



Centennial service on top of the Hill Cumorah, Manchester, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy Church History Library (CHL).

Pilgrimage to Palmyra

President B. H. Roberts and the Eastern States Mission's 1923 Commemoration at Cumorah

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The arrival of autumn in 1923 brought more than a mature harvest to the quiet farming village of Palmyra, New York. On a late September weekend, a torrent of visitors flooded the township—a spectacle unlike anything the locals had ever seen. “Trudging along the roads leading into Palmyra today there came a small army of pilgrims,” the local *Rochester Herald* reported, “each with his pilgrim’s scrip and each wearing slung across his shoulders a banner with the cryptic word ‘Cumorah’ blazoned on it.” Befuddled residents witnessed the young male and female pilgrims arrive—two by two—until they eventually coalesced in large groups around the old Joseph Smith family farm. Some of the travelers were exhausted, having walked hundreds of miles to get there.¹

On September 21, 1923, every elder and sister serving in the Eastern States Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints converged on Palmyra for an unprecedented weekend conference. Meandering down country roads until they arrived at a nondescript hill, they were joined by local Church members living across the East Coast and curious passers-by. President Heber J. Grant, accompanied by Apostles Rudger Clawson, James E. Talmage, and Joseph Fielding Smith attended from Church headquarters in Salt Lake City.² Over the next several days, the sleepy township teemed with enthusiastic Latter-day Saints eager to

1. Staff correspondent, “Pilgrims at Birthplace of Religion,” *Rochester (NY) Herald*, September 22, 1923, 3.

2. “Mormon Head Prominent at Celebration,” *Rochester Herald*, September 22, 1923.



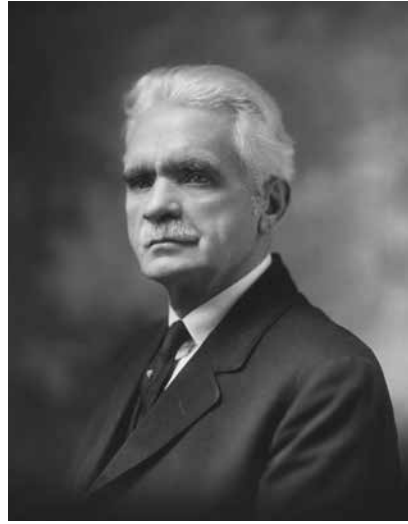
Arrival of the Eastern States Mission elders at the Smith Farm, Manchester, New York, September 21, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

commemorate the centennial of an event that took place on that self-same hill one hundred years earlier in 1823.

Joseph Smith, the religion's first prophet, grew up near the hill in upstate New York. In his published personal history, he wrote: "Convenient to the village of Manchester, Ontario county, New York, stands a hill of considerable size, and the most elevated of any in the neighborhood" (JS-H 1:51). Starting on the night of September 21, 1823, Smith, then age seventeen, was visited several times by the angelic messenger Moroni, who instructed him to climb the glacial drumlin, which he called Cumorah (JS-H 1:29–50). There he uncovered "the plates, deposited in a stone box" obscured by a large stone on the hill's western side (JS-H 1:51). Following the angel's direction, Smith returned to the hill on the same date in the ensuing years, and in 1827, having been sufficiently instructed, he removed the plates from Cumorah and initiated their translation process (JS-H 1:53–54, 59).

From September 21 to September 24, 1923, the hill served as the setting for a commemoration of Smith's vision of Moroni and receiving the gold plates. As the brainchild of Mission President Brigham Henry "B. H."

Roberts, the 1923 general conference of the Eastern States Mission replanted Cumorah into the historical consciousness of the general body of Church membership; for the first time on a large scale, Church leaders, missionaries, and members converged on a site purposely envisioned as an LDS center of pilgrimage and commemoration, whereas before it had served as an irregular reminder to occasional tourists of the Church's bygone presence in New York. The centennial conference's proceedings reinforced the Hill Cumorah's centrality to the emergence of the Latter-day Saint movement in the nineteenth century and its unique theological message.



Brigham H. "B. H." Roberts, President of the Eastern States Mission, c. 1922. Courtesy CHL.

Historians have made much of the period between 1890 and 1930, characterizing it as a time of transition and identity renegotiation for the Latter-day Saint faith.³ Several historians have postulated that Church leaders, grappling with an identity vacuum in the wake of the polygamy, spent the early twentieth century adopting a new image—one in greater harmony with the trappings of modern American society.⁴ This process of representation involved a public forgetting of the distinctiveness of the last half-century, beginning with Joseph Smith's introduction of plural marriage, instead marking a return to the earliest seeds of Mormonism. Those seeds—founded upon Joseph Smith's upbringing in New York and the emergence of the Book of Mormon as the Church's unique scriptural heritage—were on full display at the Cumorah Centennial.

3. For example, see Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints, 1890–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986). On the Smith family farm in particular, see Keith A. Erekson, "From Missionary Resort to Memorial Farm: Commemoration and Capitalism at the Birthplace of Joseph Smith, 1905–1925," *Mormon Historical Studies* (2005): 69–100.

4. Kathleen Flake, "Re-placing Memory: Latter-day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2003) 69–109.

There, Latter-day Saint identity renegotiation involved not only a return to the foundational doctrines of Joseph Smith's early restoration of Christ's church, but it also involved a pilgrimage to its foundational site, a sacred place where ancient and modern prophets met.⁵

Replanting twentieth-century Latter-day Saint identity within the geographic bounds of its nineteenth-century origin story, the 1923 Cumorah commemoration foreshadowed a day when Church theology would be grounded first in the Book of Mormon and second in the Bible. Research has recently been focused on ways mission presidents of the early twentieth century innovated new proselyting efforts focused on the Book of Mormon—subsequently pushing it to the forefront of Church culture.⁶ Most studies, however, overlook Roberts's intellectual orchestration of the 1923 summer missionary labors, which Roberts called “country work,” and the September march to Cumorah as constituent pillars of this broader push to renegotiate Latter-day Saint identity in the early twentieth century. Instead, historic treatments of the 1923 conference are generally annexed into broader histories of the hill itself or briefly mentioned as a signpost in the emergence of Church pageantry in the mid-to-late twentieth century.⁷

Moreover, any study of the 1923 centennial celebration should not be separated from the evangelistic “country work” preceding it.⁸ To

5. See Michael H. Madsen, “The Sanctification of Mormonism’s Historical Geography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 229; and Daniel H. Olsen, “Touring Sacred History: The Latter-day Saints and Their Historical Sites,” in *Mormons and Popular Culture: A Global Influence of an American Phenomenon*, ed. J. Michael Hunter (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 225–42.

6. See John C. Thomas, “The Book of Mormon in American Missions at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Religious Educator* 19, no. 1 (2018): 29–57. When Roberts introduced his new proselyting plan for the summer of 1923, he included in his series of five tracts one completely dedicated to the Book of Mormon. The tract is a powerful endorsement, application, summary, and testimony of the Book of Mormon’s significance and reaffirms that the scripture was already well ensconced in the missionary program of the Church before the Cumorah celebration.

7. Truman G. Madsen, “B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 7–32; Curtis Ashton, “Reclaiming Hill Cumorah,” April 18, 2014, <https://history.lds.org/article/historic-sites/new-york/manchester/reclaiming-hill-cumorah?lang=eng&groupid=12968101728671441203-eng>.

8. Past historical treatments of the Hill Cumorah and the 1923 Centennial tend to isolate it from the country work preceding it. See, for example,

Roberts, the proselyting pilgrimage leading to the conference was just as important a means of re-embracing their shared past as the weekend event itself was. Reflecting on the events, Roberts declared the country work the “outstanding feature of our work during the last six months.” To him, the conference was a “fitting climax” to the journey of sacrifice undertaken by his male and female missionaries.⁹ By ritually reenacting nineteenth-century proselyting efforts, the country work acted as a primer for the conference, amplifying missionaries’ awareness of the level of consecrated sacrifice exhibited by early Church members in their defense of the Book of Mormon. Without understanding the nature of the country work building up to the main event, it is almost impossible to explain how the event assumed such powerful spiritual implications in its execution and memory.

Roberts engineered the conference to be a transformative experience. Taken as a whole, the summer country work, the conference at Cumorah, and its aftermath embodied the five themes of pilgrimage: the departure, the journey, sacred space, the central shrine, and the return.¹⁰ Deep internal feelings of spiritual significance were reinforced through a process of calculated, externalized religious reenactment. Proximity to culturally relevant religious space only magnified the import of the weekend’s episodic retellings of the past. President Grant later lamented that this transformative pilgrimage was undertaken by so few Latter-day Saints. “I believe that if I had more thoroughly partaken of the spirit of that conference prior to going there,” he remarked at general conference, “that arrangements would have been made to have had hundreds of the Latter-day Saints present.”¹¹ Indeed, the conference and the summer proselyting campaign leading up to it long stood out in the memory of all who participated.

Cameron J. Packer, “A Study of the Hill Cumorah: A Significant Latter-day Saint Landmark in Western New York” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2002), 90.

9. Brigham H. Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1923), 89–90.

10. Ruth Barnes and Crispin Branfoot, eds., *Pilgrimage: The Sacred Journey* (Oxford, Eng.: Ashmolean Museum, 2006), 12–13.

11. Heber J. Grant, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1923), 5.

Eastern States Mission President B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon

In April 1922, President Grant and his counselors in the First Presidency called sixty-five-year-old B. H. Roberts to preside over one of the Church's North American proselyting fields.¹² Contrary to the norm, he was allowed to select his own mission assignment. "The choice I finally expressed was to become president of the Eastern States Mission," Roberts wrote, which then included eleven states with about thirty-three million Americans within its borders. It was to him a "truly a noble field." He privileged the Eastern States for their proximity to the historic sites of the Restoration, which he had visited and written about for decades. The Eastern States Mission, where he would preside until 1927, "had the attraction of including within it the territory of the early activities of the church, the birthplace of the prophet (Vermont), the early scenes of the prophet's life, the first vision, and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (the Hill Cumorah), the cradle of the church organization (Fayette, New York). Also the Harmony, Colesville, and Susquehanna valleys, where the priesthood was restored, both the Aaronic and the Melchizedek priesthood."¹³ The significance of these sites greatly "endear[ed] this section of the country to [Roberts's] mind and heart."¹⁴

As he prepared to assume the presidency of the Eastern States Mission, Roberts determined to further highlight the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith and the divine origins of the Book of Mormon. Both the modern seer and Moroni's ancient record held a special place in the new mission president's heart and mind.¹⁵ During his lifetime, Roberts would publish

12. At the time, Roberts was serving in the First Council of the Seventy and was an Assistant Church Historian. For information on his mission presidency tenure, see B. H. Roberts, *The Autobiography of B. H. Roberts*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 230–36; Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 315–37; and Robert H. Malan, *B. H. Roberts: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 113–28.

13. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 230.

14. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 230.

15. See John W. Welch, "B. H. Roberts: Seeker after Truth," *Ensign* 16, no. 3 (March 1986): 56–62; John W. Welch, "Introduction," in B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 1994), xi–xxxvii; and Davis Bitton, "B. H. Roberts and Book of Mormon Scholarship: Early Twentieth Century: Age of Transition," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 60–69, 87–88.

more than one thousand essays, general conference talks, sermons, articles, tracts, and pamphlets, in addition to his thirty books, with the Book of Mormon being the subject and doctrinal foundation for much of what he wrote. His three-volume *New Witnesses for God* (1895, 1909, 1909) was the culmination of decades of research, wrestle, and writing in defense of the American scripture and the overarching Restoration of the gospel. “Throughout his mature life he was a dedicated student and analyst of the Book of Mormon, struggling with both the modern and ancient contexts of the book,” concludes Roberts’s biographer Truman G. Madsen.¹⁶

Two months before being set apart as a mission president, Roberts shared his latest critical thinking on the American scripture with the presiding brethren, a writing project that he completed before leaving for the Eastern States Mission.¹⁷ His comprehensive report sought to assess the truth claims of the Book of Mormon from multiple angles. Concerned his intentions might have been misunderstood by his General Authority colleagues, he penned a letter (which he apparently never sent) summarizing his feelings and faith to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve:

In writing out this my report to you of those studies, I have written it from the viewpoint of an open mind, investigating the facts of the Book of Mormon origin and authorship. Let me say once and for all, so as to avoid what might otherwise call for repeated explanation, that what is herein set forth does not represent any conclusions of mine. . . . I am taking the position that our faith is not only unshaken but unshakable in the Book of Mormon, and therefore we can look without fear upon all that can be said against it. . . .

It is not necessary for me to suggest that maintenance of the truth of the Book of Mormon is absolutely essential to the integrity of the whole Mormon movement, for it is inconceivable that the Book of Mormon

16. Truman G. Madsen, “Roberts, B. H.,” in *Encyclopedia of Latter-day Saint History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 1035. See also Truman G. Madsen, “B. H. Roberts and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 4 (1979): 427–45; and Truman G. Madsen, “B. H. Roberts after Fifty Years: Still Witnessing for the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* 13, no. 12 (December 1983): 11–19.

17. John W. Welch, “No, Sir, That’s Not History!” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The F.A.R.M.S. Updates*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 88–90; and Truman G. Madsen and John W. Welch, “Did B. H. Roberts Lose Faith in the Book of Mormon?” *FARMS Preliminary Reports*, 1985.

should be untrue in its origin or character and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints be a true Church.¹⁸

Roberts knew and repeatedly asserted The Book of Mormon was the keystone to the overarching truth claims of the Restoration.

Before, during, and after sharing his scholarly research on the Book of Mormon with the presiding brethren in early 1922, Roberts established himself as one of the chief apologists of the ancient American codex.¹⁹ As scholar Terryl L. Givens explained, “Roberts publicly and privately affirmed his belief in the divine origins of the Book of Mormon until his death in 1933, but a lively debate has emerged over whether his personal conviction really remained intact in the aftermath of his academic investigations.” He continued, “It seems most plausible that Roberts’s unflinching intellectual integrity led him to articulate the most probing critique he could of the Book of Mormon, and he found himself incapable of solving the dilemmas he uncovered. But neither did he find his doubts sufficient to overpower his faith.”²⁰ Roberts welcomed the chance to preside over the mission encompassing the Hill Cumorah because it would give him a chance to continue to explore the book’s complexities while also bearing witness of its ancient origins.

In late May 1922, Roberts succeeded George W. McCune, who was struggling with poor health, as mission president and moved from Utah to the headquarters of the Eastern States Mission in Brooklyn, New York. During his first summer back East, he set out to greet and train his 140 elders and sisters scattered across the ten conferences of the mission.²¹ Roberts met with his missionaries in Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Washington, D.C.,

18. B. H. Roberts to Heber J. Grant, Council, and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, March 15, [1922], Church History Library (hereafter cited as CHL), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

19. See Brigham H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brigham D. Madsen (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

20. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 110–11. See also Truman G. Madsen, ed., “His Final Decade: Statements about the Book of Mormon (1924–1933),” *FARMS Preliminary Reports*, 1985; John W. Welch, “Finding Answers to B. H. Roberts’s Questions,” *FARMS Preliminary Reports*, 1985.

21. Conferences were groups of wards or branches similar to what are now called stakes.

South Carolina, West Virginia, and Kentucky before the winter snowfall made travel on the eastern seaboard and mountains less convenient.²²

The Church had recently commemorated the one-hundred-year anniversary of Joseph Smith's 1820 First Vision prior to Roberts's mission presidency. By the turn of the twentieth century, Latter-day Saints better appreciated the doctrinal significance of the founding prophet's theophany in the Sacred Grove.²³ As historian James B. Allen documents, "In 1920, the centennial anniversary of the vision, the celebration was a far cry from the almost total lack of reference to it just fifty years earlier." Reaffirming their desire to commemorate their sacred past, Church members in 1920 memorialized the theophany in a variety of new ways: they produced commemorative pamphlets, songs, and verse; dedicated their publications to showcasing its implications; and dramatized the events onstage.²⁴ In the decade between the centennials of the First Vision in 1920 and the organization of the Church in 1930, Latter-day Saints were increasingly eager observe the centennials of other key events of the Restoration, especially the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

During his first year as mission president, Roberts contemplated how to best celebrate Joseph Smith's 1823 encounter with the angel Moroni and the golden plates in Palmyra. In the nineteenth century, a growing number of Mormon tourists,²⁵ artists and photographers,²⁶ historians,²⁷

22. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 230–31.

23. See James B. Allen, "The Significance of Joseph Smith's First Vision in Mormon Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, ed. Samuel Alonzo Dodge and Steven C. Harper (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2012), 283–306.

24. James B. Allen, "Emergence of a Fundamental: The Expanding Role of Joseph Smith's First Vision of Mormon Religious Thought," in *Exploring the First Vision*, 245–46.

25. See Martin H. Raish, "Encounters with Cumorah: A Selective, Personal Biography," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, nos. 1–2 (2004): 38–49, 169–70.

26. See Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Cameron J. Packer, "A Story on Canvas, Paper, and Glass: The Early Visual Images of Cumorah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, nos. 1–2 (2004): 6–23, 167–68.

27. See Reid L. Neilson, Justin R. Bray, and Alan D. Johnson, eds., *Rediscovering the Sites of the Restoration: The 1888 Travel Writings of Mormon Historian Andrew Jenson, Edward Stevenson, and Joseph S. Black* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 176–99.

poets,²⁸ and musicians²⁹ explored and documented the religious meaning of the Hill Cumorah and the surrounding sacred landscape. Small groups of local missionaries and members had also gathered at the Smith Family farm and the neighboring Hill Cumorah on historic occasions.³⁰ However, these had been individual—not ecclesiastical—undertakings to remember the founding events of the Restoration.

Roberts envisioned a unique commemoration of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon that would culminate on September 21 at the Hill Cumorah. He viewed the anniversary as a window of opportunity to turn the eyes of the body of the Saints in the Intermountain West back toward their religious heritage in upstate New York. As early as March 1923, Roberts shared a proposed outline of proselyting events leading up to the centennial celebration in Palmyra with the young leaders of his Eastern States Mission.³¹ In mid-May, an article detailing the missionwide summer campaign was formally published in the *New York Herald*.³² Beginning on May 15 (the anniversary of the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood in 1829), mission leaders held a series of kick-off meetings marking the beginning of the summer-long country work. The proselyting campaign would culminate about four months later on September 21, when Roberts's missionaries would terminate their rural peregrinations and converge at the Hill Cumorah to attend the first annual Eastern States Mission general conference commemorating the advent of the Book of Mormon.

True to his heritage as a historian, Roberts envisioned the missionary gathering as a three-day, episodic treatment of important Church events. The conference's geographical setting only amplified the power

28. See Louise Helps, "Look Once Again at Cumorah's Hill: The Poet's View," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, nos. 1–2 (2004): 110–23, 173.

29. See Roger L. Miller, "'Hail, Cumorah! Silent Wonder': Music Inspired by the Hill Cumorah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, nos. 1–2 (2004): 98–109, 171–73.

30. Groups of Latter-day Saints may have gathered there to celebrate Pioneer Day (July 24) in earlier years. There is, however, no record of these meetings in the manuscript history of the Eastern States Mission. See Albert L. Zobell Jr., "Lest We Forget: Early Cumorah Pageants," *Improvement Era* 71, no. 6 (June 1968): 24–25.

31. O. Ragnar Linde, Diary, March 14, 1923, O. Ragnar Linde Papers, J. Willard Marriott Special Collections (hereafter cited as Marriott Special Collections), University of Utah, Salt Lake City; George L. Hoggan, Diary, March 14, 1923, George L. Hoggan Papers, Marriott Special Collections.

32. "Mormons to Start on Missionary Tour," *New York Herald*, May 14, 1923.

behind each episode, and Roberts planned to use the countryside around the Hill Cumorah as a stage to showcase the Book of Mormon's historic and religious significance. He scheduled the retelling of Moroni's appearance to Joseph Smith at the Smith log home to occur at the original home site; the retelling of the Prophet's first visit to Cumorah would be held on the hill itself; the rehearsing of his 1820 First Vision in the Sacred Grove would transpire in the very forest Smith retired to as a young man. By physically retracing the steps of the religion's first prophet, Roberts's missionaries could envision the material circumstances of Smith's early life.

“Country Work” in the Eastern States Mission

The missionary conference at Cumorah was only the pinnacle of a rigorous summer-long canvassing effort throughout the Eastern States Mission. Following the missionwide kickoff meetings on May 15, 1923, each male missionary companionship began country proselyting work in their assigned region, discontinuing conventional missionary work for the summer.³³ Bereft of missionary priesthood leadership for four months, local Church leaders across the mission were instructed to chart a course of self-sufficiency while the elders were traveling through the country.³⁴ Leaving their assigned areas, elders spread outward into rural counties, villages, farms, and meetinghouses previously unvisited during the fall, winter, and spring months.

Patterned after the ministries of Christians in the New Testament who were counseled to proselyte “without purse or scrip” (Matt. 10:5–10; Mark 6:7–12; Luke 9:3; 10:1–5; and 22:35), the summer campaign pushed missionaries well out of their comfort zones.³⁵ Going from house to house, county to county, without prearranged lodging or meals, demanded the faith and courage of everyone involved. By 1923, this nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint missionary practice was

33. Eastern States Mission Manuscript History, July 17, 1923, LR 2475 2, CHL.

34. Eastern States Mission Manuscript History, June 5, 1923, CHL.

35. In the earliest days of the Church, leaders often called members on missions, encouraging them to go from place to place without funds or prearranged plans. They left their families and occupations, often acting under the belief God would provide for their needs. See D&C 24:18; D&C 84:86. This practice lasted well into the 1860s, when Church leaders recognized potential problems with having missionaries travel in this manner. For a thorough study of this aspect of early missionary efforts, see Jessie L. Embry, “Without Purse or Scrip,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 3 (1996): 77–93.



President B. H. Roberts with Eastern States missionaries, Brooklyn, New York, June 1922. Courtesy CHL.

largely considered antiquated; most mission presidents understood the seriousness of “labor, passport, and mendicancy laws” in effect countrywide and did not ask their missionaries to risk breaking them.³⁶ Although Roberts was considered “old school” in certain respects, he still adjusted the country work to conform with twentieth-century missionary norms.³⁷ His instructions were clear: The elders and sisters were not to “go rushing through the country on straight lines in the direction started upon,” nor would there be any “ambition to make a record of miles traveled.” He encouraged them instead to prayerfully go “trusting in the Lord,” sharing their message with any person willing to listen

36. Doing country work without purse or scrip continued through the Great Depression and World War II in some domestic U.S. missions, though it was generally confined to summers. There are examples of this form of missionary work even extending into the postwar era after World War II, as late as the 1950s. Embry, “Without Purse or Scrip,” 78–82; Morris Bishop, “In the Footsteps of Mormon,” *New York History* 22, no. 2 (April 1941): 165.

37. Elton LeRoy Taylor, Oral History by Sandra Skouson, July 5, 1981, MS 2735, folder 421, CHL, 6.

along the way. To go “trust[ing] in the Lord” became the official substitute phrase for “traveling without purse or script [*sic*],” which Roberts worried could be easily misinterpreted by critics who might subject the missionaries to “charges of vagrancy.” If missionaries were blamed for trying to secure lodging among strangers without proper means of paying, the elders and sisters were to refer these people to the financial account at mission headquarters.³⁸

The word *country* in country work was an appropriate reference to the predominantly rural nature of greater America in the early 1920s. According to Jessie Embry, in the early twentieth century “church leaders encouraged members to stay in their communities and build up the church there.” Missionaries were increasingly directed toward urban centers with established member bodies to assist their ongoing congregational growth. This slow shift necessitated a change in operations: “When missionaries were in cities, it was more difficult to find people who would provide free room and board.” Rented lodging in urban areas provided continual access to city membership but barred regular travel to the outer reaches of one’s area. For one, transportation was sparse, and missionaries ran the risk of walking miles of dirt roads between two farm houses. Missionaries, already working on limited funds, employed no vehicular means of transportation—consequently, visiting people in the countryside often demand multiday excursions on foot.³⁹

During their country work, missionaries spent the week canvassing the countryside but did not spend the entire summer drifting on bucolic byways. On weekends, they returned to their original residences to do laundry, attend church meetings, and catch up on sleep. While they were out, the mission office in Brooklyn forwarded literature and tracts to their rental address. While it was tempting to remain home where all creature comforts were taken care of, come Monday morning all were expected to depart to the countryside to resume the work for another week.⁴⁰

As their male counterparts proselyted in the countryside, female missionaries remained in their local congregations and took charge of “the work in the branches, mailing reports, etc.” When positive reports filtered in from the “country,” the “lady missionaries” were repeatedly commended for their work in the branches. “They are losing no opportunity to teach the Gospel,” one report stated, “The spirit of unity

38. “Mormons to Start on Missionary Tour.”

39. Embry, “Without Purse or Scrip,” 78.

40. Taylor, Oral History, 6.



Arrival of lady missionaries at the Smith Farm, Palmyra, New York, September 21, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

prevails and all are determined to make this a banner year in missionary activity.”⁴¹ President Roberts personally thanked the sisters for “keeping the holy campfires burning in branch halls and Sunday Schools, Relief Societies, and Mutuals,” while the elders were away.⁴²

As the male missionaries headed into the countryside, most did not travel in their traditional livery, opting instead for garb as unique as the experience. Khaki britches tucked into a pair of leather or cloth-wrapped puttees⁴³ comprised the lower half, with a suit coat and straw hat on top. Besides an umbrella for the drenching rain and harsh sun, each elder carried relatively little into the field with him—a medium-sized fiber suitcase usually sufficed to hold a week’s worth of toiletries,

41. Eastern States Mission Manuscript History, July 17, 1923, CHL.

42. B. H. Roberts to the Eastern States Mission, August 29, 1923, Cumorah Conference Materials, Roberts Papers, MS 106, box 10, folder 13, Marriott Special Collections.

43. A *puttee* is a gaiterlike article worn from ankle to knee that offers support and protection from the elements. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “puttee.”



Eastern States missionaries—Elders Ducy, Bunker, Eldrige, Wardell, and Moore—with briefcases labeled “Why Mormonism,” Middletown, New York, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

shaving materials, and mission tracts and books for prospective listeners and potential hosts.⁴⁴ Sometimes fastened across the face of their suitcases was a small white paper sign with the eye-catching words in black, “Why Mormonism?”⁴⁵

An eye-catching Cumorah pennant, similar in form to most college banners of the era, was the distinguishing accessory of the missionaries’ wardrobe. It was to be worn for the duration of their September march to Palmyra. The pennant, cut triangularly from blue felt cloth, was

44. Taylor, Oral History, 6.

45. See B. H. Roberts, *Why “Mormonism”?* (Independence, Mo.: Press of Zion’s Printing and Publishing Company, 1923); see also LeRoi C. Snow, “Eastern States Mission,” *Liahona: The Elders’ Journal* 20, no. 19 (March 13, 1923): 382–83. *Why “Mormonism”?* was a missionary tract written and published in March 1923 by B. H. Roberts, intended for distribution on his missionaries’ summer campaign. Of the five tracts in Roberts’s new system, one was dedicated solely to the Book of Mormon, containing references to Roberts’s longstanding interests in the Book of Mormon that frequently highlight its “doctrinal value” and powerful witness.

adorned “with a photograph of the Hill Cumorah on white silk sewed on the broad end,” with the word “Cumorah” in gold lettering alongside the dates “1823—September 21st—1923.” Draping from left shoulder to right hip, it visually dominated the torso of the elders and sisters who proudly wore it. “This to attract attention,” Roberts explained, “and invite inquiry as to your march and its purpose.”⁴⁶ Elder Elton Taylor recalled, “This pennant created considerable interest and opened up opportunities to explain what we were doing and carry on gospel conversations.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the *Rochester Herald*’s description of the pennant’s solitary word as “cryptic” perhaps best epitomizes the endeavor’s success at soliciting curiosity.⁴⁸

Throughout the summer of 1923, Roberts clarified the details of their anticipated arrival at Cumorah. In an August mission circular, he provided information on travel arrangements, sleeping accommodations, and directions to Palmyra. The mission president understood the uneven geographic distribution of his missionaries across a dozen states. Sisters were told to make the entire journey by railroad. Taking distance into consideration, he also granted permission for elders in West Virginia to travel some distance by train; some elders could travel as far as Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; elders in Maryland as far as Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; and elders in Maine as far as Boston, Massachusetts, or Albany, New York. After arriving at these locations by early September, these same elders were instructed to continue their journey to Cumorah on foot for about three weeks. Like the summer work, Roberts instructed them to pursue a nonlinear path, enabling them to “[preach] by the way . . . , testifying to all whom they [met].” Roberts left other logistical details to the care of his conference presidents.⁴⁹

President Roberts envisioned the centennial conference as a gathering capable of transcending mere cultural memorialization—his material preparation pointed toward a deeper spiritual significance. “Colored shirts, knee trousers and puttees,” were permissible for the long foot journey, but his encouragement to ship missionaries’ Sunday best ahead to Willard Bean, curator of the Smith farm, for use at the

46. B. H. Roberts to the Eastern States Mission, letter, “The Conference at Cumorah,” August 10, 1923, Cumorah Conference Materials, Roberts Papers, MS 106, box 10, folder 12.

47. Taylor, Oral History, 6.

48. Staff correspondent, “Pilgrims at Birthplace of Religion,” 3.

49. Roberts, “The Conference at Cumorah,” August 10, 1923, Roberts Papers.

centennial clearly advertised the conference's sacred nature to attendees. He knew the presence of Church leaders—especially President Heber J. Grant—would heighten the spiritual importance of the proceedings if they were able to attend. Likewise, missionaries were told to expect simple, affordable meals during the weekend, evidence the meeting was not to be a “banqueting affair as to material food,” but rather “a spiritual feast.”⁵⁰ Details like these highlight the intensive process of transforming American countryside into religious sacred space—Roberts seemed keenly aware it not only required spiritual commitment but physical sacrifice and elevated decorum.

Roberts sent a follow-up letter to his mission reinforcing the centennial's sacred character sometime later. He repeated his vision of the event as a gathering meant to spiritually reinvigorate the elders and sisters after a summer of hard work. It would also serve as a ceremony of remembrance to review historic events central to their religious identity. Roberts's language in the letter was noteworthy; framing it as a “solemn memorial conference,” he again asserted it was not intended to be a social reunion focused on missionary fraternity, but a formal and dignified occasion, serious enough for all present to grasp the import of Joseph Smith's angelic encounters on Cumorah. There would be no place for “lightmindedness or boisterous conduct or jollification,” nor space for sports, games, picnicking, scuffling, or wrestling. It was from start to finish designed to be a “serious piece of business.”⁵¹

A Case Study in Country Work

When George L. Hoggan put pen to paper on May 15, 1923, to record his thoughts in his missionary journal, a summer of unknowns beckoned. Earlier that day, he had participated in the Maine conference's summer kickoff to the missionwide program of country work. After the group read examples of the faith-based service they were tasked to replicate from Matthew 10 and Luke 5, all present “dedicated [themselves] anew to the work of the Lord,” preparing to embark on their summer routes through the country. Hoggan was assigned a new companion, Elder John Anderson Thorson, to accompany him throughout the summer, as well as a new district between Portland and Liveston, Maine. As a final

50. Roberts, “The Conference at Cumorah,” August 10, 1923, Roberts Papers.

51. B. H. Roberts to missionaries of the Eastern States Mission, letter, “Conference at Cumorah (Second Letter, n.d.),” Cumorah Conference Materials, Roberts Papers.

flourish to his diary entry that day, he added, “May God grant strength to me in the work.”⁵²

The next day, Hoggan packed his “duds” for a week’s travel and “launched the summer work in the Maine” conference. Leaving at 1:30 in the afternoon, he and his companion walked until they arrived at Cumberland, having spoken with passers-by along the way. There, having nowhere to stay for the night, they petitioned for lodging. Eventually, a Mr. Raymond Jewett agreed to house the two young missionaries. Marveling at the generosity of a stranger and the miracle it was to find lodging, Hoggan recorded, “Such trust in strangers is wonderful.”⁵³

Day two shortly became as good an archetype of the summer’s work as any. Arising early and spending breakfast with the Jewetts, the missionaries departed at 9 a.m. and walked until 1 p.m. Evidently, there were few contacts to be made in that period. Hungry and tired, they asked around until a woman agreed to feed them a chicken dinner. After their lunchtime break, they went on their way. His diary records a cumulative travel distance of thirteen miles that day. The labor taxed the missionaries both physically and emotionally. Well into the night they walked, seeking somewhere to rest. Hoggan grew tired and desperate. “No one would take us in,” he wrote. Finally, a man opened his door and agreed to let them stay. It was 10 p.m.⁵⁴

The proprietor was typical of the hodgepodge of people Eastern States missionaries met over the course of that summer. Each interaction was unique; this man’s wife left him almost nine years earlier—one day while he was at work, she sold all their joint possessions but the house. He warned the missionaries of his situation, and as the missionaries entered the home they recognized the gravity of his plight—“he had newspapers dated Aug. 12, 1916 for table covers.” Hoggan found him to be a “well read” individual and they enjoyed spending the evening in his home. After midnight, he and his travel companion found a spot on the man’s floor and “turned in between two quilts.”⁵⁵

The month of May panned out like a series of repeating snapshots. Every morning, the two ate breakfast, studied, and departed from their host’s residence. As they set foot onto the country road, their journey was a *tabula rasa*. The only direction they could not go was back the way

52. Hoggan, Diary, May 15, 1923.

53. Hoggan, Diary, May 16, 1923.

54. Hoggan, Diary, May 17, 1923.

55. Hoggan, Diary, May 17, 1923.

they came, not at least until Sunday when they inevitably returned to hold meetings with member families in their original area. They covered anywhere between ten and twenty miles a day. They did not always find accommodation—at times they begged from house to house. Weather interfered with the country work. Rainstorms had the potential to keep them indoors for days on end. When housebound, they made it a point to do laundry, finish chores, and help the Lanes, their proprietors, with the housework. This problem faded as the summer months ticked by. When they returned to the country, food and shelter again became priorities—all missionary work depended upon their ability to satisfy incessant bouts of hunger. Asking for food, eating with strangers, and sleeping by the wayside, however, were as good a conversation starter as any.⁵⁶

Temperatures increased as the summer months melted away. The roads grew dustier and work more difficult. Each day more removed from the naïve optimism of the May conference kickoff, Hoggan's diary entries increasingly reflect the building stress of perpetual hardship; interpersonal issues with his companion, being told "to go to the next house" every time they asked for lodging, oppressive heat even in the northeast on muggy days, and tracting without food past dark creep into the quotidian reflection in his journal.⁵⁷ The repetitive grind wore on them, and on the occasional hot day both elders knew it would have been easier to sit under a shady tree than walk in an unknown direction. On July 11, Hoggan wrote, "I am not feeling the best in spirit on account of neglect of work. God forgive." That night, without any place to go, Hoggan and Thorson hid out in a barn's hayloft, passing the hours trying to bury themselves just to keep warm.⁵⁸

That experience marked the low point of Hoggan's summer country work. The next day, the owner of the farm found them and chastised them for sleeping in his barn without permission. When he mentioned he could put them in jail, they assured him they had not used matches to start any fires. Things got better. Hoggan found opportunities to play piano for people who took them in. They swam in creeks and rivers along the way to combat the stifling heat and to clean themselves. Gospel conversations occurred in unlikely places. If anything, it all made for a once-in-a-lifetime experience Hoggan would never forget.

56. Hoggan, *Diary*, May 18–25, 1923.

57. Hoggan, *Diary*, June 9, 12, 15, 1923.

58. Hoggan, *Diary*, July 11–12, 1923.

In spite of the rigorous and uncertain temporal climate within which that year's summer missionary work operated, general responses among the missionaries themselves were positive. Hoggan rarely referred to how he felt about his summer efforts, since he had limited space to record only what he did. However, he made clear the cumulative experience was "interesting" and valuable.⁵⁹ Elder David Ariel Nash, a missionary serving in West Virginia, wrote in to the *Liahona*, "The summer campaign is one of the greatest things that has happened to this Mission and much good is being accomplished."⁶⁰ Elder R. Willis Walker echoed Nash's sentiments, writing: "The people have been very anxious to accept our literature and to have us explain our doctrine."⁶¹ The process of working without set accommodation or eating arrangements was certainly not easy to navigate; it was a learning experience requiring months of spiritual and physical acclimatization. Likewise, prejudice toward the missionaries' message never abated in certain regions, leading to hardship among missionary pairs.⁶² By August, reports circulated that "after two months of country work," some missionaries had "learned through experience how to best work their districts and many friends [were] being found continually."⁶³ Complimenting the zeal of Mormon missionaries in his region, one "prominent" man in West Virginia reportedly stated, "The work of the 'Mormon' missionaries is surely an example to the ministers of this city. We must either conclude that our ministers haven't the metal [*sic*], or they haven't the message."⁶⁴

59. Hoggan, Diary, June 1, 1923.

60. LeRoi C. Snow, "Eastern States Mission—Voices from the Field," *Liahona: The Elders' Journal* 21, no. 4 (August 14, 1923): 74. All *Liahona* citations are also pasted into the Eastern States Mission Manuscript History on the same date. See LR 2475 2, CHL.

61. "Eastern States Mission—Voices from the Field," 74.

62. Reports from Elders Diamond R. Adams and Carl E. Weaver serving in the Albany Conference in August 1923 noted the presence of prejudice, leading to several refusals of street privileges to preach. See "Eastern States Mission—Voices from the Field," 76. Elder Elton Taylor also recorded, "This was in an area of early historic church history, in western New York and western Pennsylvania, where there was still considerable bitterness toward the church at that time." Taylor, Oral History, 6.

63. Le Roi C. Snow, "Eastern States Mission—New Haven," *Liahona: The Elders' Journal* 21, no. 4 (August 14, 1923): 74.

64. "Eastern States Mission—South West Virginia," *Liahona: The Elders' Journal* 21, no. 4 (August 14, 1923): 75.

Living well outside their comfort zone, missionaries engaged in country work were quick to notice its impact on their personal lives. “Yes, we have had some wonderful adventures and experiences,” Elder Leon W. Reynolds remarked. “I would hate to have to part with them.” Prayer and instinct were often the missionaries’ greatest tools in the country—more than not, Roberts’s missionaries were touched by the “many testimony-strengthening experiences” resulting from the unregimented nature of the work. Others characterized their experiences as “happy time[s]” providing “joy and satisfaction . . . never before experienced.”⁶⁵ According to the *Deseret News*, the personal value of the pilgrimage for each missionary was unmistakable; a common theme of their journeyings, the reporter wrote, could well have easily been, “They had gone out to find disciples. They found disciples and also found God.”⁶⁶

In many respects, the country work of their summer campaign was a salute to the work of generations of missionaries who toiled in their fields of labor without purse or scrip. One missionary carried a small pedometer on his travels. In a six-week span “crisscross[ing] over much of western Pennsylvania and western New York” on their way to Cumorah, the missionary duo “registered something over 1500 miles by foot.”⁶⁷ It was rigorous, toilsome labor, but it taught humility, diligence, and self-reliance. Most—if not all—missionaries would certainly have been excited for fall, ushering in the termination of their country work and the final Cumorah centennial to cap it off. The country work, with all its physical implications, doubled as a spiritual primer for the centennial. As is true of any pilgrim’s journey, Roberts’s missionaries united in a common purpose, adopted common living circumstances, and physically covered large distances on foot, thus identifying with steadfast Latter-day Saint prophets and pioneers of the nineteenth century. In the process of being refined by the hardships they encountered, missionaries learned to better appreciate their communal heritage, carrying a newfound respect for the circumstances of their religious past into the September proceedings at Cumorah.

65. “Eastern States Mission—Voices from the Field,” 74.

66. “Palmyra Scene Re-enacted—Genealogy Will Be Theme,” *Deseret News*, September 22, 1923, second section, 1.

67. Taylor, Oral History, 6.

The September 1923 Pilgrimage to Cumorah

Early September signaled the end of the Eastern States Mission’s summer proselyting campaign as its elders and sisters set their sights on the cradle of the Restoration.⁶⁸ All missionaries were instructed to arrive at the Joseph Smith family farm on September 21, 1923—not a day before, or a day after. Each companionship donned their personalized pennants as they traversed the highways and rail lines of the East Coast toward Upstate New York. Others walked—and kept on walking for several weeks—until they arrived. All told, over 150 elders and sisters made the journey to Palmyra.⁶⁹



“Hill Cumorah from the Meadow” with automobiles in foreground, Manchester, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

68. Some missionaries started traveling to Cumorah as early as September 1, while others from conferences adjacent to the New York proselyting area started later.

69. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 231; “Eastern States Show Interest in Palmyra Meeting,” *Deseret News*, September 21, 1923, second section, 1.

Elders and sisters from the Eastern States Mission were not alone in making the pilgrimage; Latter-day Saints traveled from across the region in automobiles to witness the proceedings. In his instructions to missionaries, Roberts emphasized strict limitations on catering and accommodation at the site during the conference, cautioning missionaries that they would be unable to care for the needs of other Latter-day Saints who desired to attend. Regardless, curious Church members packed their own food and camping gear into their vehicles and made the journey to Palmyra.⁷⁰

Autumn rains saturated the muddy roads, fields, and farms around Palmyra in the weeks leading up to the event.⁷¹ The weather presented an acute problem for the event organizers; meetings were scheduled to be held outdoors, and when the rain showed no signs of stopping on Thursday, September 20, and continued into the following morning, the wet terrain threatened to both literally and figuratively dampen the proceedings.⁷²

As a precaution against the rain, two roomy former military tents were erected at the Smith family farm. One was meant to serve as sleeping accommodation for sister missionaries; the other was filled with chairs and used as a meeting place. Other preparations were made to prepare the site for the commemoration; a forty-foot-tall flagpole cut from the timbers of the Sacred Grove was installed outside the Smith family frame home, with another made of metal erected on the Hill Cumorah to fly the American flag. Rows of tables provided space for taking three catered meals per day.⁷³ Electric lights were likewise set to illuminate the night. While the sisters had ample bedding and cots to make themselves comfortable in their tent, the elders spent their evenings packing into an old barn across the street from the Smith family frame home where “an immense mattress of new-mown hay” awaited them.⁷⁴

As missionaries arrived from all over the eastern seaboard, they participated in an “informal reception” lasting the duration of the

70. See Roberts, “Conference at Cumorah,” August 10, 1923, Roberts Papers.

71. Taylor, Oral History, 7.

72. Jane Shipp Hogan, comp., “Ancestors of Carl Bingham Shipp and Annie May Newton,” typescript, 166–67, MS 15023, CHL.

73. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 231.

74. Rudger Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” *Deseret News*, September 29, 1923, section three, 7; Taylor, Oral History, 6; and Hogan, *Ancestors of Carl Bingham Shipp and Annie May Newton*, 166.



“Serving Breakfast at the Farm” to Eastern States missionaries and Church members, Smith farm, Palmyra, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

afternoon, followed by an opening dinner held on the evening of Friday, September 21.⁷⁵ Later, missionaries and members poured into the large tent for the first of the weekend’s meetings—a commemoration of the angel Moroni’s first visit to Joseph Smith one hundred years earlier. Two hymns were sung celebrating the angelic visitation, and the group was formally welcomed to the special conference. Before the meeting closed, the missionaries were invited to report on their summer proselyting labors.⁷⁶ Overall, the body was made “comfortable and pleasant” by the enclosed tent shielding them from the constant dribble of rain.⁷⁷

Unfortunately, the mission president who spent so long orchestrating the affair was unable to attend the opening conference session. Roberts’s disappointment was palpable; the onset of “nervous chills”

75. “First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” *Journal History of the Church*, September 21, 1923.

76. “Program of the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Eastern States Mission, 1923), 1, CHL.

77. “First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission.”

precipitated by—according to him—“the excessive work of providing for this centennial conference” and the “ceaseless exertions both mental and physical” it required precluded him from attending the Friday meetings. (A doctor later determined the malady as the onset of diabetes—something Roberts would struggle with until he died a decade later.⁷⁸) In his absence, President Heber J. Grant conducted the opening session.

The mission president’s health emergency was remembered by conference attendees in various ways. President Grant noted Roberts’s illness in his journal.⁷⁹ Apostle James E. Talmage likewise recorded how Roberts fell ill the day before the conference started and spent Thursday, September 20, resting.⁸⁰ Church Historian and Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith noted in the official meeting minutes, “On [the arrival of the Apostles] they found President Brigham H. Roberts . . . quite ill and confined to his bed, he improved, however, and was able to attend most of the meetings of the conference on the succeeding [*sic*] days.”⁸¹

For one Church member, the memory of President Roberts’s illness assumed deeper spiritual dimensions. Annie Newton remembered Roberts taking “violently ill” on the first day of the conference. Later—she did not specify when—two doctors were called by President Grant to the site from Rochester to attend him. Both men determined there was nothing they could do, allegedly declaring, “He’ll be dead in ten minutes.” In response, President Grant bid the missionaries and members to gather “into the tent and kneel and lend your faith for Brother Roberts.”⁸² In their personal records, however, neither Roberts nor Grant mentions receiving or giving a priesthood blessing. Grant did pray for Roberts to have a speedy recovery as he led the Friday evening meeting,⁸³ and Roberts indeed recovered quickly—enough to be present at several

78. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 233.

79. Heber J. Grant, Journal, September 21, 1923, CHL.

80. James E. Talmage, Journal, September 20, 1923, James E. Talmage Papers, MSS 229, box 32, folder 1b, L. Tom Perry Special Collections (hereafter Perry Special Collections), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

81. Joseph Fielding Smith, “Minutes—The First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints held at Joseph Smith Farm and the Hill Cumorah, September 21–23, 1923,” 1, Joseph Fielding Smith Papers, MS 4250, CHL.

82. Hogan, *Ancestors of Carl Bingham Shipp and Annie May Newton*, 166–67.

83. Smith, “Minutes—The First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” 2.



Church leaders and missionaries march to the Sacred Grove, Palmyra, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

subsequent meetings and offer a memorable prayer during the Sunday meeting in the Sacred Grove. Still, a reporter for the *Rochester Herald* noted that Roberts had to “leave the chair because of illness” during one of the Sabbath meetings.⁸⁴

Before dawn broke over the Joseph Smith family farm, on Saturday, September 22, missionaries and members arose from their makeshift beds to prepare for a sunrise flag-raising ceremony on the Hill Cumorah. A heavy storm had raged during the night, but Saturday’s cloudy morning brought calm as the Latter-day Saints organized themselves into groups ready to walk the three miles to the hill.⁸⁵ Everyone struggled to navigate the slew of muddy, lake-sized puddles scattered around the Smith farm by a week’s worth of rainfall.⁸⁶ One such pool of water that

84. “Mormon Head Prominent at Celebration,” September 22, 1923.

85. Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” 7.

86. Some of the puddles were large enough as to inspire younger attendees to wade into them waist-deep as the weather improved. See “Mormonism’s

had formed along the path of a small creek intersecting the Smith farm was deemed substantial enough in size to accommodate the baptism of several people in a ceremony held the next day.

Because the Church was still several years away from purchasing the entire Hill Cumorah, conference organizers secured special permission from non-Latter-day Saint Pliny T. Sexton, owner and proprietor of the hill and surrounding farmland, to hold ceremonies on his property.⁸⁷ The missionaries and members made their way, flags in hand, to the top of the hill while the sun peeked over the eastern horizon. When everyone summited, the appointed “Flag Sergeants” erected America’s national banner. They also raised a unique “Cumorah—Ramah” flag specially designed for the occasion—bisected into two colors, the blue “Cumorah” side bore the hill’s name “as it was known by the Nephites” in bright gold letters. The purple “Ramah” side similarly bore the ancient name of the hill in gold, as it “was known to the Jaredites—the people who first possessed the land.”⁸⁸ The color guard, led by Elder Elvie H. Yancey, president of the Vermont missionary conference, was composed of a large portion of “former service men” from the recent Great War. They, with everyone, including the President and Apostles, “stood at attention and pledged their allegiance again to their country’s flag.”⁸⁹ The morning’s flag-raising ceremony was symbolic of the newly emerging Latter-day Saint religious identity; merging explicit American patriotism with an accentuation of Book of Mormon truth-claims, the day’s rhetoric diverged from the political isolationism and biblical parallelisms of the previous century, reinforcing the Church’s twentieth-century push to integrate itself into the American mainstream while still claiming religious distinction.

After breakfast, all conference-goers expecting to return to the Hill Cumorah for the mid-morning meeting instead gathered in the large tents “on account of mud.”⁹⁰ Following the pattern of thematically

Theologian Interviewed,” *Rochester Herald*, September 23, 1923.

87. See David F. Boone, “‘A Man Raised Up’: The Role of Willard W. Bean in the Acquisition of the Hill Cumorah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 13, nos. 1–2 (2004): 24–37, 168–69.

88. Smith, “Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” 3; and “Palmyra Scene Re-Enacted,” 1.

89. “Mormon Head Prominent at Celebration,” September 22, 1923.

90. See session information in George Hoggan’s annotated copy of the “Program of the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” Hoggan Papers, 2.



Centennial service on top of Hill Cumorah, Manchester, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

addressing specific historical episodes within their original geospatial setting, the speakers recounted the “death struggles” of the ancient Jaredites and later Nephites in the Book of Mormon—struggles that culminated on the hill. A treatment of Joseph Smith’s visits to Cumorah to obtain sacred artifacts followed. Missionaries were given time to share spiritual experiences from the summer campaign. President Grant and Apostles Clawson, Talmage, and Smith spoke for much of the meeting. Group singing opened and closed all such meetings.⁹¹

Two additional meetings were held later that Saturday. The ten o’clock session was to be held on the Hill Cumorah, but because of “the damp condition of the ground due to the rain of the day before,” it was moved back to the large tent.⁹² The meetings sought to establish the spiritual and historical relevance of the Book of Mormon by rehashing foundational events from centuries preceding Joseph Smith’s theophany of 1820. Covering the themes of apostasy, personal revelation, and the restoration of priesthood authority—constituent, unique pillars of

91. “Program of the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” Hoggan Papers, 2–3.

92. “Proceedings of Second Days Services,” *Journal History of the Church*, September 22, 1923; Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” 7.

Latter-day Saint theology—member and nonmember conference-goers received a contextual broadening of the significance of Joseph Smith’s role in bringing about the Book of Mormon.⁹³

Local newspaper reports of the second day’s proceedings were positive. In labeling the conference attendees as “pilgrims,” the newspaper columns captured the depth of sacrifice missionaries made to attend the conference, comparing their youthful zeal to that of a young Joseph Smith.⁹⁴ They published photographs and interviewed key Church leaders. Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith believed the conference reports succeeded in removing prejudice toward Latter-day Saint beliefs endemic to that region.⁹⁵

The local media coverage impressed Roberts, who included lengthy quotes from the *Rochester Herald* in his own unpublished autobiography (1932–33) and multivolume *Comprehensive History of the Church* (1930).⁹⁶ However, Roberts also felt the lack of newspaper representatives at the gathering was a missed opportunity. During the conference’s intricate planning phase, Roberts reached out to national press agencies, who communicated their desire to be present at the proceedings. Unfortunately, the conference schedule unfolded during a week of newspaper workplace strikes throughout New York.⁹⁷ The biggest press agencies were unable to send journalists to isolated Palmyra. Apart from the publicity from the editor of the local *Rochester Herald*, who himself attended the conference, according to Roberts, “the Cumorah gathering failed of this anticipated publicity.”⁹⁸

By the morning of Sunday, September 23, evidence of the week’s prolonged rainfall was dried out by bright rays of sunshine. The morning light glinted through the trees surrounding the Smith family farm.

93. “Program of the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” 3–4.

94. Staff correspondent, “Pilgrims at Birthplace of Religion,” 3.

95. “Closing Exercises of the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission and Commemoration Services,” *Journal History of the Church*, September 24, 1923; and Smith, “Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” 8.

96. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 232–33; and B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 6:524.

97. During the labor strike, newspapers joined workforces to produce a joint spread of varying page lengths. See Talmage, *Journal*, September 19, 1923.

98. See Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6:523–24; and “Newspapers Give Vivid Account of Celebration,” *Deseret News*, September 29, 1923, 7.



Church leaders in the Sacred Grove (*left to right*: John Harris Taylor, Joseph Fielding Smith, Rudger Clawson, Heber J. Grant, August Winters Grant, James E. Talmage, B. H. Roberts, LeRoi C. Snow), Palmyra, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

The program culminated in a Sabbath-day special meeting in the Sacred Grove—the site of Joseph Smith’s theophany, the opening scene of the latter-day Restoration.⁹⁹ After breakfast, missionaries and members crossed the swollen brook near the rear of the neighboring barn, reverently making their way down the narrow lane leading to the Sacred Grove. The conference organizers had arranged a speaker’s stand, complete with a small table that served as an impromptu pulpit. They also carried a portable organ into the grove to provide music for the hymns.

Elder Edwin F. Tout was serving as a missionary during the centennial celebration and was responsible for organizing multiple choir numbers during the proceedings, including two solos he performed in the grove on Sunday morning.¹⁰⁰ A gifted singer himself, Tout was also the patriarch of an extremely talented musical family, including

99. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6:522–23.

100. Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” 7.

three daughters who accompanied him to Palmyra. Though his family hailed from Ogden, thanks to his daughters' excellence in the realms of opera and drama, the Tout name was known well beyond the confines of Utah—indeed, it had been heard around the world. Hazel, Margaret, and Nannie Tout, three of Edwin's several daughters, met their father in Palmyra for the Sunday meeting. Hazel and her sister Eleanor were both accomplished Broadway performers, both having taken leading roles in several shows in New York City. Margaret was also extremely talented, having toured and sung with the Metropolitan Opera Company of New York City. The eldest daughter, Nannie, however, was the best known of Tout's daughters. According to the *Rochester Herald*, she was an “operatic prima donna,” having sung for luminaries as distinguished as the queen of England.¹⁰¹ Nannie served as the organist throughout the centennial. Indeed, the Tout family's presence elevated the proceedings as their musical talents reverberated through the trees of the Sacred Grove. Per the *Rochester Herald*, “It was a strange sight to see in this dense grove and on nature's own stage some of the leading people of the theater world.”¹⁰²

On a pilgrimage, the arrival at the central shrine is often associated with the strongest proximity to divine presence. Roberts had arranged the program in a way all could “live again in the places and near places” where “epic events that resulted in the creation of this latter-day work” unfolded.¹⁰³ Recapitulating important moments related to Joseph Smith's work in bringing about the Book of Mormon record brought conference attendees closer to the spirit of the early Saints of the Church's restoration. While the Smith family farm, Hill Cumorah, and surrounding countryside were spiritually significant, the Sacred Grove became the conference's central shrine. There in the grove, one of “God's first temples,” participants drew closest to the divine as they partook of the Last Supper rite, prayed, and supplicated.¹⁰⁴ Having paid the physical price in self-sacrifice and given themselves to their calling in

101. “Mormon Head Prominent at Celebration,” September, 22, 1923; and Paul B. Cannon to G. Homer Durham, June 23, 1981, MS 6768, CHL. See also Nephi Anderson, “Nannie Tout in London,” *Young Woman's Journal* 15, no. 9 (September 1904): 401–4; “Preaching the Gospel in High Places,” *Improvement Era* 7, no. 7 (May 1904): 548; and Edward H. Anderson, “The Touts Sing on Ship,” *Improvement Era* 9, no. 9 (July 1906): 744.

102. “Mormon Delegates Assigned,” *Rochester Herald*, September 24, 1923.

103. Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 91.

104. “Program of the First General Conference,” 4–5.



Sabbath service in the Sacred Grove, Palmyra, New York, September 23, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

self-surrender, missionaries and leaders felt spiritually uplifted, renewed, and transformed in the place where the historical and contemporary churches met.

After a summer of faith and sacrifice, the elders and sisters were well attuned to the spiritual significance of spending that Sunday in the Sacred Grove. “We felt that we were truly on hallowed ground,” Elder Elton Taylor recalled. “I realized that this was one of the richest experiences of my life.” Connecting the meeting’s importance to the changing weather, he remembered that as the Latter-day Saints “sang the opening hymn, ‘O How Lovely Was the Morning,’ the sun broke through the clouds and glistened on the leaves of the trees. . . . The spirit of God was truly there in a rich outpouring.”¹⁰⁵ Elder George Hoggan wrote, “I felt a sense of spiritual light every moment.”¹⁰⁶ Apostle Rudger Clawson likewise recorded: “The weather was mild and clear and the sun came out bright and shone down through the trees. The spirit of peace, of thanksgiving and worship pervaded the congregation.”¹⁰⁷

105. Taylor, Oral History, 7.

106. Hoggan, Diary, September 23, 1923.

107. Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” 7; later republished as “Centennial Commemoration of the First Visit of the Angel Moroni to the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Liahona: The Elders’ Journal* 21, no. 8 (October 9, 1923): 139–42.

The meeting was significant in several ways. Roberts, hitherto barred by illness from much participation, felt well enough to ask President Grant's permission to open the meeting. The mission president first read a quote about the sanctity of the grove, then offered the meeting's invocation. "As he prayed," Apostle Smith recorded, "the congregation was moved by his eloquence and all felt the presence of the Spirit of the Lord."¹⁰⁸ Roberts's prayer left an indelible impression on the Church President, who noted, "I do not know when I have listened to a more inspiring prayer. I regret exceedingly that his prayer was not taken down in shorthand so that it could have been published."¹⁰⁹ Moreover, it was also the only meeting of the conference that included a liturgical rite: the sacrament was prepared, blessed, and passed to the entire congregation in the Sacred Grove.¹¹⁰ As missionaries passed the bread and water to attendees, people sat quietly, pondering the restored gospel in the hallowed woodland. It was both "solemn and impressive," according to Apostle Clawson.¹¹¹

After eating lunch as a group, the missionaries and members once again climbed the Hill Cumorah for a Sunday afternoon meeting made enjoyable by continued sunshine and dry weather. The gathering was attended by a congregation so large it was described as "a scene of interest rarely witnessed"; not only did missionaries and members crowd the hill, but over a thousand interested and curious passers-by stopped their automobiles and likewise scrambled up the slope.¹¹² Roberts, who had been "indisposed and unable to preside at all of the meetings," was

108. Smith, "Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission," 5–6.

109. Heber J. Grant, Journal, September 23, 1923, Heber J. Grant Papers.

110. Smith, "Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission," 5–6.

111. Clawson, "Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises," 7.

112. Apostle Clawson reported around 250 automobiles parked at the base of the hill, along with 1,250 people present at the afternoon public meeting, and that 1,000 cars "moved about the hill and along the main thoroughfare nearby." See Clawson, "Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises," 7; Talmage, Journal, September 23, 1923, Perry Special Collections; and Smith, "Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission," 7. Local newspaper reporters suggested higher numbers: "Mormon Delegates Assigned," *Rochester Herald*, September 24, 1923; and "Pilgrims Return by Train," *Rochester Herald*, September 24, 1923.

carefully carried up the Hill Cumorah by two of his young missionaries.¹¹³ After he offered an explanation of the Cumorah-Ramah flag waving from the summit flagpole, the attendees were led by mission secretary LeRoi C. Snow in the sacred “Hosanna” shout, a tradition normally reserved for temple dedications.¹¹⁴ Waving white handkerchiefs, all repeated the words “Hosanna, to God and the Lamb.” The event stirred onlookers, as the powerful throng of voices swept “across the valleys in a challenge of melody.”¹¹⁵

Afterwards, people gathered back near to the meadow brook passing through the Smith family farm to witness the baptism of three children, officiated by farm curator Willard Bean.¹¹⁶ The brook was enlarged enough from the week’s rain to accommodate the ordinances. Following the baptism, the day’s events concluded as 250 people crammed into the tent and a large crowd stood outside for a final evening meeting.¹¹⁷ When the tent’s seats were filled, a crowd hoping to hear the centennial’s final remarks formed outside. During the meeting, the three children previously baptized were confirmed Church members by President Grant and Apostles Clawson and Talmage. Apostle Smith also blessed a small baby in the congregation.¹¹⁸ The meeting culminated with remarks by LeRoi Snow and B. H. Roberts,¹¹⁹ followed by President Grant and his Apostolic cohort, who bid the visitors farewell.

Monday, September 24, ushered in the start of a new missionary work week. Elders and sisters from the Eastern States Mission—most extremely far removed from their proselyting areas—knew that they would soon return to their assigned conferences across twelve states. Unlike their journey to Cumorah, President Roberts made a concession for the return trip to the delight of all his missionaries: “At the end of the

113. “Last Meetings of Celebration of Centennial,” *Rochester Herald*, September 23, 1923.

114. Smith, “Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” 7.

115. “Last Meetings of Celebration of Centennial,” September 23, 1923.

116. Talmage, *Journal*, September 23, 1923.

117. Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” 7.

118. Talmage, *Journal*, September 23, 1923.

119. See B. H. Roberts, “Destruction of the Ancient Nations in America, The Book of Mormon Message to the Gentile Nations Occupying the Land,” *Improvement Era* 27, no. 4 (February 1924): 288–92.



Eastern States missionaries and Saints from Albany, New York, in front of the Smith frame home, Palmyra, New York, September 24, 1923. Courtesy CHL.

conference, we were happy that we were able to go home by train,” one elder recalled, “instead of having to retrace our steps by foot.”¹²⁰

Before returning to their areas, the elders and sisters gathered with their weakened mission president, President Grant, and the three Apostles for a final round of counsel. At the end of the meeting, many missionaries were issued new proselyting assignments.¹²¹ With the centennial conference complete, the missionaries bid farewell to one another, often signing one another’s conference programs as keepsakes.¹²² Heretofore isolated Church members also packed their camping tents back into their automobiles and left the Smith family farm for home.

120. Taylor, Oral History, 8.

121. “Mormon Delegates Assigned,” *Rochester Herald*, September 24, 1923.

122. See Hoggan’s annotated program, “Program of the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” Hoggan Papers.

The Legacy of the Palmyra Pilgrimage and Cumorah Commemoration

Following the conference, Roberts immediately returned to Utah by railcar to attend to his failing health. Though he had been unable to attend portions of it, the conference represented the culmination of months of Roberts's meticulous planning and preparation. To him, the centennial celebration was more than a series of meetings. He wrote in his autobiography it was "altogether a profitable and inspiring time . . . in which sociability and fellowship furnished important features."¹²³ Indeed, as Roberts aged, the Cumorah conference maintained a favorable position in his memory. Seven years later, he wrote that the event as a whole was "a successful and long to be remembered event by those in attendance."¹²⁴

Among the short-term consequences of the mission pilgrimage to Cumorah was its immediate spark of motivation; for missionaries returning to their areas, many were "naturally fired with zeal for the coming winter campaign," thoroughly "saturated with the thoughts expressed . . . by the leaders of the Church who were in attendance."¹²⁵ Not only that, but the proceedings provided spiritual nourishment and needed social interaction for local members in attendance. "We had a most spiritual three days," one visitor wrote in retrospect. "We shall always remember them and the miracle of the healing of President Roberts and the miracle of the elements."¹²⁶ Truly, it was "a spiritual feast" to all involved, leaving everyone "with their spirits high" on their return home.¹²⁷

In the weeks after the Cumorah commemoration, Church leaders returned home and settled back into their established routines. In Salt Lake City, preparations were in full swing for the upcoming general conference at the Tabernacle on Temple Square. But few Latter-day Saints had experienced firsthand the Cumorah conference of 1923. Aside from the attendance of four General Authorities, around two-hundred missionaries, and the regional members who made the journey to Upstate

123. Roberts, *Autobiography*, 232.

124. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6:523.

125. LeRoi C. Snow, "Eastern States Mission," *Liahona: The Elders' Journal* 21 (December 18, 1923): 246.

126. Hogan, *Ancestors of Carl Bingham Shipp and Annie May Newton*, 166.

127. Snow, "Eastern States Mission," 246–47.

New York, the event unfolded in a locale sequestered far from the general body of Church membership in the West.

Within two weeks of the celebration, Church members received news of the special gathering. At general conference, President Heber J. Grant felt impressed to relay his impressions of his recent experiences in Palmyra. That the prophet spent a significant portion of his general conference remarks expounding on his New York visit demonstrated the personal value he derived from the proceedings, and his desire for all to know something of the “remarkable” event. President Grant believed the proceedings marked a historic moment for the Church—not only looking back, but moving forward: “Each and every person who attended will look back to with that same pleasure and joy and satisfaction with which we look back upon the dedication of our temples, and the passing of other mile-stones, so to speak, in the history of this Church.”¹²⁸ Praise for the centennial celebration among his fellow Apostles was unanimous. Apostle Joseph Fielding Smith said through the conference “much good was accomplished, prejudice was removed and the truth received a firmer hold in the land where the Lord first revealed it.”¹²⁹ Likewise, Apostle Ruder Clawson felt the conference was far more significant than a routine commemoration; to him, it was a historic moment, memorable for its spiritual, as well as physical dimensions: “These memorial services mark an epoch in the history of the Church and were of such a character, solemnly and spiritually uplifting, as never to be forgotten by those who were in attendance.”¹³⁰

Roberts reflected on how the pilgrimage influenced the lives of his missionaries to his general conference audience. To him, their willing departure into the countryside without purse or scrip symbolized deep sacrifice and was a “great test of faith and patience and endurance.” Indeed, just as any religious journey forces the pilgrim to forsake social status, pay the price of discipleship, and remove him- or herself from daily life, the country work demanded wholehearted consecration and rededication to the service of God. This was embodied in their missionary motto: “A mission in the Eastern States means absolute consecration of one’s self to the service of God and fellow men; with

128. Grant, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 4–5.

129. Smith, “Minutes—the First General Conference of the Eastern States Mission,” 8, Joseph Fielding Smith papers.

130. Clawson, “Church Authorities Attend Commemoration Exercises,” 7.

all light-mindedness, folly and sin eliminated.”¹³¹ They “burned their bridges,” which, according to Roberts, involved a sacrificial abandonment of their past lives and embarkation into a new one.¹³² On their journey, his missionaries evinced the traits of true pilgrims. Their adoption of unique outfits, including their shared Cumorah pennant, identified them as joint-participants in a united cause. Their march through rural regions, sustained by their faith that they would be housed and fed along their journey, eventually stretched across hundreds of miles, culminating in their arrival in Upstate New York. While interaction with the divine along this journey was isolated to occasional acts of veneration, religious meetings, and conversation, the growing sense among missionaries was one of optimistic hope—hope that their sacrifices would be rewarded in a final reunion at Cumorah. Roberts watched “the development of this experiment” from afar, knowing they would all be amply rewarded in character and spiritual growth.¹³³ After recapitulating the coming forth of the Book of Mormon at his 1923 mission conference, Roberts testified that Mormon’s ancient abridgment was “the sublimest message ever delivered to the world.”¹³⁴

The 1923 Cumorah conference was a milestone because it signaled the climax of early twentieth-century Latter-day Saint identity renegotiation, including a strong reaffirmation of the Book of Mormon.¹³⁵ It foreshadowed subsequent developments in Church historical consciousness, pageantry, and memorialization.¹³⁶ According to the

131. Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 89.

132. Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 89.

133. Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 90.

134. Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 92.

135. Roberts summarized this feeling in his October 1923 conference address: “The great outstanding thing in the Book of Mormon is the fact of the visit of the Redeemer to the inhabitants of this western world, and the message of life and salvation that he delivered here; the Church which he brought into existence, the divine authority which he established here in the western world. This is what makes the Book of Mormon of so much importance—it is a new witness for God and Christ and the truth of the gospel.” See Roberts, in *Ninety-Fourth Semi-annual Conference*, 91.

136. Right before the conference, on September 17, 1923, the Church made a move to purchase the Inglis farm, and for the first time in its history owned a part of the Hill Cumorah. See Boone, “Man Raised Up,” 30–31. While President Grant’s predecessor, Joseph F. Smith, is often seen as the primary champion of Church historical sites in the early twentieth century, the Cumorah conference

Rochester Herald, the centennial celebration at Cumorah conveyed the “simplicity and directness of a Norse saga” and was “epic in implications and dramatic in content.”¹³⁷ It was at root a story of how hundreds of missionaries, members, and leaders spearheaded the modern Latter-day Saint image, strengthening their connection to the past as they marched into the future.

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was President Grant’s inaugural foray into the land acquisition that eventually led to complete ownership of the hill and the subsequent placement of monuments on it.

137. “Mormon Head Prominent at Celebration,” September 22, 1923.