

In the next issue, *Beacon Lights* begins a projected long-running series on the history of the PRCA.

This series will consist of transcriptions of oral history interviews I conducted in 2008–2009. Some background and explanation is in order.

Sometime in 2008 my wife, Ruthellen, and I went to Lansing, Illinois, to visit my life-long friend Mr. James Blankespoor, whom I knew all my life as “Uncle Jim. “Although he was no blood relation to me, this moniker indicates a close and familiar relationship. At the time he was 91 years old and sharp as a tack. Since then he has joined the church triumphant, which was his professed desire. During this lengthy visit he told many stories about his life in the context of the church, around which his life centered. Many of them were humorous, for he possessed a dry humor that was hilarious, and he had my wife nearly rolling on the floor with laughter.

Shortly after beginning our journey home, Ruthellen said to me, “It’s too bad that we didn’t record that.” As we traveled, we discussed the possibilities, and came to the conclusion that we should indeed record his memories, as well as memories of other older saints. She thus deserves the credit for the initiation of this oral history.

Upon arriving home, and mostly because I didn’t know who else to talk to, I contacted Jon Huisken, the archivist of the PRCA, and described to him our thoughts. His response was, “That’s called an oral history. It should be done, and you’re in charge.” I must admit that I didn’t see that coming. With assistance from Mr. Huisken and considerable guidance from Dick Harms, the archivist of Calvin College, I was able to organize this project. I wrote letters to the consistories of the PRCA soliciting names of candidates and also received suggestions from individuals. I drafted a letter of explanation and request to participate, in which I gave a justification for this project by asking, What is an oral history?

At this point I can do no better than to quote from that letter

An oral history is a verbal account of the memories and recollections of past events and history as experienced by or told to specific individuals. Oral history differs from the written or documented record of history in that it is not objectively provable. This does not imply in any manner that oral history differs from or contradicts documented history. On the contrary, oral history is very valuable in that it complements, adds to, gives background and context to, and enhances the formal record of history. It is

the story behind the history, Lest there be any doubt as to the value of oral history, allow me to remind you that for the first 2000 years of the church's existence (until the time of Moses), the truth was preserved only by means of oral history.

I then asked and answered several questions.

Why is an oral history being compiled? Because there exists a huge body of knowledge and experiences that are currently locked up in the minds primarily of older saints. They will very soon go to their eternal reward, and their knowledge will be forever lost to the church militant, which must continue to know its history and learn from it. This knowledge, crucial to the generations of the covenant, must be unlocked and preserved by means of an oral history.

Who will participate in this oral history? Primarily older saints in their 70s, 80s and 90s. The reason is self-evident. Younger saints are still living their history, and time remains for their contribution to what may become an ongoing oral history. But old saints must be interviewed before they join the church triumphant. You are therefore encouraged to suggest the name of anyone who may have a valuable contribution to make.

How will this oral history be accomplished? It will consist of an informal interview between you and myself. Our conversation will be digitally recorded. I will ask the questions, and you will give the answers. The digital recording, as well as a transcription of our conversation, will be preserved in the archives of the PRCA.

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed by Judi Doezema, after which both the verbal and transcription versions were placed in the archives, where they remain. However, they were not easily accessible by our people; many did not even know that this material existed. Note: copies of both the verbal and transcription versions are available on request from the PRCA archives. Upon becoming aware of the existence of this material, *Beacon Lights* received permission from the archivist to publish the interviews with the consent of the interviewees, which has been obtained.

I used a standard list of questions in these interviews in an effort to achieve a degree of consistency. Nevertheless, the interviews vary widely in length and content, depending on the individual. Some are simply factual; some are a bit disjointed and somewhat disorganized, as is often true of verbal accounts. Recounted are doctrines, many difficulties, events, personal details, and contributions to the doctrine and life of the PRCA. A surprising number contained humor. It was often in answer to follow-up questions that things got interesting.

I tried to say as little as possible, allowing the interviewees to tell their stories in their own words. Most had little problem with this, although some needed a bit of prompting.

Any necessary explanations I will put in brackets and italics.

An interesting sidelight concerns the small digital voice recorder I set in front of each person. Most people began by talking to the recorder and were often hesitant and reluctant to speak in the consciousness that their words were being preserved for history. But once I was able to get them talking, within a few minutes they forgot all about the recorder and spoke freely.

One question remains: Why is a youth-oriented magazine publishing a bunch of interviews with old people? A fair question this is, but it has good answers. First, they are instructive; they teach us our precious heritage. Those who are ignorant of or forget history are doomed to repeat it. Second, they impart to the young generation the knowledge and wisdom of the senior generation—I mean here the wisdom of the book of Proverbs. Third, they are the encouragement to the young generation of those who have struggled to live the Christian life and to defend the faith against all odds. Last, they are interesting and sometimes funny. We will learn, for example, why Loveland PR church has no windows, and we will read the story of someone's most improbable journey to the PRCA.

We at *Beacon Lights* hope you will read, learn, and enjoy.