering, as instructed. Again we said hello, but they only nodded and whispered something we couldn’t hear.

We also found a bench, sat, and considered. It was quiet and peaceful. It felt good to sit down, rest, meditate. Tall trees by the hundreds shielded our view of the world outside. It was pleasant to think about the story of this grove. A sense of history flickered through the trees like the sunlight—now easy to see, now difficult. Birds sang somewhere in the distance, bringing a sense of tranquility, but we could also hear a chain saw somewhere off in Palmyra.

It figures, we thought. Palmyra had traditionally not supported any of “this Joseph Smith business,” as one waitress told us later. Even today the local Mormons seemed put off by the local people (and vice versa). Elder Brown used the word “mob” frequently as he talked about the people of Joseph’s era. (“The

mob came to their door.” “The mob wanted those golden plates.” “The mob tried to follow him.”) We sensed he might consider today’s skeptical and standoffish Palmyrans to be “children of the mobbers.” When we had asked one of the missionaries where to get lunch, we were told that there was no good place in Palmyra to eat, but that if we went out of town about three miles, we could find a good family restaurant.

THE thought of lunch, coupled with mosquitoes, the increasingly hard wooden bench, and some unanswered questions finally encouraged us to rise and return to the house.

Elder Brown and another elder met us at the door, recognized us, and asked us in again. We told them we had just a few more questions. First, how many people visit the Sacred Grove? “About 30,000 people, almost all Mormons, visited last year. Most come in the summer. On some days last winter we were lucky to have a single visitor. It gets pretty lonely out her on those cold, snowy days,” Elder Brown replied.

Second question: Why didn’t the sign in the Grove report God’s answer to Joseph? The one about all the sects being wrong, their creeds an abomination in his sight? “Well,” the other elder said, “you have to feed people milk before meat. Some might not understand.” We mumbled something about manipulation, but he didn’t hear us. What about the location of the Sacred Grove? How do they know it was right there? Elder Brown said, “President Kimball’s answer was good enough for me. He said it didn’t matter where it was. The important thing is that it happened.” The other elder said that he had heard that President McKay had declared the sight authentic, but he didn’t know the time or circumstances of the pronouncement. (As an afterthought, and as if to restore President Kimball’s credibility, Elder Brown added that President Kimball had authenticated the Savior’s tomb in Jerusalem.)

What about the man who was relieved to know there was a prophet on earth, we asked. What had happened to him? Is he a Mormon now? Elder Brown looked a little cranky for the first time. People don’t generally get this specific with questions, we guessed. Perhaps a little of our wondering attitude made him feel uncomfortable. “I haven’t seen the man. He might have come back when we were off duty. We just can’t follow up on everybody. But I’m sure he’s a Mormon by now.” Elder Brown’s confident and sure smile returned.

We thanked the elders and hurried off.

We had just enough time to eat and drive back to the airport. As we drove, we thought about our visit and about the elders and their wives. Good, solid, loyal Mormons. Questions requiring historical accuracy had little relevance to Elder Brown. His response to questions-without-clear-answers was to bear strong witness to the truthfulness of the stories he had heard and believed all his life. Historical rumors were accepted as fact as long as they fit the Joseph Smith story. Dates, places, and details were unimportant. These good people were the backbone of the Church—faithful, supportive, trusting.

We asked ourselves what we would do if we were in charge of the Sacred Grove. Was the Church handling it the right way? Try as we might, we couldn’t come up with any better ideas. Icons, traditions, and even religious myths must be upheld, must be supported. The Church was doing a difficult job in the least objectionable way at historical sites, we concluded. Then another of those crazy questions occurred. Why isn’t there a visitor’s center at Adam-Ondi-Ahman? ☒