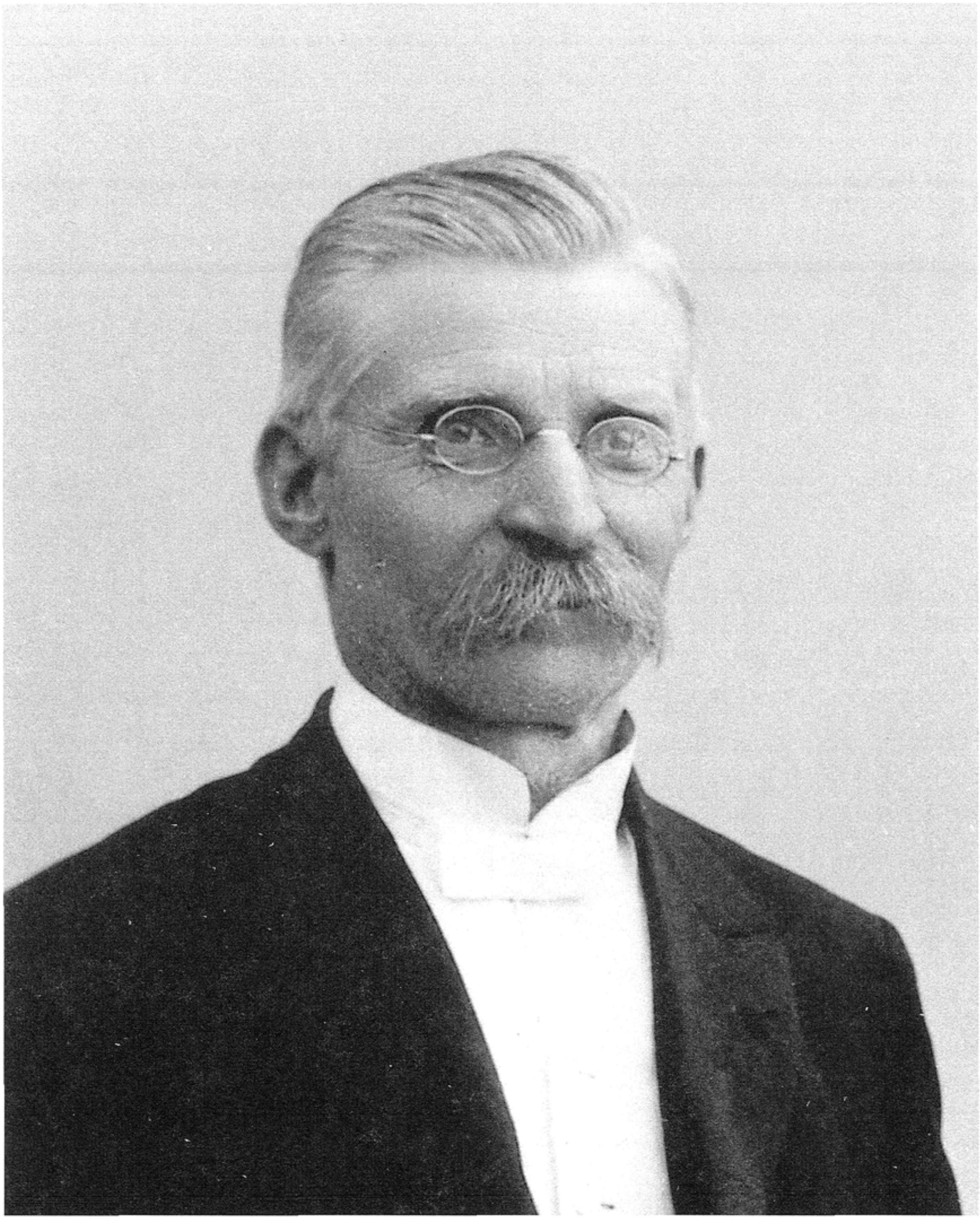

Courtesy LDS Church Archives

Andrew Jenson, August 2, 1910 (image cropped). This photograph was taken in Copenhagen, Denmark, while Jenson was serving as president of the Scandinavian Mission. Photograph by Emil Clausen.

Andrew Jenson Chides the Saints

Paul H. Peterson

Historian Andrew Jenson frequently reminded the Saints of their obligation to be familiar with their history and to be diligent in keeping personal as well as institutional records.

"Brother Andrew Jenson has . . . written a good many things of great value, and is continually giving his mind to the work of collating and collecting data and facts concerning Church history," President Anthon H. Lund told Saints at general conference in October 1917. "When he [Jenson] finds a new fact or a new date that he didn't know before, he feels as happy as the placer miner who finds a nugget of gold in the first pan that he washes out, and it is no wonder that Brother Jenson estimates the value of the Historian's office at a million dollars!"[1]

Fellow Scandinavians, close friends, and Church historian associates, Anthon Lund and Andrew Jenson had enjoyed a meaningful professional and personal relationship for over two decades. But, friendship aside, in praising Jenson's labors on this occasion, President Lund was hardly engaging in hyperbole. Since the Restoration, no one had evidenced more interest in preserving a record of the history of the Church than did this Danish convert. Not given to synthesis, analysis, or interpretation, Jenson was an indefatigable collector of facts—simple facts, but for Jenson, essential, almost larger-than-life facts that told the story of a unique people, facts that related the unfolding of the history of God's people in this, the last dispensation.[2]

Sustained as assistant Church historian in 1898, Jenson first spoke in general conference in April 1903. Beginning in 1905, he became a "regular" on the general conference rotation list, most often speaking once a year at either annual or semi-annual conference until he gave his final conference talk in 1930.

A man that clearly had little fear of the pulpit, Jenson gave conference talks that often vacillated between historical recitation and historical encouragement. When in the recitation mode, Brother Jenson inundated Saints with an avalanche of names and dates and other relevant facts related to the history of the Restoration or to the history of the migration or to the history of missions and missionary work or to the history of temple building. When in the encouragement mode, Jenson promoted the

keeping of both institutional and personal histories. As one who traveled thousands of miles to compile histories of missions, stakes, wards, and quorums, Elder Jenson knew well the importance of maintaining such records. But along with urging stakes and wards to keep "official records," Jenson, always interested in "ordinary" people, emphasized the importance of personal diaries and personal histories.

The following sermon, given in October 1926, was the third-to-last conference talk that Jenson gave. For the most part, it is a typical Jenson talk. For example, referring to or citing from scriptural sources and then pointing out that had not historians recorded the words of Jesus or the prophets, we would be without scriptural records, was vintage Jenson; detailing the current progress of the historian's office was, understandably, standard Jenson procedure; encouraging Saints to keep records was normal fare; even chiding the Saints for being derelict in historical matters was not an uncommon tactic. What was different about this particular address was the tone of the chastening. Never accused of not saying what he had on his mind, Elder Jenson was especially candid on this occasion as he called the Saints to repentance for their record-keeping lethargy.

The plainspoken rhetoric perhaps had to do, in part, with Jenson's advancing age and his coming to grips with the realization that most Latter-day Saints would never take to history and record keeping as he had. While Latter-day Saints, by comparison with other communities, were diligent record keepers, few approached their tasks with the fervor of Jenson. Likely, for many Church members, the problem was as much a lack of vision as a lack of discipline. For Andrew Jenson, it seemed so obvious: membership in the Lord's church in the final dispensation—who wouldn't want to write about it?

Andrew Jenson, General Conference Address, October 1926[3]

In just three years and a half from now the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be one hundred years old. It has been, and is, a most remarkable organization. There never has been another one like it upon the face of the earth. We do not have to compare the Church to which we belong with any of the so-called Christian churches of today, so far as members and progress are concerned, but we can consistently compare it with other dispensations that the Lord has established upon the earth for the salvation of mankind; and particularly do we take pleasure in comparing it with the Church which was organized more than eighteen hundred years ago by the Savior himself and his apostles. We can also draw comparison between the Church to which we belong and the Church organized among the Nephites about the same time that the Church was organized in what we call the old world. But the history of the Nephite Church is very brief. And the same might be said of the history of the original Church organized in Palestine, or in Asia.

There are some comparisons that I sometimes think of. Jesus was thirty years old when he commenced to preach. Up to that time we have but very little knowledge of what he did. Joseph Smith was twenty-five years old when he, as an instrument in the hands of the Lord, organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830. After one hundred years had passed away from the time that Christ commenced his ministry we find (by referring to the historians of that day, such as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles and the writings of the historian Eusebius, who wrote the history of the first 325 years of the so-called Christian church), that there was scarcely anything left of the original church. It is a strange thing that such should be the case, but it was undoubtedly in the providence of the Lord. Before the first century of that dispensation had passed away all the apostles had been killed except John; other leaders of the church had also gone to their rest, most of them falling as martyrs to truth, for that was a time of martyrdom. John, who did not taste death, as we understand it, was the only apostle left. So, at the end of one hundred years from the time that Christ commenced his ministry in Galilee the great majority of the people who belonged to the original church had passed away, either by natural death or had fallen as martyrs, or gone into apostasy. The falling away had become so universal during the latter part of the first century of the Christian era that there was scarcely anyone to speak of left professing the true gospel of Jesus Christ when the century ended. False doctrines had been introduced into the church, and the falling away, which had been predicted by Paul and others, had indeed taken place.[4]

It is different with the dispensation to which we belong. When this Church shall be one hundred years old, the historians will be able to record that it never before was any stronger or its membership more numerous. We can easily judge the condition of the Church three years and a half hence. At the present time we can say that the Church never had so many organized stakes of Zion as it has now, and never before so many bishop's wards, nor so many missionary fields at one time; that is, if we make exception of a few temporary missions established in the early days of the Church; but, taking it all throughout, the Church to which we belong never had a more prosperous existence than it has at the present time, when we refer to the thousands of noble men and women in it. We may regret that there are some weak members, who are not as true to the gospel of Jesus Christ as they might be, but there is a sufficient number of faithful men and women, both young and old, to warrant my statement; the majority of the members of this Church would be an honor to any community. That really should prove to all that we have borne good fruit, and our actions are now being copied by many of the people of the world who have figured with organizations that have been less successful than ours has been.

It is one thing to make history, another thing to write it. If it had not been for the writers I have mentioned, who belonged to the original Church, what would the doings of Christ mean to us? We would have known next to nothing of his activities. The doctrines he taught would have been hid in mystery and conjectures. For instance, if Matthew, or some other historian, had not recorded the Sermon on the Mount, we would not have had that splendid exposition of gospel truths. And if somebody had not recorded the many other beautiful sayings of Christ and his apostles, what would we have known of the ministry of Christ and of his apostles? We would merely have had some vague ideas handed down by tradition that would lead astray more than lead aright; but because these things that are written, we have at least some knowledge of these earlier dispensations.

In our day, the first thing the Lord did after the Church to which we belong was organized with six members, in the little village of Fayette, Seneca county, New York, was to command that a Church recorder should be appointed, a man who should write down what was taking place. That man was Oliver Cowdery. He had previously assisted Joseph Smith the Prophet in translating the Book of Mormon; and now, after that sacred record had been completed and printed, his labor with the pen was continued through his appointment as the first Church recorder. Since that time we have had recorders and historians in the Church who have been more or less faithful, and more or less efficient in doing their work. Soon Oliver Cowdery was appointed to other positions in the Church, and another

man was called to be Church recorder. But as that man was not very faithful in the discharge of his duties the early history of the Church is not as complete as we would like it to be. There are certain very important dates lacking because John Whitmer did not do his duty. Nevertheless, we have sufficient to show that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a most complete and successful organization, and we also rejoice in the promise made that it shall never come to an end. Other dispensations have ceased to exist, but this one to which we belong will continue, and the Church shall finally grow into the Kingdom of Heaven, over which Christ shall reign as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

It requires much effort and labor to keep track of the thousands and tens of thousands of missionaries who have gone out from the headquarters of the Church to preach the gospel. We are, at the present time, engaged in making a list of them. In a few weeks we expect to complete the same, and we will then be able to state approximately how many elders, and how many missionary sisters, have been sent out from the headquarters of the Church to preach the gospel in different lands and climes. We will also have a good idea of how many people have been baptized since the Church was organized, notwithstanding the fact that many important Church records have been destroyed or lost. We will also know approximately how many branches of the Church have been organized in the different countries of the world, where our missionaries have labored. You will, perhaps, be surprised to learn that they are numbered by thousands, and you will be astonished to know that at one time there were nearly a thousand branches of the Church in Great Britain alone. We will surely have something interesting to tell the Latter-day Saints when the Church is one hundred years old.[5]

It has already taken much time and money, and also necessitated much travel, to gather material and record the events of the history of the Church from the beginning to the close of the nineteenth century. Years ago we found, at the Historian's office, that we could not locate ourselves within the walls of that little building which stood across the street from where the large Church building now stands, and there write histories of the stakes of Zion and of the different missions of the Church. We found it was necessary to go abroad, travel extensively and gather material for history in many lands and climes. Your humble servant has had the pleasure, if I may call it such, to be a globe trotter. Some people have thought that I have traveled more than necessary, but I know better than that, and am convinced that I have not traveled nearly as much as I should have done in order to become a good and reliable historian. Yet I have traveled about 490,000 miles in the interest of the Church, and I have come to the conclusion that the work accomplished could not have been done in any other way than by

going into the field for material. We have had Church recorders and historians all the time since the organization of the Church, and they have found it possible to record facts as they have been reported to headquarters from time to time; but the recorders could never make a complete history of this Church unless they go abroad, visit with the elders and saints in different parts of the world, peruse records and become acquainted geographically with the stakes of Zion and the countries of the world. Then, in connection with the reports that are sent in from year to year, they can write history, and it may be said that these reports are now better than they have been before. A complete history of this Church, in my opinion, can never be written unless that mode of procedure is followed.

We do not know what will take place in the near future; only this we believe, that great events are close at hand. But we do sincerely hope and pray for a general awakening in the interest of Church history. Sometimes, when I visit some of the stakes of Zion in the interest of history I am looked upon as a sort of Rip van Winkle, or some ancient of days, who has been asleep for twenty years, or more, and it seems as if some people are actually annoyed by it. I do not say this as a slur upon the Saints generally. This lethargy can perhaps be traced to the fact that for years only very little attention has been paid to Church history in a public way. We preach about the Word of Wisdom. Imagine what the consequence would be, if our brethren from time to time did not open their mouths to draw attention to that particular word of God.[6] Even, after mentioning it and speaking about it repeatedly, such conditions exist as those we have had explained to us in this meeting by the brethren who have preceded me.[7] Now, inasmuch as the importance of history has not been mentioned much of late years, the people have become careless about it, and quite frequently we hear somebody say, "We have enough to do with the present and looking out for the future; let the past alone."[8] It may be true that the present is more important to us than the past; and yet I contend that without knowing something about the past, we do not know where we come in as elders of the Church laboring in the vineyard both at home and abroad. It is necessary for us to know how we fit in as we continue the labors commenced by Joseph Smith the Prophet and continued by Brigham Young and his successors. In Great Britain we need to know how the present missionaries fit in with the labors in earlier days by Heber C. Kimball, Orson Hyde, Brigham Young, Orson Pratt, Wilford Woodruff, and many others. We from Scandinavia need to know how our present missionaries fit in with the labors commenced by Erastus Snow and his fellow-laborers seventy-six years ago. Without some knowledge in regard to the past, we scarcely know where we are at. We know we belong to a great organization, but not always what our particular duties are in building upon the foundation that the heroes and heroines of this Church laid many years ago.

My message as one of the historians of this Church is this: We want cooperation; we need a general awakening in regard to the importance of record-keeping. We must become better posted in regard to the history of this Church, the most important organization of its kind that ever existed upon the face of the earth. We cannot sit still and quietly at the Historian's office and steer the great ship of Zion historically, we need the cooperation of the local authorities and the people generally. We want the stake clerks and ward clerks, and clerks of the priesthood and auxiliary organizations to stand by us. And when we send out, or go out, for information we want to examine and peruse the records that are in existence for historical material. We raise our voice against the destruction or the losing of records, and draw attention to the folly of looking upon record-books in the same light that a school boy looks upon his copy book—when it is written full it is of no further use. The records of a ward or quorum are entirely different from that. A blank book is worth nothing to the historian, but being filled with records it is, in many instances, worth its weight in gold. We would, therefore, earnestly insist that the brethren and sisters in charge of records, or even private journals, do not destroy them or lose them. The time will surely come when they will be wanted. Probably much that is in them may be mere chaff, that never will be worth copying, but there will always be something found in these records that will be of use to the historian. I cannot remember that I ever in my life have perused a record book of any kind—and I have perused thousands of them—but what I have found something in it of historical importance.[9]

Now, brethren and sisters, let us wake up to a realization of the fact, that there is something of vital importance for us to know in the past, as well as in the present and the future. I speak as one who has devoted almost his entire life in the historical field, and who for many years has endeavored to draw attention to the fact that the writing of history is the next thing to making it. May God bless us and enable us to be faithful and diligent in discharging the duties pertaining to our respective callings in the service of God, I sincerely pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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1. Anthon H. Lund, in *Eighty-Eighth Semiannual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1917), 12.

2. Relevant sources examining Jenson's life and historical contributions include Davis Bitton and Leonard J. Arrington, *Mormons and Their Historians* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 41–55; Keith W. Perkins, "Andrew Jenson: Zealous Chronologist" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974); and Louis Reinwand, "Andrew Jenson, Latter-day Saint Historian," *BYU Studies* 14, no. 1 (1973): 29–46.

3. Andrew Jenson, in *Ninety-Seventh Semiannual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1926), 54–59.

4. Jenson had compared the restored Church with the original Church in a slightly more penetrating manner in an earlier general conference. See Andrew Jenson, in *Ninetieth Semiannual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1920), 66–67.

5. Jenson was able to deliver on the first part of this promise—identifying the number of missionaries—in the following April 1927 general conference. In his sermon on that occasion, after providing a detailed history of Latter-day Saint missionary work, he indicated that from the time of the organization of the Church until the close of the year 1926, 35,275 members had left Church headquarters to serve missions. But, Jenson added, if mission-field converts who were ordained to the ministry and proselyted in their native lands were added to that number, the total would be over 70,000. See Andrew Jenson, in *Ninety-Seventh Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1927), 71.

6. As an elderly, third-generation Latter-day Saint, Jenson was aware of the emphasis presiding Church authorities had given the Word of Wisdom over the years. In 1866 the fifteen-year-old Jenson migrated with his family to Utah—about the same time President Brigham Young began to stress Word of Wisdom observance with increasing frequency. From that period forward, Church leaders had alternately plead, cajoled, and threatened noncompliant Church members about Word of Wisdom lapses. Presidents Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant were especially vocal in their emphasis that Word of Wisdom abstinence was a gospel requirement. See Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 258–71; and Paul H. Peterson, "An Historical Analysis of the Word of Wisdom" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1972).

7. The "brethren" who preceded Jenson in this general conference and who commented in one way or another on the importance of Word of Wisdom observance included President Heber J. Grant, who gave a lengthy talk on the revelation; Presiding Bishopric Counselor, David A. Smith; and M. Howard Randall, president of the Morgan [Utah] Stake. After Jenson spoke, Rey L. Pratt of the First Council of Seventy and Elders David O. McKay and Joseph Fielding Smith of the Quorum of the Twelve advanced Word of Wisdom themes. Elder McKay's talk was a major address on how tobacco stained human character. Altogether seven different general or local authorities broached the Word of Wisdom during October Conference of 1926, hardly an atypical approach or pattern during the Joseph F. Smith and Heber J. Grant administrations.

8. Jenson's analogy, suggesting that both Word of Wisdom observance and dutiful record keeping suffered unless the Brethren continually reminded the Saints of such responsibilities, is interesting but misleading. Keeping both institutional and personal records was never emphasized to the extent that Word of Wisdom observance was. Indeed, Andrew Jenson, by a considerable margin, was the foremost promoter (and for much of the time, the only consistent advocate) of record keeping during these years.

9. Were Jenson alive today, he would likely be disappointed that many local stake, ward, and quorum records are no longer kept. In 1973 local Church units were informed

it would no longer be necessary to send priesthood quorum and auxiliary minute records to the Historical Division for record-keeping purposes. The rationale behind this First Presidency circular letter was that "Church growth and the concurrent growth in the volume of records kept by units of the Church necessitate a modification in record-keeping procedures." Four years later in 1977, it was determined that stake, district, ward, and branch meeting minutes need not be forwarded to Salt Lake City for permanent storage. In 1984 the First Presidency indicated that wards and branches were no longer required to "prepare a Historical Record to be sent to Church headquarters or the area office." Stake, district, and mission historical records (which presumably included notable ward or branch events) were retained. See First Presidency letters to Stake, Mission, and District Presidents, Bishops and Branch Presidents, August 20, 1973; November 23, 1977; and April 2, 1984, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. In all these letters, while reducing the number of records to be forwarded, the Brethren continued to assert the importance of keeping faithful institutional and personal histories. Obviously, electronic record keeping, which clearly will minimize storage and space considerations, and recent directives for concerted record keeping at the stake level offer intriguing possibilities for the creation and retention of important records in the future.