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Early Cumorah Pageants

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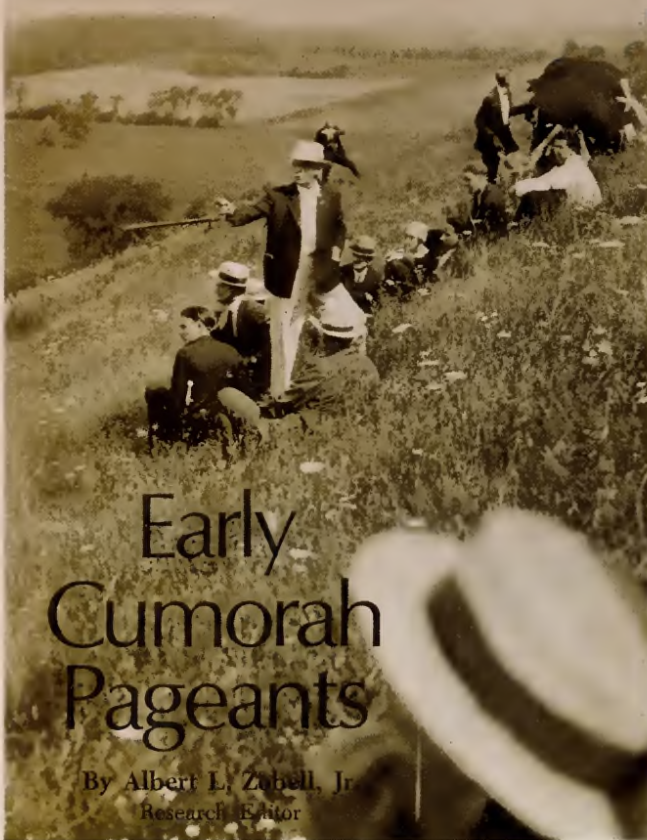
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Abstract: This article discusses the history of the Hill Cumorah pageant, a dramatic production that depicts the people of the Book of Mormon who peopled America many years ago.

Lest We Forget



Early Cumorah Pageants

By Albert L. Zobell, Jr.
Research Editor

Straw-hatted President B. H. Roberts at 1923 gathering.

● “Unfolding like some graphic panorama of the past, epic in implications and dramatic in content, the story of an ancient civilization that peopled the plains and hills in this vicinity was the chief topic of discussion. . . . Reaching so far back into the dim yesterdays of history, back to days more than 2,500 years ago, this story came with a strange emphasis in the very places where its climaxes and documents are supposed to have been reached. The narrative is the very basis of Mormon theology and belief and leads directly to the revelation given through Joseph Smith of the foundations of the Mormon Church.”

Does this sound like a news clipping about the Hill Cumorah Pageant? It is the Rochester, New York, Herald of September 23, 1923, reporting on a conference commemorating the centennial of the first visit of the Angel Moroni in sermons and songs. President Alvin R. Dyer recalls that his part on the program was to speak from a prepared text on the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon.

Each summer tens of thousands come to the Hill Cumorah to thrill again to the great religious pageant, “America’s Witness for Christ.” The 1968 dates are July 29 through August 3.

There were many earlier pageants and presentations, and each in its time has been designated “first.”

It is thought that observances began as summer outings.

Scene from the 1930 pageant. The production was repeated several years.



The first recorded forerunner of the pageant was held July 24, 1917, in Palmyra, when missionaries and members conducted a picnic-pilgrimage from Rochester to the Joseph Smith farm and Sacred Grove.

In 1922, President B. H. Roberts, who was serving in the dual capacity as a member of the First Council of the Seventy and president of the Eastern States Mission, had his missionaries walk to the Hill Cumorah from the Joseph Smith home. There the celebration was climaxed by a program of effective, well-written slogans.

In August 1923 President Roberts notified the missionaries of a coming Cumorah conference. He desired them to make the journey by foot, preaching the gospel and tracting as they came from every direction. Missionary sisters were asked to come by train, and elders laboring in the far reaches of the mission (Maine and West Virginia) were advised to come by railroad to Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, or Albany before starting to walk, testifying to all they met of "the restoration of the gospel by the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the re-establishment of the Church." The elders would wear a college-type pennant, bearing the inscription "Cumorah 1823—September 21—1923," especially designed to attract interest and create opportunities for gospel conversations.

At fast meetings held in September, a letter from Presi-

dent Roberts was read, saying that only those members who could provide for their own transportation, food, and lodgings should go to Cumorah. Missionaries were told that they would have food and lodging at the Smith farm during the days of the conference.

The conference began Friday evening, September 21, at the Smith farm, and continued Saturday and Sunday with meetings (President Roberts called them "episodes") at the Hill Cumorah and the Sacred Grove. The "episodes" bore these titles: The Appearing of the Angel to the Prophet Joseph Smith; The Prophet's First Visit to Cumorah—Beholding the Plates; The Delivery of the Plates to Joseph—the Translation and Publication of That Record; The Organization of the Church, April 6, 1830; The First Vision of the Prophet—The Atonement of Christ; The Appearing of the Christ to the Nephites; and The Message of the Book of Mormon to the Gentile Nations of America, the Land of Zion.

Flags were much in evidence during the program, including a Cumorah-Ramah flag in tribute to two great peoples—the Nephites and the Jaredites. Appropriate songs of the restoration were sung, some by Nannie Tout, Hazel Dawn, and Margaret Romaine, members of the Church who were pursuing opera and concert careers in New York.

President Heber J. Grant, then President of the Church,

Missionaries rally at Book of Mormon flags in 1923.



attended and spoke. Also there were President Ruderger Clawson and Elders Joseph Fielding Smith and James E. Talmage. The Sunday afternoon meeting on the Hill Cumorah was attended by about 200 missionaries, 50 other members, and 1,000 nonmembers.

At that conference no attempt was made to dramatize the restoration. Several years later, in July 1928, a pageant was presented at the Sacred Grove. This was written by John W. Stonely, who had come into the area about a year earlier and who is now a patriarch in the Cumorah Stake, and the late Florence Bushman [Zobell], then an Eastern States missionary. This pageant portrayed the origin, history, contents, and purposes of the Book of Mormon in readings, costume, dialogue, and music. "The Stick of Joseph," the first scene, was placed in the Holy Land just prior to the Babylonian captivity, with Ezekiel and others depicting development of biblical prophecies relating to the Book of Mormon. Scene 2, "Lost Truth," was set on the mountain (1 Ne. 11:1) where Nephi received a vision concerning the purpose and destiny of the book. Scene 3, "The Iron Rod," showed a New World beach and depicted the establishment of Lehi's people in the land of promise. Here the Lamanite nation began, and the Iron Rod dream received its interpretation.

Scene 4, "Voices from the Dust," was dated 1829, when

the testimonies of Moroni, Alma, Abinadi, Benjamin, the Brother of Jared, Nephi (who chronicled the visit of the resurrected Lord to his people), and Samuel the Lamanite were given to Joseph Smith. "Unto Every Nation," the final scene, was also placed at the Hill Cumorah, as Joseph Smith and the Three Witnesses proclaimed a new dispensation upon the earth in 1830.

Elder Stonely also wrote pageants in 1929 and 1930. In 1930, "Footsteps in the Sands of Time" (a title taken from the theme of the Church's centennial year) pictured events in the ten decades of the Church's history. This program was presented in a roped-off field on the Joseph Smith farm before an audience of 200, and was repeated several times in the succeeding years, usually on July 24, at annual Eastern States Mission conferences.

At the three-day mission conference in 1935 the Angel Moroni monument atop the Hill Cumorah was dedicated on July 21 by President Heber J. Grant, with President David O. McKay and other General Authorities in attendance.

There was no pageant that year, but meetings with talks and musical numbers were held at the hill and the grove. However, mission president Don B. Colton saw the potential for missionary work in large summer gatherings at the hill, then easily accessible by a new highway.

In 1936, Ira J. and Beatrice Markham, inspired by the

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suggestions of Professor E. H. Eastmond of Brigham Young University, wrote and directed a pageant entitled "The Restoration," which was presented May 8 in the Brooklyn Ward. Following this, President Colton encouraged missionaries Oliver R. Smith and Meryl Dunn [Jones] to prepare a pageant script. Their "Truth from the Earth" was presented by a cast of 70 on July 25, 1936, at the rear of the new Bureau of Information building at the foot of Hill Cumorah. This was the first pageant presented at the hill.

With an audience of about 5,000 seated on the hillside, the 1936 pageant began with the strains of "Nephtie Lamentation," played by seven missionary trumpeters spotlighted at the crest of the hill. Its scenes unfolded the story of the Book of Mormon and the restoration, including the following episodes: Joseph Smith's vision in the grove; appearances of the Angel Moroni; translation of the sacred record; Lehi and his family in the wilderness; the ministry of Alma; Christ's appearance and teachings to the Nephites; their destruction by the Lamanites; Moroni's closing of the Nephtie record; and the organization of the restored Church.

President Colton then formed a committee to develop a pageant suitable for annual presentation at the hill. Dr. H. Wayne Driggs, then an instructor in English at New York University, prepared the script, entitled "America's Witness for Christ," taking the theme from the Book of Mormon.

This pageant was first presented on three stages at the Hill Cumorah, July 23 and 25, 1937. Missionaries estimated the audiences at 15,000, and they counted cars from 19 states in the parking lot. On July 24, local Church members and missionaries presented "The Builders," a pioneer drama written by Elder Oliver R. Smith.

"The unfolding purpose of God is like a scroll of light in the heavens. Every discovery and invention may be used for the dissemination of gospel truth," said the late Elder John A. Widtsoe. (Era, August 1939, p. 480.) Over the years the Cumorah pageant has undergone numerous refinements. If one were to compare the presentation of "America's Witness for Christ" year by year, one would surely see the influence of many writers, directors, and others, and how refinements have been made in it as new technological developments have become available.

This year's pageant, under long-time director Harold I. Hansen, is expected to enlist some 450 workers—cast members, technicians, and all the behind-the-scenes people who make such a presentation successful. Workers will include missionaries, busloads of volunteers from the West (largely Brigham Young University students), and Saints from the Hill Cumorah area.

Thus a tradition begun half a century ago at the Hill Cumorah continues. ○

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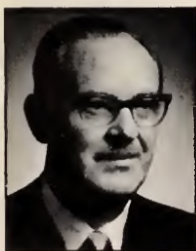
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