

MY ADOPTED PIONEER ANCESTORS

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By Cynthia Woo

Over the past several years, I have enjoyed making trips to visit Church history sites in the midwestern United States. The first time I saw some of these sites was as an investigator in December 1997. I had driven from California in the winter because I wanted to know more about these Mormons I was learning about from the missionaries.

I had no family in the Church and no ties to anyone who had lived in Kirtland, Ohio, or in Far West, Missouri. Nor was I related to anyone who had crossed the Mississippi River to escape persecution or who had camped at Council Bluffs, Iowa. During those pioneer times, my ancestors came from the opposite direction, traveling east, and may have helped lay the railroad tracks from California to Promontory Point in what is now the state of Utah.

I can still recall little details from my first trip to Church history sites.

Nauvoo, Illinois

My first view of Nauvoo was after dark, when I saw the grassy expanse where the original Nauvoo Temple stood. This was about a year before President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008) announced that the temple would be rebuilt. I walked around in sub-freezing temperatures to look at the engraved stone exhibits and the sunstone that was once a part of the temple.

I loved walking around historic Nauvoo on those cold, snowy days and seeing how the city looked in the 1840s. I could imagine what life was like then. I especially liked seeing the graves of the Prophet Joseph Smith, his wife Emma, and his brother Hyrum. I felt the Spirit as I read some of the hundreds of pioneer names inscribed on the walls of a circular monument at Parley's Landing. I wondered how the Saints felt when they bade farewell to the temple and entrusted themselves and all they owned to God as they crossed the frozen river that He had miraculously provided.





Carthage Jail

I sat in my car outside Carthage Jail for about 10 minutes after the tour, gathering my thoughts. I was the only visitor on the tour that frigid day, and the missionary guides asked me the question I was accustomed to hearing: “Are you a member of our church?” My usual answer was that I was investigating and still learning. This time my reply was different but came out in a totally natural way. “Not yet,” I said. Obviously I still didn’t know if I would become a member, but Heavenly Father did.

Winter Quarters Cemetery

Standing in the cold of the cemetery at Winter Quarters with the statue of forlorn parents who had to bury their child, I shed tears for the hundreds of people who left Nauvoo but died before they reached Zion.



Crossing the Plains

I crossed Iowa, Nebraska, and Wyoming in a field of white snow, and crosswinds buffeted the car. I had adequate food and fuel, along with radio weather reports and other conveniences the pioneers never had. I thought of their sacrifices.

An Heir of Pioneer Sacrifices

Now as a Latter-day Saint myself, when I visit Church history sites I honor the pioneers as a beneficiary and an heir to their sacrifices and suffering. I owe them an eternal debt of gratitude. Because of the grace of my Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, and the faith and dedication of the pioneers in keeping their covenants and building Zion, I have been able to embrace the restored gospel, receive temple covenants, and offer those blessings to my ancestors through providing temple work for them.

I have been able to attend both the Nauvoo Illinois Temple and the Winter Quarters Nebraska Temple, which overlook the places sanctified by sacrifice.

After a session at the Winter Quarters Temple, I walked through the cemetery and stopped for a moment of meditation. Someone nearby, probably not initially noticing my non-European features, asked if I had ancestors there. I felt both a tear and a smile on my face as I replied, “These are my adopted ancestors.” ■

The author lives in California, USA.



PIONEER LEGACY AND MODERN-DAY PIONEERS

“I love and honor the faith and courage of those early pioneers of the Church. My own ancestors were living an ocean away at the time. None were among those who lived in Nauvoo or Winter Quarters, and none made the journey across the plains. But as a member of the Church, I claim with gratitude and pride this pioneer legacy as my own.

“With the same joy, I claim the legacies of today’s modern-day Church pioneers who live in every nation and whose own stories of perseverance, faith, and sacrifice add glorious new verses to the great chorus of the latter-day anthem of the kingdom of God.”

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, “Faith of Our Father,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 70.

