

So They Will Know

# Their Heritage

By Don L. Searle

Church Magazines

**R**angi Parker didn't start out to be a historian. She was a well-known entertainer in her native New Zealand. But an unrelenting feeling that she needed to help preserve the history of her Maori people led her to develop a historical archive of great value to her country—a work for which the Queen of England has honored her.

Sister Parker has spent the past 20-plus years gathering the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints among the Maori because, she says, “our generation of young people need to know who they are.”

She was concerned that younger members of the Church might not know about or understand the depth of faith shown by Maori great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents in accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The history she has been permitted to collect “is very sacred, and very special for the whole of the country,” Sister

PHOTO OF RANGI PARKER BY DON SEARLE; ALL OTHER PHOTOS ARE FROM THE RANGI PARKER COLLECTION







Parker says. “I see the positive things it will help the people of this generation to know about their ancestors.”

While Maori transmitted their history orally, missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who worked among them wrote things down and took photographs. What Rangi Parker has collected is the story of the work of LDS missionaries among the Maori, as told in the missionaries’ journal accounts and letters. She has also made audio and video recordings



of memories from many former missionaries who are still living.

Some of those recordings made an important cultural contribution because the former missionaries were able to speak and bear their testimonies in classic Maori—a more formal language that is no longer taught. The missionaries had learned it from older Maori decades ago while working in New Zealand.

Rangi Parker’s interest in the history of her Maori people began in the early 1970s, when she still had young children at home. But she turned to historical research in earnest in the mid-1980s, after her children were grown and after a serious automobile accident left her with time to contemplate this history’s importance.

The items she collected include journals, correspondence, other documents, photographs, and a bit of amateur movie film. There are audiotapes of talks by important individuals and of music by local choirs, as well as the videotaped reminiscences by former missionaries. There are also a number of

**Photos in Rangi Parker’s collection help sketch out history of the Church in New Zealand, including the influence of leaders like Elder Matthew Cowley (top left, with two New Zealanders). The Maori knew him as a missionary, as a mission president, and as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.**







artifacts—hand-decorated or hand-woven ceremonial items—that may have been given as gifts to missionaries decades ago and that have now been donated to Sister Parker’s archive by their families.

Much of the material she has gathered was produced by missionaries before 1950. Some of the valuable items also came from labor missionaries who helped build the temple in Hamilton, New Zealand, and the nearby institution that became the Church

College of New Zealand.

Many of the items Sister Parker collected are tied to Elder Matthew Cowley (1897–1953) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who spent many years among the Maori and was beloved by them and by Sister Parker. As a baby, she was given a name and a blessing by Elder Cowley.

She has made several trips to the United States in connection with her historical work, and almost every time someone has approached her offering to donate a historical item of some kind to her archive.

In 2008, Sister Parker donated a one-terabyte computer hard drive full of information she had collected to the Church History Department. She also has donated copies of original documents from her archive to the Church History Department, and in turn the department has given

her copies of other documents for her archive in New Zealand.







## GATHERING CHURCH HISTORY IN YOUR AREA

Steve Olsen, senior historic sites curator in the Church History Department, says it would be helpful to have Church members all over the world helping locate Church history documents, photographs, or artifacts for the department. Such local and regional efforts could become a major part of the gathering of Church history in the future.

Chad Orton, an archivist in the Church History Department, says, “We really can’t do what we have been asked to do in the scriptures—document the history of the Church—without the members letting us know what they have.”

If you have or know of items that help establish the history of the Church in your area, contact the Church History Department at [lds.org/churchhistory/donations](http://lds.org/churchhistory/donations) to make them aware of the items. Church history staff will be glad to visit with you about the best way to document and preserve, or to donate historical items, Brother Orton says. The participation of local members is vital because they know the people, events, and items that are significant to the history of the Church in their area.



Sister Parker’s work is “extraordinary. It is one of the finest collections in the world on local Church history, and she’s done it largely by herself,” says Steve Olsen, senior historic sites curator in the Church History Department. “What I’d love to do is stimulate similar initiatives by Latter-day Saints all over the world.” (See accompanying article above.)

Others outside the Church also recognize the value of her work. A national television network in New Zealand has aired three documentaries drawing on the history Sister Parker has collected. In 2008, she was awarded the Queen’s Service Medal; she was among those included on the annual Queen’s Birthday Honours List. She was nominated for the award by the member of the New Zealand parliament

representing her area, and the nomination was supported by an executive of the television production company with which she worked.

“The history that the missionaries have kept is amazing with these photographs and journal entries,” she says. “It’s something that has excited me since I started 20 years ago, and still excites me because of the historical value of it all.” ■

