

Church History: A Journey, Not a Destination

by Daniel Lewis | Feb 28, 2017 | Church History, Featured | 0 comments



Almost three years ago, I took a trip with my family to visit Church history sites across the country, from Utah to New York and back. We planned it carefully, before my oldest daughter left home for college and when my youngest would be old enough to appreciate it. It also happened that I was experiencing a transition in my faith and the ways that I thought about the Church. The following are my journal entries from the trip, transcribed as they were originally recorded. My oldest daughter is on a mission now and my youngest is a deacon. Many

things have changed since then, including my perspectives but the experiences are still as valid for me now as they were then.

July 6

The planning is over. We have fought through opposition as we have made our preparations. I have personally struggled with high anxiety and emotional turmoil, feelings of insecurity and depression but underneath it all, a certainty that we are doing the right thing. And, of course, an incorrigible sense of adventure and the signature Lewis insanity!

July 7

We arrived at the hotel 11:00 p.m. Nebraska time after a long but pleasant drive. We encountered heavy fog and monsoonal rains over the I-80 pass in Wyoming. (highest point on I-80, 9000 feet) and a glorious monument to Abraham Lincoln at the summit. 735 miles in a day! what would our ancestors have thought?

July 8

cloudy and overcast out of Nebraska and all across Iowa which made it quite humid but not too hot. We stopped in council Bluffs to visit the Winter Quarters Visitor Center, cemetery and Temple grounds. There was a show of paintings by Simon Dewey, depicting scenes from the Book of Mormon. A little too Thomas Kinkadee for my taste but still pretty cool. I recognized one of them from this months Ensign. We spent way too much time in there though because, by the time we pushed half-way across Illinois, to Starved Rock State Park, the campground was closed! (closed at 10:00, we arrived at 10:13) so we drove on to Murray Illinois, found a Comfort Inn and now we're about to crash for the night. In spite of the stress, the kids are in good spirits and their silliness is contagious. I really do love being with them. I can feel the Spirit of The Lord attending us and I have high expectations for many good memories.

July 9

We drove out of Illinois and on to Ohio. It is gently hilly with lots of corn and cows and classic farm houses spread across the lushly forested countryside. There are so many trees, it makes me think I've never seen a real forest! It even rivals Seattle for green. We stopped in Kirtland to visit the Temple and Visitors Center. It struck me how holy and sacred the temple grounds feel in spite of not being officially dedicated. Maybe the original dedication is still in effect? We plan to return to the Temple tomorrow since there are no tours today. I'd like to ask them (The Community of Christ- formerly The Reorganized Church) about Emma Smith. We toured the (Mormon) Church's Kirtland History Center where the original Newel K. Whitney store and home still stand, and they have re-constructed some other buildings such as the sawmill and ashery. We were led on the tour by a couple of well-intentioned and sincere sister missionaries who delivered a lot of good information, although some of it seemed a bit contrived to force spirituality rather than just letting it happen naturally. It was awesome to stand in the store where The Prophet Joseph and early apostles walked, to see the room where revelation recorded in the D&C was received and The School of the Prophets met. I was inspired that their great accomplishments were achieved in such common surroundings. Their dedication to their convictions made all the difference. We made it to the Geneva Campground on the shore of Lake Erie but had to drive back out, after setting up the tent, for dinner. (Dominoes) I can't believe the fireflies! they are so cool! No

description can replace the experience of seeing them in person. The bugs themselves are quite common looking, but oh! what they can do!

July 10

It rained just a little during the night. Just a little and we were under the trees so it wasn't too bad. We broke camp and headed back into town for breakfast. We picked up a few things at the local grocery store and met a wacky old guy who called us hippies and chatted us up the whole time we were in line. He was hilarious! He followed us out to the parking lot while his slightly embarrassed wife tried to get him to leave us alone. He gave Jones four shiny quarters.

We drove back to Kirtland for the Temple tour. The girl who led the tour was rather hipper than I would have expected. I guess I need to reconsider some of my pre-conceived notions. She was very knowledgeable and gave a nice tour. I asked about Emma Smith but she didn't know much. She recommended a book: "Emma Smith, Mormon Enigma." She invited us to sing "The Spirit of God" while we were in the temple with our group (mostly active LDS). The Community of Christ includes two verses that we don't sing, I wonder if they're original.

We left the Temple tour, still curious, and visited the Grandin building in Palmyra where the first edition of The Book of Mormon was printed. It was quite fascinating. We were able to participate in some of the activities involved in printing a letter-press book. Our guide was a sister missionary from Tonga who described the process and the roles that certain people played in the first printing of the book. I'm sure that Egbert B. Grandin didn't quite understand the magnitude of what he was involved in.

July 11

I am in the Sacred Grove where, nearly two hundred years ago, God and his Son visited a curious fourteen-year-old kid. The woods vibrate with energy they radiated. It is uncomfortably hot and mosquitoes are buzzing around looking for a meal, but overall it is peaceful. Sun filters through the leaves and birds chirp cheerfully above, just as they do everywhere. I am allergic to something that is making my right eye itch like crazy. The world rushes around. I can faintly hear the sound of traffic and the not-so-faint buzzing of the cicadas. The significance of a visit from Deity to the boy Joseph hasn't faded. I am here with my sweetheart, the kids are elsewhere, seeking their own experiences. There is no-one else I would rather be here with, we are joined in the hope that the sacred visit brought the possibility of change, redemption and eternal joy. I am struck by the things that are present here in the grove: beetles, mosquitoes, animals, pain, discomfort, all the trappings of mortality. There is peace here, spiritual confirmation and hope. I am also struck by what is not present: ready answers, full enlightenment, certain knowledge.

We left the grove to visit the Smith Family Farm, the log home and the frame house. The frame house is 80% original but the log home is re-constructed on the original site with materials salvaged from other old cabins. It is quite short because of some height tax. I am not short and I whacked my head on the way out, hard enough that I saw stars and decided to bleed. There is a tree in the yard that the Smiths planted when Alvin died. It's so strange to have real mental pictures to go with all the stories now.

July 13

After the Smith Farm, we drove past the Palmyra Temple which is specifically designed to overlook the Sacred Grove. It is a smaller temple but very cozy, in a great location. We then drove out to the Whitmer Farm where the Church was originally organized. President Kimball had a chapel built there on the site in 1980, which includes a visitors center. Our guide was a

very sweet, very enthusiastic older lady. Her perspective was very refreshing. As we have been on several tours, I am slightly bothered by scripted tour guides that seemed to be pushing us toward a foregone conclusion rather than presenting the information and letting us reach our own. There was none of that with her. We're staying with very gracious friends here in New York that used to be our next-door-neighbors. Her eccentric parents have kept us entertained and her Dad made us egg salad sandwiches for the road.

We drove down to what used to be Harmony Pennsylvania, where Emma's parents lived, where Joseph met Emma, the work of translation began, and the Priesthood was restored on the bank of the Susquehanna River. Harmony Township has since been split into four different townships. The river was very low but it is such a beautiful and peaceful area. We found a turtle on the path and a tiny frog by the water. I gathered a few stones from the river for souvenirs. We got on I-70 going the wrong direction in Pennsylvania for about an hour so we didn't get as far as we planned and missed our campsite again. These toll roads can be so confusing! The hotels through most of Ohio were full of gas and oil workers. We found one in Columbus and just rolled in, it's 2:30 a.m. We are pooped!

July 14

Most of these history sites have a sacred feeling and an obvious reverence about them, but it was especially strong at Carthage. I could sense the importance of this site where Joseph Died for his beliefs. How very strange to stand in the very room, to see and touch the bullet holes. I collected a leaf from the ginkgo tree outside the jail.

We drove on to Nauvoo which was much bigger than I imagined. About half of the historic sites are owned by The Community of Christ. We visited the Temple which was astounding, majestic, Beautiful. After driving around a bit, we visited the Land Records Office to find out where some of our ancestors lived. I researched Isaac C. Haight and Howard Coray. Jenn looked up MacClellan, Rust and Day. We discovered that the Haight and Rusts were neighbors! I wonder what they thought when we were married? We drove on to Missouri where we stayed the night with my sister and her family.

July 15

After a late start, we drove to Independence and visited the Liberty Jail site. It is the least impressive so far They've built an enclosure around the original building and set up a vignette depicting Joseph there. It is just too contrived. The visitors center was better,, we got Sister Wright as our guide and we've all agreed, she is our fave.

After the Jail we went to the museum at The Community off Christ Temple. It is very cool! they have many artifacts from early Church history Like Joseph's military uniform and his shaving kit. They also have portraits of their Prophets, including some women. Though they were close to closing time, they were very accommodating and I am glad we had the chance to go there. We camped in Kansas.

July 16

Hot! I'm sure it didn't get below 80 degrees all night. We didn't sleep much and just drove on through Kansas and Colorado to stay with my youngest sister and her family in Grand Junction. We had planned to camp in the Rockies but torrential rains on the Denver side prevented us. There were three accidents on the down-hill side including a haz-mat clean-up in a tunnel which caused significant delays. We had a short visit, a nice rest, left by 11:00 home by 4:00, put away and cleaned up, whew!