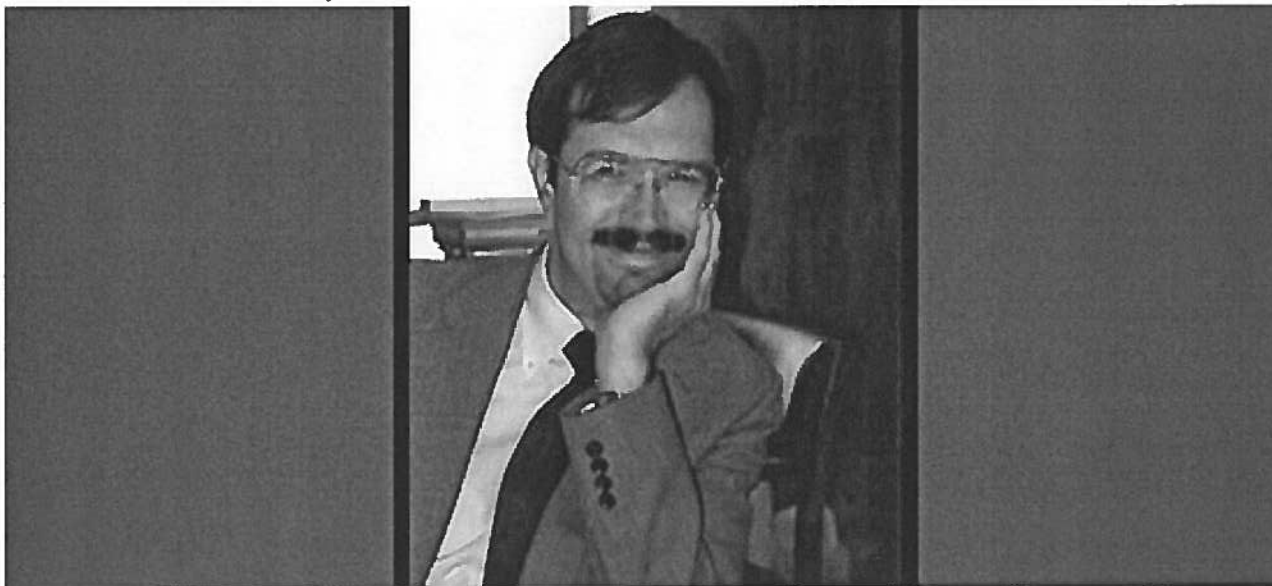


Farewell, Gordon Irving

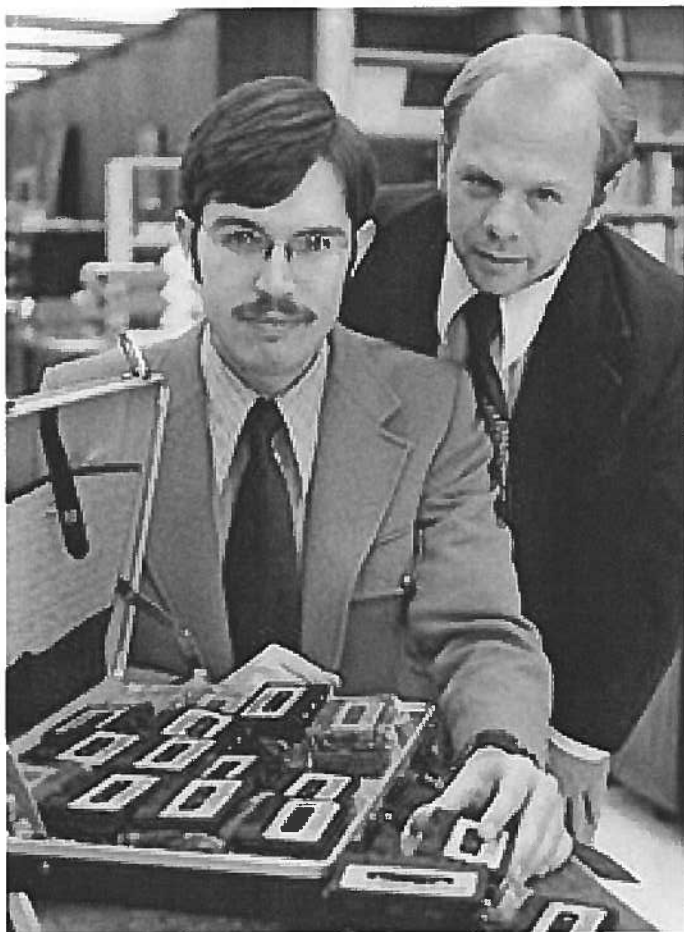
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Above: After a 1989 backpacking trip to King's Peak with Department colleagues.



At my retirement open house on August 27, someone asked what I've enjoyed most about my forty-three years with the Church History Department, and I said the association with the people involved. Left: Gordon Irving with oral history colleague, Bill Hartley, after an interviewing trip to Mexico City in 1974.

Having had time to think about it, that's not a bad answer, but it's an incomplete one, since I'd feel bad if that were the only positive take-away after so many years. For me, as I'm sure is true of most Department employees, my feelings about the work I've done and my sense of mission about my work are two other things I'm grateful for. Maybe I feel that way because, in spite of a certain amount of repetitiveness in what I've done day to day over the years, I always was learning something new and there has been a good deal of variety in the work I've been asked to do.

When I first started working here in 1972, I was assigned to help Assistant Church Historian Davis Bitton prepare what was published five years later as *Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies*, which, in our pre-digital age

was a printed listing of authors with a summary of what they had written about and where their personal records could be found—since the book sought to cover all the relevant LDS holdings of libraries nationwide. My job was to read and summarize all the works to be listed that had already appeared in print—which in those days largely involved the reading of published nineteenth-century journals and reminiscences—and to serve as editor and lead

indexer for the book.

When I started working here I suppose I believed—as one new employee told me fairly recently that he too had supposed (so I'm not the only one who thought this way)—that what professional historians do is (1) teach classes and (2) write books—and it was in fact the view of my bosses in 1972 that the young people they hired as helpers would move on to graduate school and then to teaching and writing. However, I'm still here in 2015, without having taught any college-level courses and without having written a single book.

Of signal importance to my future career path, the first year I was here, the Church historian and his two assistant historians decided the Historical Department should sponsor an oral history program, under the auspices of the research-and-writing division I was part of. Having been a missionary in South America only a couple of years earlier, I remember one day proposing in a staff meeting that I make a list of what materials the Historical Department had relating to Latin America, and I recall Church Historian Leonard Arrington telling me it would be okay to take a couple of hours some afternoon to do that. (I suppose that in 1972 the Historical Department's Latin American collection, other than the minute books and membership records of local units of the Church, could have been surveyed in a single afternoon—although it's also the case that I repeatedly heard Brother Arrington respond the same way to all sorts of research proposals, he having no doubt observed that research-and-writing projects have a tendency to go on far longer than anyone would have supposed.)

As an outgrowth, in some sense, of my proposal, I recorded my first oral history interview in October 1972 with Carlos Cifuentes, a Church leader I'd met in Chile and who came here for general conference, and after that my oral history project relating to Latin America did in fact go on for decades—although over time the subject matter of my oral histories shifted away from Latin American LDS history.

Interestingly, considering what Justin Bray has done in the past three or four years, the Church historian and his assistant historians in 1972 felt that at age twenty-four I was too young—or maybe too inexperienced—to interview General Authorities or other general Church officers, with the recording of oral histories with people like that being best handled by middle-aged assistant Church historians. So I interviewed former Latin American mission presidents and pioneer Church members from Mexico and other Latin American countries for the first five years, until it became clear to my bosses that they didn't have time to interview everyone who had a story worth capturing and that I had maybe shown some potential for interviewing the Church's senior leaders.

So in 1977 I interviewed my first General Authority, Elder A. Theodore Tuttle (1919-1986) of the First Quorum of the Seventy, who had just returned from presiding over an area on the west coast of South America. Since that time I've interviewed dozens, if not hundreds, of General Authorities, including all the recent members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve, some of them several times—which I've come to realize is a job that many faithful Latter-day Saints would "die for."

Since my first oral history in October 1972, I've recorded nearly thirteen hundred interview sessions with several hundred individuals, although, as I've already said, the focus of who was being interviewed shifted over time. Until the mid-1980s it was still pretty much people with a Latin American LDS tie of some kind, although sometimes I would be assigned by Historical Department executives to interview a person who didn't fit that profile—such as David Kennedy about his service as the First Presidency's international diplomatic representative or Wendell Ashton, the founding director of what is now the Church's public affairs program. Both those projects resulted in many interviews with the men involved (and speaking of men involved, it

was interesting that for a while I somehow became the Department's lead interviewer with regard to the sisters who served in the Young Women General Presidency), with such oral histories helping to develop my interest—as well as my expertise—with regard to the institutional history of the Church at its headquarters, which has turned out to be a major focus of my job in recent years.

I realize that oral histories are a different animal than the books I thought it was the job of professional historians to write—but the process of interviewing people and editing their interviews has resulted in thousands of pages of transcripts—including many book-length bodies of documentation—that more traditional research-and-writing historians can draw upon.

As the years passed, my focus shifted for a short time to interviewing Church leaders from the British Isles, and there was also a multi-year detour when I served as the catalog editor for the Church History Department's Archives Division. I still kept my hand in oral history work in a minor way, but those were years when oral history became identified as a tool to be used by the archives acquisitions staff generally, since the Department, at that time, no longer had a research-and-writing staff. In more recent years, the responsibility for recording oral histories with local Church leaders and members has migrated to the Global Support and Acquisitions Division.

Besides serving as catalog editor in the 1990s, my general assignments shifted in the direction of dealing with the unpublished Church corporate records produced here, in Salt Lake. Looking back, I can see that my oral history work, during the most recent fifteen years, was pushed, or perhaps steered, in a new direction when former Historical Department Executive Director Marlin Jensen volunteered my services to his colleague in the Seventy, Elder Bruce Hafen, who had agreed to write a biography of Elder Neal Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve (which appeared in 2002 as *A Disciple's Life*). Interviewing several dozen of Elder Maxwell's associates (as well as sitting down with Elder Maxwell himself nearly twenty times for interviews) gave me an increased cachet (or credibility) as a General Authority interviewer, during a time when I was also the archivist handling the records of the presiding quorums of the Church.

I moved on from the Maxwell project to interviewing Area Presidents returning from international assignments and Seventies who were leaving office, until that approach eventually gave way, after Elder Jensen returned to the Department as Church Historian and rRecorder, instituting a systematic annual plan for interviewing members of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, the Presidency of the Seventy, the Presiding Bishopric, and general auxiliary presidencies. (Interviewing such people had always seemed like a worthy objective, but I previously supposed they were too busy for us to bother them about documenting their history. So it was a pleasant surprise, when Elder Jensen opened the door for access to them, to discover that they were interested. although the busyness of their lives brought some not-very-surprising scheduling challenges. It is common to see a given interview appointment postponed several times, sometimes for months, before it actually takes place.)

While much of the work I have done in recent years will not be available anytime soon to scholars and lay members of the Church, due to confidentiality concerns, these years, as well as all the other years running back to 1972, have blessed me with opportunities that I would not trade for a career as a college professor or a writer of scholarly books and articles. While I certainly had no detailed plans for how I'd spend my professional life, it appears that somewhere up the line, someone did. I scarcely believe in coincidence any more.

As my career with the Church History Department wound down and succession plans for the future were developed, the responsibility I had for working with the archival records of the presiding quorums and their individual members passed to Richard Davis, while Justin Bray

came aboard to learn to be a General Authority interviewer and to take responsibility for carrying out the Department's annual oral history recording plan—balancing what he was doing with the needs and desires of the Global Support and Acquisitions staff. As those shifts have happened, I have had the chance to finish the editorial work on the many interviews I recorded during Justin's training years and to tie up older loose ends.

I want to close by saying that while the work assigned to me has provided a satisfying outlet for my limited creative historical skills, it has not been a work I have done alone. Besides the large number of people I met in the process of interviewing them, I also owe a great debt of gratitude to the numerous Church History Department staff members and missionaries whose contributions to my work have been indispensable—including a host of typists over the years, among them especially Karen Pyper and Ana María Coburn (who worked in Spanish), Jean Hyde, Cherie Best, and most recently Shannon Hanks—as well as oral history coordinator Joan Harding and people in all areas of the Department who provided technical and administrative support. To single out two colleagues who have contributed much, I am deeply grateful for the support and friendship of Richard Davis and Justin Bray. I also owe much to wonderful managers and directors such as Steve Sorensen, Alan Johnson, Mark Buchanan, and Keith Erikson—to mention only a few names from recent years—for supporting me in doing my job in a way I've felt good about and sometimes for running interference for me, even when I wasn't aware that I needed someone to do that. It takes a lot of people, many more than I've named here, to undergird any person's career in Church History, and I'm grateful for all of those who have touched my life.