

Episode 31

Legacy EARLY SALT LAKE CITY

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NATHAN WRIGHT: One of the most remarkable aspects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is its unique history. Throughout the world great stories from faithful church members have only added to that history. This program shares some of these incredible stories of faith, perseverance, hope, and inspiration. You're listening to Legacy. I'm your host, Nathan Wright.

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NATHAN WRIGHT: Today on Legacy, we are talking with Randy Dixon who has been on a previous episode where we talked about the great tabernacle here in Salt Lake City. Today, we brought Randy back to talk about the early Salt Lake valley, and some of the structures that have survived and those that haven't survived. It's just an interesting time. First off, Randy, why don't you give us an overview of your background and what you like to do.

RANDY DIXON: I've worked for the Church in the Church History department since 1975 and while there I've been able to work with a lot of material relating to Salt Lake City. For many years I have cataloged photographs, including many of the city and in doing that I have learned a lot about the beginnings of the city and the buildings erected. I have always looked for information down that line because I have been interested in architecture.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Tell us what brought you to the historical department, your educational background, and so forth.

RANDY DIXON: Since a young boy I was interested in history. I attended Ricks College and Brigham Young University and got a degree in history. Shortly after that I was able to get a job at the Church Historical Department as it was called then and that for me that was everything I ever wanted because of my interest in church history. It has been great to be able to work there for all these years in an area that I have really enjoyed. It's been a great experience.

NATHAN WRIGHT: What are some of the specific tasks you have done for the department, and what brought you this great interest in the Salt Lake valley?

RANDY DIXON: In looking back, I remember my father served a mission in the 30's in Texas. He brought home a picture book of Salt Lake City that was used, I think, as kind of a missionary tool. It was a picture book of Church history with a lot of pictures of Salt Lake City. So I remember using that as I was growing up and was interested in the buildings pictured-- the Salt Lake Theatre, the Social Hall, the Temple, and the Tabernacle. So I grew up being fascinated with that. And since I lived in Idaho, it wasn't until I was much older

that I actually came to Salt Lake. So it was this book that actually got me interested in these things. So when I came to Salt Lake, I continued that and built on it over the years.

NATHAN WRIGHT: What are some of the things you have done for the historical department?

RANDY DIXON: When I first started working there, I was a cataloguer. I catalogued a lot of records of the Church--records of wards and stakes, and for many years I worked cataloguing photographs. That was particularly interesting. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and you can learn so much looking at a photograph. For many years that was my task, and I delighted in that. Over the years I have also worked in public service helping patrons that come in doing research. My background helped in that also. Recently, I have been working with the churches media team in ways of sharing the collection more broadly via the web and other new technologies. That's my current assignment.

NATHAN WRIGHT: What did Brigham Young and the original pioneers see when they saw the valley? There are some accounts of cheek-high grass and maybe some trees along the steam. What did they really see when they first got here?

RANDY DIXON: When I grew up I grew up with the story of the Salt Lake valley being this barren, desert. But in study and researching the primary materials--diaries, it becomes clear that the valley was barren. The saint's were used to the East where there were many more trees and much more foliage than what we have out here. It was, in a way, barren to them compared to what they were used to. When they first came in, they camped on the city side, July 23. Brigham Young had stayed back because he had been ill. They found a valley that had some trees along the creeks. They mention to have to cut down the grass in order to prepare for plowing. They also mentioned about how some of their cattle were lost, but were really just hidden by the grass. The valley had some very fertile parts, and sometimes they had to avoid the marshy areas because they couldn't travel through that. It was quite a bit different than the story that I grew up with. But again, they were used to a very different area in the Eastern states, and those that came from Europe too, this was much different. But we shouldn't think of it as being sagebrush flat, although, of course, there was sagebrush in the area--but not necessarily right along the creeks and the valley.

NATHAN WRIGHT: We've all heard that they immediately began plowing and planting crops, etc. Whether that is true or not, I don't know. How soon did they actually start laying out the city of Salt Lake City that we know today?

RANDY DIXON: The first day they arrived, on the 23 of July, they started plowing and preparing for crops. They started preparing to irrigate, also. The first days and weeks were involved in doing that. But Brigham Young very soon chose a spot for the temple and a spot to survey the city from--the corner of the temple block. So within a week or so, they began surveying the city into ten acre blocks with the wide streets. They knew that they needed to accomplish in the next few weeks was preparing what they could do that Fall because Brigham Young and many of the group went back to Winter Quarters. They surveyed and started preparing a place for those who stayed the winter. They prepared an area to

build a fort--the area which is now Pioneer Park. They moved very quickly ahead to accomplish what they needed to do.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So that may come as a surprise that the first structure built was a fort. Is that correct?

RANDY DIXON: Probably the very first structure was a bowery that was built by members of the Mormon Battalion which was basically a shade post with branches over the top so they could meet. Of course, this was July and we know how hot it is in July in Salt Lake. That was the first building, but was a temporary building. It was built on what is now Temple Square. But they soon began building the fort which entailed making adobe bricks. The fort was made up of three walls of adobe and one wall was made up of log cabins that made the fourth side of the fort. Leaning against this wall, they built adobe cabins along the three sides of the fort.

NATHAN WRIGHT: We are all familiar with the tabernacle and it got completed in 1867, as I recall. What are some of the larger structures they started on relatively soon?

RANDY DIXON: The first building of a public nature and more of a permanent nature they started on was the Council House. In fact, they chose the site in '47 but they didn't start on the actual building until '48. This building was located just south of Temple Square of what is now South Temple and Main Street. This building was made of sandstone and adobe, and was built as the name indicates, a Council House--as a place where they held meetings. They had offices. The territorial legislature met there, the city council had meetings there. It was kind of a multipurpose building. As time went on, different functions that were held in there went out to other buildings which house those functions such as City Hall was built and the Endowment House was built for temple ordinances that were originally performed in the Council House. It was really the focus of Salt Lake's earliest history was in that building.

NATHAN WRIGHT: As the city begins to grow, what was the life like really in the Salt Lake valley in those early years for just the regular person who lived there?

RANDY DIXON: For someone first coming in, the first thing they would need to do is acquire some property. For those coming in the earliest years, the property was distributed as people needed it.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Did they have to purchase it or was it just...

RANDY DIXON: Yes, there was a fee, a filing fee, but the lots were actually free. They would pay the county recorder so much to file. Very soon the lots were all distributed and so those coming in and wanting to stay in Salt Lake would actually have to purchase property. Very soon the property started turning over. People would charge for the property, lots were divided up. If the person wanted property to farm, there was a section called 'a big field' that was south of 9th south that was designated as a farming area. So often the family would have a lot in the city and a farming lot south of that, and they would travel back and forth to farm their property. They would build a house on their city lot as they had means. At first, those who came early--those who had houses in the fort, (log houses) they would often disassemble it and move it onto their lot and use that until they were able to build a more permanent dwelling. Then as time went on and were able

financially, they would build a larger home maybe out of adobe or later out of brick. Often these old log houses were put in the back yard as a shed or for other uses. The log house that we all know about is on display next to the Church Museum was one of the log houses from the fort that was moved to a lot north of Temple Square and eventually became kind of a potting shed in the back yard of the property. Then it was acquired by the Church and became a museum exhibit.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Just as a reminder for our listeners, that structure sits between the Family History Library and the Church Museum. Anybody can visit it. It is quite unique and quite quaint. Are there any other original structures--I don't know what you consider original--maybe the first ten years of the people being here that exist still?

RANDY DIXON: There are very few. The Council House that is described burned down in 1883, one of the largest fires up to that date in Salt Lake City. It was completely destroyed. The other buildings that survived from that early period--of course, the Beehive House where Brigham Young lived; the Lion House where his families were located. There are a couple of log homes that still exist in the city that date from that early period. And scattered around the city there are other adobe houses--often they have been added on to or you would not recognize them as pioneer homes because of all of the remodeling. So scattered around there are quite a few adobe houses. Of course, every year there are fewer as the city grows and there is redevelopment.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So from the history of Nauvoo we hear about how people passed the time with dances and entertainment and whatever else. Did that follow on with this tradition in Salt Lake City? What type of things did people do for entertainment in the Salt Lake valley in the early years? Any idea?

RANDY DIXON: Early on, they looked for ways to entertain them as they had in Nauvoo. One of the first structures on Temple Square was the Bowery that was built. This is different from the one I mentioned earlier. There was one in 1849 that was built, and it very soon was used as a theatre besides having Sunday meetings there and other meetings during the week. And very soon the Social Hall was built on State Street which was used both for plays but mostly for dances and parties. You can imagine in those days, without the kind of entertainment we have today, they would be looking for ways to break the monotony of labor and would look for ways to entertain themselves. Social Hall is one of the very earliest buildings built. But even before that, there was a bath house built at the Warm Springs north of town and it was used for parties and dances. So from very early on people were seeking to entertain themselves.

NATHAN WRIGHT: During these early years, the wars that the United States were involved with--Spanish American, Civil War etc.--how did that affect people back here in Utah? Would it have affected their lives in a major way?

RANDY DIXON: The earliest war, let's say the Civil War, even though we were so far away from the United States then, we were impacted in Utah. The army of soldiers was sent here and they set up Camp Douglas, later Fort Douglas, on the East Bench to monitor the Mormons. The fact that there were soldiers in Salt Lake and earlier such as Johnson's Army which came out and made a big change for Salt Lake because it was then they

started having a police force in Salt Lake. As time went on, you mentioned the Spanish American War; Salt Lake was pretty developed and integrated into America as a whole. The impact was probably similar to what it was in other parts of the country where certain people joined the army and served in those wars. When the war was over, there was a big celebration in Salt Lake--a big parade down Main Street. They had decorations, they had an arch which was built over the street and so like most Americans the victory was celebrated. The impact on the church was not as much as in earlier pioneer times.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Did the impact of the railroad come near this same time or was it a little bit after?

RANDY DIXON: The railroad came to Utah in 1869. It did have a lot of impact because prior to that immigrants coming to Utah from Europe and elsewhere would have to come by ox team. And so the fact that they could get on a train and come all the way to Utah and soon after Salt Lake was connected to Ogden by railroads. Then they could make their trip from the East in just a few days and the people could travel much more easily but more than that it was easier to get building materials and furniture and all sorts of things delivered to Utah. Before the railroad, it would have taken great effort hauling all of the material across on wagons and so this was a big impact. Another impact would be on architecture. Before the railroad, the buildings were mainly built of adobe and stone and wood. But after the railroad they could bring in all sorts of materials. One material was cast iron that was used for a building material for façades of stores, buildings and it immediately an obvious change in Salt Lake City. For example, Zions Cooperative Mercantile Institutions, ZCMI, built a new store of cast iron that could easily be assembled. Before, they would have to laboriously build out of stone. So it was a kind of prefabricated building. That was one of the many buildings that were built out of this cast iron which was shipped in from St. Louis or from other places. So buildings got higher, went up faster--goods came in that they didn't have before and as a result, of course, there was some fear that this would change the society here. The result was the organization of ZCMI as a cooperative movement to try and maintain the economics here so we wouldn't be overwhelmed by what the railroad brought.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So local leaders knew that the railroad was coming, and that there were most likely be changes. Did they make any physical preparation like extra housing or more hotels or...?

RANDY DIXON: I think it developed more on a free market basis. Entrepreneurs knew that things were going to change. There were new hotels built, there were new stores, and the Church itself, as I understand it, was not really involved in it that much except in the cooperative businesses. But at the same time there were many other businesses that were not church related that were individually owned. Business men from all over came to Utah and we had the development of mining. So, it was only for a few years that Utah was really isolated and merchants came with a couple of years and set up stores. If we think of early Salt Lake as being just a very isolated society, it was for a short time, but very soon national influences were very prominent.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So that short time would have been 15-20 years?

RANDY DIXON: Right!

NATHAN WRIGHT: What needed to change in Utah for it to become a State to be accepted into the Union?

RANDY DIXON: The biggest obstacle was polygamy because the state had grown economically in the number of people. Areas that were much less developed than Utah became states and so it was the fact of polygamy that kept us out of the Union for so long.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So once that took place, did it change life in Utah much--becoming a state?

RANDY DIXON: Becoming a State, if you look at it just the way society was, I don't see that there was that much different. The '90's, the time of a lot of economic growth and also a time of depression--the economic collapse. I think the main difference was just that instead of having a governor that was appointed; we could elect our own officials. That was probably the main change. That brought up a lot of political questions about who should have influence who should be elected, what groups should have power, and by that time there were a lot of non Mormons in Utah and they had a political party and so it is a very complex time.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Thank you for taking a shot for me. With the influx of people which brought non Mormons to the area, how soon did other churches start going up? Was it within that 20-year period or so?

RANDY DIXON: Even before the railroad came, a lot of the merchants that came to Utah were non Mormons. They were here from almost the beginning. They certainly served an important purpose to bring goods to Utah and to provide those goods and provide employment. Quite early on there were religious groups too. For a while there was a building built by the Congregational Church called the Independence Hall. It was built in the 1860's before the railroad, and it was used by many different religious groups to meet in. I'm sure it was named as a way of showing that they were separate from the Mormons. But even while Brigham Young was still alive, several important churches were built in Salt Lake. St. Mary's was built by the Catholic Church. In fact, it was built just a block and a half away from the Beehive House. The Episcopal Church built St. Mark's Cathedral. In the 1870's the Methodists Episcopal Church built a large building on 3rd South. So these were buildings that were prominent in the community and were handsome stone structures. It showed how large the non Mormon population was and that they had the resources to build these buildings.

RANDY DIXON: Some of the ones that you have mentioned and others have long histories are just beautiful, and have a very important part in the history of Salt Lake City. Let's talk about some of your very favorite structures. You say you love architecture. What are some of your favorite buildings in Salt Lake?--standing and not standing.

RANDY DIXON: I think the most unique and most interesting building is the Tabernacle because it is so unusual. It was built in a time before the railroad came, and it was very innovative and it kind of showed how you can take what you have and build something unique even though you don't have great resources. Using the structure that was designed for bridges to roof the building and using metal that had been used for bolts in other buildings or horse shoes or other things that they used to tie the roof together. It is just a really unique building. I would say that is my favorite building. Many of the early buildings no longer

exist. There were many stores on Main Street that were built in the popular styles of the time--Greek Revival buildings in Italian eight style stone buildings. The church ward houses around the city and in those days they were mostly used for school houses, but many of them were very handsome buildings that wouldn't necessarily look like a meeting house today. The Salt Lake temple, of course, is another amazing building built out of granite that shows the great permanence and showing the foresight of Brigham Young in building such a large, complicated building starting it when the resources were almost nonexistent. Of course, that explains why the building took so long to erect. Over the generations there were many other amazing buildings that haven't survived such as the buildings of the LDS University that used to stand on the block where the Church Office Building is. A beautiful building designed by Brigham Young's son--the Bishop's Building, a really detailed and wonderful building. Many of these were cleared to build the buildings that we have today on the block east of the Temple.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Which is how it happens.

RANDY DIXON: As the city grows, I'm one that loves to preserve old buildings. But I realize that times change, and it is one thing for a small city to preserve its buildings; but as the city grows the needs change. Yesterday I was giving a tour for some of our department employees. We walked around the outside of Temple Square, and I talked about the buildings that used to be around Temple Square. I had to take pictures to show because most of the buildings are gone. Some of them, I think, could have been preserved because they were of such high quality and built so well. Others were the kind of buildings that were of minor importance or built in more or a temporary way. But it is amazing what is no longer there! People are amazed of what used to be around Temple Square.

NATHAN WRIGHT: I seem to recall as a child going into a museum on the southeast side of Temple Square. Was that one razed for the South Visitor's Center or when did that actually take place?

RANDY DIXON: It was. It was the Bureau of Information on the South side of Temple Square. It was started in 1904, I believe, the first part of it, and then it was enlarged over the years and then eventually a museum was built on the east end of it. Also, near it was the log cabin we talked about earlier. It was displayed just outside of the museum. That was all razed in the mid '70's for the Visitor's Center that is there now. The new museum was built west of Temple Square where the log cabin is and a lot of the artifacts of the old museum.

NATHAN WRIGHT: One of my favorite structures on Temple Square is the Assembly Hall. Can you give us a background on why that building was built?

RANDY DIXON: The Assembly Hall was built on the side of the old Tabernacle which had been built by Brigham Young and opened in 1852. It was the major assembly place in Salt Lake until the new Tabernacle was built. It had been built as more of a temporary building anticipating a larger tabernacle would be built. So after the new Tabernacle was built, in fact one of the last things Brigham Young did before his death, was to plan the Assembly Hall, which in the earliest stages was called the "new tabernacle," which is kind of confusing if you are not familiar with all of the terminology. He had the old Tabernacle demolished with plans for the new building to be built. When it was originally built, the Tabernacle itself was not heated in the winter because of its size. During the winter they

would hold meetings in smaller buildings. When the Assembly Hall was built as a place to house these meetings during cold weather, it was because it was heated and it was originally built as the Tabernacle for the Salt Lake Stake which covered the entire Salt Lake Valley in those days. It is still used today for the Salt Lake Stake and other downtown stakes. But it was a really different style, of course, than what the other buildings had been and represented what was popular in the late 1870's and is a much more religious building than the old Tabernacle and these other pioneer buildings.

NATHAN WRIGHT: One of the features on the Assembly Hall is one of the spires on the north side has a flat top that used to be a chimney for the heat that you were talking about.

RANDY DIXON: Right. There is one on either side of the building that used to be chimneys. The building was heated because it was more compact.

NATHAN WRIGHT: A question that I have wondered over the years--how many times have Salt Lake City had a trolley system? We have one now that is called the TRAX and goes from Salt Lake to about 100 south, and there have been trolley's in the past, as I understand.

RANDY DIXON: Right. When Brigham Young was still President of the Church, I bring him up because it is a way of designating a time period, the city had a trolley system that was mule cars or the cars were hauled by mules at first. They went from different designated streets. One line went from the Warm Springs north of town and the mules were initially housed in one of Brigham Young's barns. Over time, the mule cars were replaced by street cars that were electric cars in the 1880's and then over the years that was expanded. We had a lot of street car suburbs in Salt Lake to the south and other directions depending on the street cars and that's why the city grew because people could ride the street cars and those continued clear up into the 1940's.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So where does Trolley Square, the building that is on 7th East and 4th South fall into here?

RANDY DIXON: The Trolley Square originally housed the street car system. It was built around 1910 to house the street railway system and was used for that until the 1940's or '50's. By then the automobile had become so dominant that the street cars were discontinued. At the same time, there was also the Bamburger Railroad which ran--interurban which ran between cities--and went north and south, I believe. I'm not sure of the extent of the Bamburger Railroad. But today the Bamburger Railroad has basically been recreated with the Front Runner train system. The light rail system, the TRAX system, is also kind of an interurban system. But Salt Lake City is also planning to add another street car system to the city that will run with TRAX or the light rail around and kind of loop around downtown and close area. So we are basically going back to a system we had decades ago, and it just shows how things kind of go around.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So Salt Lake is in the middle of a huge downtown development at this point. Do you see any impact on the history of Salt Lake City based on this development?

RANDY DIXON: One aspect of it that I think is quite interesting is the new mall is going to be called City Creek Center. Originally the City was put here where it is because it was along City Creek because it had a lot of water and it was a good site for a city. Over the years, City

Creek, while its water was appreciated, the Creek itself was buried in a pipe under North Temple street and most people had no idea that it even existed until 1983 when because of the high run off the Creek made itself known again by flooding and (State Street River) water had to be diverted down State Street and really brought back to people's consciousness the fact that the Creek existed. Since then, the City has in different ways used the creek. There's a water feature that runs now down North Temple in front of the Church History museum. In front of the Conference Center, the city would like to extend that to the Jordan River through other parts of the city. The City Creek Park has been extended down from Memory Grove and opened up the creek. So I think because of this high profile, people appreciate the Creek more. The fact that the mall is being named after City Creek is bringing us back to our roots of being founded on this Creek. Through the mall there will be representations of the Creek--water features throughout the structure. That would represent what the creek would be like if it was really a Creek.

NATHAN WRIGHT: This has really been a fun discussion. Is there anything else you would like to share with the listeners about the history of Salt Lake or its architecture?

RANDY DIXON: One thing about Salt Lake--I think from the beginning Salt Lake has even though it was founded as a Mormon community, we've always had the close ties to the rest of the country. The style of our buildings reflects the styles of the buildings in the rest of the country. There's not really a unique Mormon architecture. The Council House looked like Midwest courthouses. The Salt Lake Temple in various aspects represents the gothic style which is popular all across the United States and Europe. The only really unique building seems to be the Tabernacle. Our stores and hotels represent what was popular around the country. To me that shows a connection and the continuity with the rest of the United States and in some ways Europe. That has continued to the present. I was recently in Denver, and I realized how in some ways we have similarities with Denver and other cities on a much smaller scale, of course. One thing that makes us really unique is the setting at the foot of Ensign Peak and surrounded by mountains and our creeks. It's just a wonderful setting for a city.

NATHAN WRIGHT: We've been talking with Randy Dixon today, a church history employee of 35 years--a great admirer of Salt Lake City. Thank you very much for being with us.

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