



Type: Magazine Article

The Hill Cumorah Pageant

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 69, No. 7 (July 1966)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 624–626, 643

Abstract: This article gives brief histories of the Book of Mormon and the Hill Cumorah pageant. It includes appraisals from Eastern newspapers of the pageant.

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*Pretty coed helps missionary
with costume as pageant curtain time
at Hill Cumorah approaches.*

*Two cast members pause during a dress
rehearsal. Pageant features cast
of 400, including missionaries, students,
and members from Eastern states.*





Hill Cumorah Pageant

BY ELEANOR KNOWLES

EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE

● As darkness descends on the peaceful hills of New York later this month, the strains of "High on the Mountain Top" will resound over the hills and valleys. Another performance of the famed Hill Cumorah Pageant, "America's Witness for Christ," will have begun.

This year's pageant is expected to attract more than 100,000 people to its five performances July 26 through 30 and a dress rehearsal July 25. The audiences will come from all of the United States and many foreign lands to witness what one columnist has called "the greatest outdoor religious pageant in North America."

The participants, who also come from all sections of the country, will include 160 members of the Church from the West, primarily college students from Brigham Young University and other Utah colleges, 170 full-time missionaries from the Cumorah Mission, and 150 members of the Church from the Eastern states. They will range in age from 10 to 70.

The pageant will be directed by Dr. Harold I. Hansen, chairman of the Dramatic Arts Department at

Brigham Young University, who has been in charge of the production since its beginning in 1937, when he was a missionary in the Eastern States Mission. Previously he was a drama major at Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University).

"I arrived in the mission field around the ninth of July, and our pageant was to be presented July 23, 24, and 25," he recalls. With less than three weeks in which to rehearse the cast of more than 100 missionaries and to work out lighting, sound, costuming, blocking, and other details, the production was put together and played successfully to more than 15,000 people.

Today's pageant had its beginnings in a brief program that was presented at an Eastern States Mission conference at the Joseph Smith farm in 1934, with an audience of a few hundred church members. The following year the Angel Moroni Monument atop the Hill Cumorah was dedicated, and no pageant was held.

During the winter months of 1935-36, the script underwent numerous revisions and was presented in

Three pretty cast members wait for their call to appear on stage at Hill Cumorah. The pageant, an annual event since 1937, attracts more than 100,000 spectators to five performances, dress rehearsal.

Dr. Harold I. Hansen, director of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, rehearses the trumpeters whose fanfare and playing of "High on the Mountain Top" open the annual spectacle.



wards of the New York Stake. "Truth from the Earth," as it was called, was then presented during the July missionary conference at the Hill Cumorah, this time with 5,000 in the audience. During the

months following, Dr. Wayne Driggs, a member of the English faculty at New York University, rewrote and polished the script, and by July 1937 "America's Witness for Christ" was ready.

"The story of the pageant is in part the story of the Book of Mormon," according to Dr. Hansen. "It traces the journey of Lehi, a prophet of Jerusalem, to the western hemisphere, where his family split into two factions: the Nephites, a God-fearing, diligent people, who kept records and built a marvelous civilization; and the Lamanites, who became corrupt, envious, and quarrelsome.

"The pageant proceeds to tell of the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection in Jerusalem and of his visit as a resurrected being to the continent of America, where he taught his gospel and organized his Church. Obeying his teachings, the Nephites flourished for generations. After a few centuries, however, they again fell into wicked ways and disregarded the warnings of their prophets.

"The story then tells how Mormon made a record of the Nephite nation and gave it to his son Moroni. It describes the destruction of the Nephite nation and the burial of the plates in Hill Cumorah, where they remained hidden for fourteen centuries. In the final scenes the plates are revealed to Joseph Smith by Moroni, who appears to the youth as an angel."

The western slope of Hill Cumorah provides the setting for the pageant, with four major stages and 20 secondary stages. On this large hillside, more than 400 actors, clad in costume of biblical times and ancient America, act out the scenes. There are 20 speaking roles, but the 20 principals seen on the various parts of the hill are pantomiming. Each has a counterpart on a stereophonic recording who delivers the spoken words (Continued on page 643)

FROM EAST CANYON TO PRATT'S PASS

BY CLAIRE NOALL

*To the stream's sound within the canyon walls
a hunter brought an elk in semi-darkness,
slipped in crossing and spent the night
midstream, the points upon his shoulder.*

*Yet the camp was fed. The following morning
hunger was appeased for all but two scouts
who sought the place seen in vision.
They went to find the haven where*

*The Saints could free themselves from persecution.
Up the tortuous path to wooded crest
they climbed, over fallen trunk and bouldered
barrier, climbed to realize the way.*

*When suddenly the valley came to view
thrice the shout of triumph rose,
as if the voice of man could reach
the silvered streams and shining lake.*

*The wild hay of the mountains' depth is ours
to plow and seed!
Up, up we have trekked.
The glory we have seen.*

*Down we now command our eager steps
to keep the vision granted by the Lord.
Down the camp will soon entrain
to keep the glory of the Word.*

Hill Cumorah Pageant

(Continued from page 626)

of his particular role.

"The tape of the pageant is a mile and a half long," Dr. Hansen said. "Our sound system, the finest of its kind, was developed for us by Dr. Harvey Fletcher. We have three major speakers, each seven feet square at the mouth and nine feet deep, and clusterings of speakers in front of and around the audience. Thus the production can be heard as well as seen from any vantage point."

No effort is spared to make the sound perfect. As an interesting sidelight, in 1959 a farmhouse and surrounding buildings in a field owned by the Church and located just across the road from the hill were torn down when it was found that they were responsible for distortion and feedback.

In the early days of the production, excerpts from classical music were spliced together to provide the musical background. Since 1957, however, the pageant has boasted its own magnificent musical score, composed by Dr. Crawford Gates of the Brigham Young University faculty. Performing the music are the BYU combined choruses, the 80-piece Utah Symphony Orchestra, and the Tabernacle Organ. The only live music for the pageant is provided by a brass ensemble that appears at the beginning, standing near the Angel Moroni Monument, where they play "High on the Mountain Top." For an hour preceding the pageant, tapes of the Tabernacle Choir are played, and as the field lights come on at the close, the choir is heard singing "Come, Come Ye Saints."

Each year improvements are made on many aspects of the production, and this year is no different, according to Dr. Hansen. "Last year we completely rebuilt two of our major stages, and this year we will have the other two completed. We also have many new costumes that have been designed and coordinated for specific scenes."

Assisting Dr. Hansen will be Charles Henson, technical director, and Paul Evans and Dick Welch, sound technicians. Beverly Warner of the BYU staff designed the costumes, which were sewn at the university and shipped to Palmyra earlier this summer.

Dates for this year's pageant are July 26-30, with dress rehearsal on July 25. Each performance will begin at 9:15 p.m.

On Sunday, July 31, a priesthood meeting will be held on the slopes of the Hill Cumorah at 8 a.m. Worship services open to the general public will follow at 9:30 a.m.

All requests for housing accommodations should be directed to the Hill Cumorah Pageant Housing Bureau, c/o Manger Hotel, Rochester, N.Y. 14604.

Among the most spectacular scenes are the appearance of Jesus Christ and the awesome destruction of the city of Zarahemla. Dramatic use of lighting and water curtains adds to the spectacle.

The pageant is held each year the last week of July or first week of August. Audiences begin gathering in late afternoon to find seats on the 15-foot wooden planks stretched out across the field at the base of the hill, to hike up to the Angel Moroni Monument, to visit the Bureau of Information, and to meet with friends from all over the country. By 8 p.m., fully an hour before the start of the pageant, the 20 acres of parking fields are usually filled with automobiles and buses, and thousands of people have found seats on the wooden planks and on blankets spread picnic-fashion around the periphery. Many thousands more will watch from their automobiles.

Each year finds hundreds of column inches of publicity in newspapers and magazines throughout the country and the world. These are some of the comments:

"It is put together with the highest professional polish and the latest technical equipment."—*Time* magazine.

"Nothing about the pageant is so notable as the concealment of artifice. All the wizardry of stagecraft is employed to secure the effects. A thousand tricks of the trade are put to use. Yet the impression the audience gets is one of spontaneity. There are times when the drama seems to flow from the earth itself."—Rochester (New York) *Times-Union*.

"The pageant left an impression so strong that it lingered long after darkness had enfolded the Hill Cumorah."—Syracuse (New York) *Herald Journal*.

"The spectacle is a production in the deepest sense of the word. Its basic purpose is to deliver a message keyed to a better life. Americans respond readily to such motives."—Rochester (New York) *Democrat and Chronicle*.

"The scenes of Christ's life had the most telling impact. . . . Jesus, portrayed wonderfully by a man in costume and beard of that day, walked among the sick, bringing comfort and healing. . . . Most spectacular of all, though, was when he, in a brilliant white robe, literally appeared to descend from heaven."—*The Telegram*, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

In the years since its beginning in 1937 (the pageant was not presented during the years of World War II), more than 8,000 missionaries and volunteers have participated in the pageant.

"It would be impossible to name all who have contributed," Dr. Hansen said. "Credit, naturally, must go to those who dreamed the dream in the first place, but great credit is also due those mission presidents who followed and have defended the merit and value of producing the pageant. The entire history has been one of love and devotion to a cause. The future of the pageant has never been brighter, and the 1966 production promises to be the most inspiring of all!"

IN AN ORCHARD

BY ORMA WALLENGREN

*He lived, and felt the same fresh breeze
That winds its way through surf and trees
In endless orb of land and sea,
This air that outlives life and death,
This tender probing wind, this breath
That once touched Him, now touches me.*