

## THE FIRST MORMON TABERNACLE IS REBUILT IN KANESVILLE, IOWA

*Gail Geo. Holmes*

### CONSTRUCTION OF THE ORIGINAL KANESVILLE TABERNACLE IN 1847

In April 1847, Brigham Young led eight members of the Quorum of the Twelve in the original company of pioneers to the Salt Lake valley to find their new promised land. They were followed the end of June by John Taylor and Parley P. Pratt leading another 1490 Saints west. When Brigham Young returned in late October with the apostles who had accompanied him, Taylor and Pratt were still in the valley. Orson Hyde, presiding over the Saints in Iowa, was at his farm in the little settlement of Hyde Park, eight miles southeast of Kanessville. The controversial Lyman Wight was in Texas. Therefore, nine of the twelve members of the Twelve were together.

At the time, Brigham Young, as senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve following the 27 June 1844 assassination of Joseph and Hyrum Smith at Carthage, Illinois, was only acting president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Members of the Quorum of the Twelve joined Brigham in calling a conference of the Church to convene 3 December 1847 in the Blockhouse Branch building atop the big bluff overlooking Kanessville's Main (now Broadway) Street and about three blocks east of Hyde (now called South First) Street. Presently, the bluff has been graded down substantially. East Pierce Street was cut through in the late 1800s to the site of the old blockhouse (between Grace and Union Streets on Pierce). The blockhouse was built in 1837 by some sixty

U.S. Dragoons, mounted infantry, to warn the Sac Indians of north-central Iowa and the Dakota Sioux of eastern South Dakota not to attack the newly arrived Pottawattamie/Ottawa/Chippewa Indians. The latter had been sent there by United States authorities who were enforcing the Indian Removal Act (moving the Indians west of the Mississippi River) of 1830. The 25' x 25' log building had a high roof and ramps up the walls to allow defenders, white or Indian, to fire through high gun ports.

By 4 December, the second day of the conference, many members of the Church were standing outside the blockhouse hoping to hear wisps of speakers' voices floating out of the gun ports. Brigham proposed adjourning the conference until a larger meeting hall could be built. That proposal was sustained.

Orson Hyde then invited Quorum members to convene at his farm home in bucolic Hyde Park, named by that returned London missionary after the metropolitan Hyde Park where the prime minister of England resides. Readers may avoid some confusion by keeping in mind that southwest Iowa's Hyde Park was both an extensive grove of trees and a small LDS community. The ride of the Quorum to Hyde Park afforded them beautiful views of nearby hills; a broad, flat valley below them; and the wide and meandering Missouri River. A person may even hike that route today by following the Wabash Nature Trace southeast from the Iowa School for the Deaf to near the site of that historic meeting, walking the final pleasant mile along a country road.

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GAIL GEO. HOLMES lives in Omaha, NE, and is associated with many of the historical organizations of the area: president, Kanessville Restoration Inc.; advisor, Old Council Bluff(s) Historical Recovery & Development Group; advisor, Pottawattamie County Mormon Trails Assn.; and is on the State Historical Society of Iowa Advisory Committee to Western Historic Trails Center, Council Bluffs, IA. He has written and been co-narrator of more than 1000 broadcasts covering southwest Iowa and eastern Nebraska history. Mr. Holmes was approached by *The Nauvoo Journal* editor to present a report of the progress and dedication of the Kanessville tabernacle. Although the accompanying article is current and does not fit the outlined time frame for the journal, the historical significance of the tabernacle reconstruction justifies its inclusion in this special Iowa issue of the magazine.

On 5 December 1847 in the home of Orson Hyde, Brigham Young was elected president and prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He selected Heber C. Kimball and Willard Richards as his counselors.

The next day, 6 December, the leaders decided to build a tabernacle in Kanessville "immediately" and a temple in Salt Lake City "a little later."

Under the direction of Henry and Daniel Miller, the tabernacle was complete enough by 23 December for conference to recommence the following day. It then continued for four days.

Brigham Young was sustained by about a thousand members crowded into the tabernacle on 27 December in the only solemn assembly held by the Church outside Salt Lake City. Music provided by woodwind and brass players and by hosannas from the audience made the day even more memorable.

The old tabernacle was used both for church and for community meetings and activities. Seventies of the Church held a jubilee there. It was used as a polling place during the congressional elections of 1848. The printers of Kanessville held a benefit dance. Children of three schools, carrying, in the words of Orson Hyde, "appropriate banners," marched there for graduation ceremonies behind a band from half a mile away. In the tabernacle, little children conjugated verbs before the audience, and older children "sang out the names and capitals of every nation in the world." That was followed by a banquet at large tables under nearby trees beside Indian Creek, now paved and known as Green Street.

But, alas, the tabernacle had its weakness. The edifice was erected in December. In the warm weather, an underground spring wet the floor. Cottonwood shrinks in girth as it dries, which caused major problems for the building. In 1849, the structurally damaged tabernacle was dismantled and its timber was used in other buildings.

#### OTHER TABERNACLES

The 1847 Kanessville Tabernacle was the first tabernacle built by the Church but was not the only one in the Middle Missouri Valley. A Welsh tabernacle was built four miles southwest of Kanessville for members of the

Church coming from Wales.

The Pigeon Creek Tabernacle, larger than the Kanessville Tabernacle, was built in the form of a Greek cross about eight miles northeast of Kanessville. More than twenty miles north of Kanessville, the Tennessee Hollow Tabernacle was built. More than 250 persons from Tennessee, headed for the Great Salt Lake Valley, were living in Pottawattamie County, Iowa, when the 1850 federal census recorded them. Because the census was as of 1 June, many of the approximately five thousand who migrated to the Great Basin in 1850 were gone before that federal census counted 7,828 residents in Pottawattamie County. Kanessville was the seat of the county government.

#### THE KANESSVILLE TABERNACLE RECONSTRUCTED IN 1996

The historic 1847 Kanessville Tabernacle was rebuilt in 1996 near downtown Kanessville/Council Bluffs, Iowa. It was erected a little more than a block northwest of the site of the original blockhouse, the first LDS meeting-house in Middle Missouri Valley, and is situated within a block of the 1847 tabernacle site. Like the original tabernacle, it was built of cottonwood. The green cottonwood walls shrank more than two inches in less than two months and are expected to shrink another ten inches in the next five years. What was fatal to the first tabernacle, however, will not hurt the new one. The four central columns that hold up the roof of the 1996 tabernacle are on jacks. As the walls shrink, the jacks are lowered accordingly to keep walls and roof together. The plans were based on specifications detailed in 1847 by Brigham Young's clerk, Thomas Bullock. Myrtle Hyde of Ogden, Utah, and Katie Gregory, of Council Bluffs, provided additional detail. Don Enders of the Museum of Church History and Art and Charles Allen, Nauvoo, Illinois, skilled restoration craftsman, gave technical advice.

Bill and Patricia Ann Child and Mont and Viola Nelson, all of Salt Lake City, were major financial backers for the rebuilt 1996 40' x 60' log tabernacle and nearby 24' x 72' visitors center. Bob Schulze, Iowa School for the Deaf Special Projects Director, as president of Pottawattamie County Mormon Trails Association, directed the building program. At the time, he also was president of the Iowa Mormon Trails Association.

On 13 July, 1996, President Gordon B. Hinckley of

the LDS Church, accompanied by Hugh Pinnock and other general and local church leaders, dedicated the tabernacle in the yet-to-be-landscaped, 2-acre Kanesville Park.

The rebuilt tabernacle has one remarkable and unexpected quality. The acoustics of the tabernacle are wonderful, probably because the roof peaks at 20 feet.

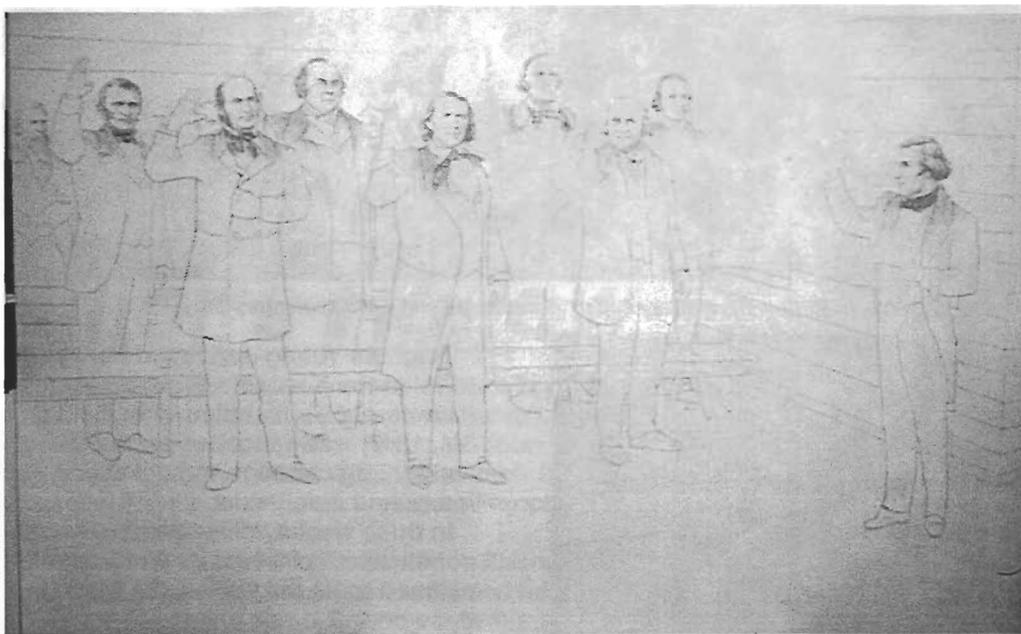
It also has an amusing component. Growing inside the tabernacle in profusion out of the log walls and overhead beams are mushrooms of various sizes and shapes, up to eight inches in diameter. The mushrooms are all the more remarkable because the entire inside of the tabernacle was sprayed in June with disinfectant.

One visitor looked askance at the white or brown, straight-up, straight-out, or hanging mushrooms with perfectly smooth tops, ruffled tops, flat tops, or cupped tops. When told they were, indeed, mushrooms, she said: "Well, I wondered who would put up those perfectly silly looking decorations."

The parking lot now has been paved after delays by repeated rains. Concrete work for walks and outdoor light fixtures has also been completed.

Monuments by Bill L. Hill of Mendon, Utah, and by Bob Keiser of Omaha, Nebraska, are expected to be placed in April and June 1997. The Hill monument will be a mother, father, and daughter in standing pioneer prayer. The Keiser monument will be of builder Henry Miller, with ax in hand. Other monuments of Daniel Miller, Orson Hyde, Thomas L. Kane, and Brigham Young will be placed near the tabernacle after about \$50,000 is raised for each life-sized bronze figure. A huge painting by Bill L. Hill of the solemn assembly in the tabernacle will be placed on the east wall of the tabernacle on 24 July 1997. The painting will replace the present charcoal sketch that has pleased hundreds of visitors.

The newly constructed tabernacle, long a dream of local Mormons and trail enthusiasts, is now a reality. It is fitting that it was dedicated in 1996, the sesquicentennial of the arrival of the Latter-day Saints in Kanesville.



*Diagram of the composition of the painting of the 1847 solemn assembly by Bill L. Hill which is not complete. The finished painting will be placed on the east wall of the tabernacle. Slide of diagram furnished by Bill L. Hill.*

*1846 - 1996*

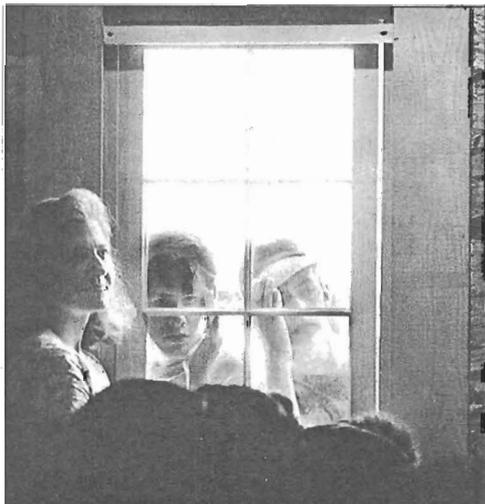
# **Kanesville Tabernacle**



Wagon train arrives at tabernacle moments before services.



LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke to assembly and gave dedicatory prayer.



Sneaking a peek at dedication services.

Brigham Young appointed Henry Miller to build the Kanesville Tabernacle after a conference scheduled to be held Dec. 3-4, 1847, was cancelled because a facility large enough to hold those interested didn't exist.

In three weeks, Miller and 200 men, constructed a 60-foot by 40-foot building, claimed to be the largest log cabin in the world.

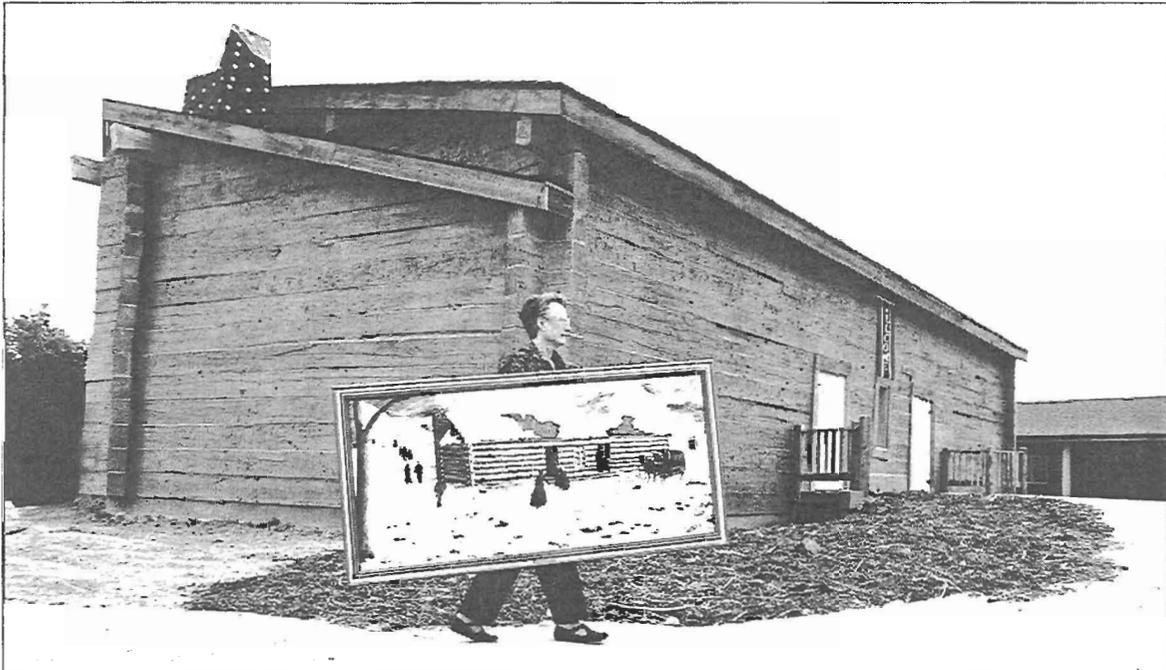
On the 27th. of December, a solemn assembly was held and Brigham Young was sustained as the new church president.

(All photos in series by Garry Bryant / Deseret News, Salt Lake City, Utah)

**Capt. Henry Wm. Miller**  
Co-founder of Miller's Hollow,  
Kanesville High Council 1846-1852.  
Built Kanesville Tabernacle.  
Pottawattamie Co. Representative.



**Daniel A. Miller**  
Co-founder of Miller's Hollow,  
LDS Bishop 1846-1848.  
Assisted brother in building  
Kanesville Tabernacle.



Katie Gregory carries her painting of the tabernacle in a winter scene in front of the new replica.

## ***Miller's Hollow***

Council Bluffs was originally called Miller's Hollow after the two Miller brothers (Henry and Daniel), who settled below the eastern bluffs of the Missouri River in the Spring of 1846. The Millers pooled their funds and bought a cabin and 150 acres from a Frenchman named Hildreth.

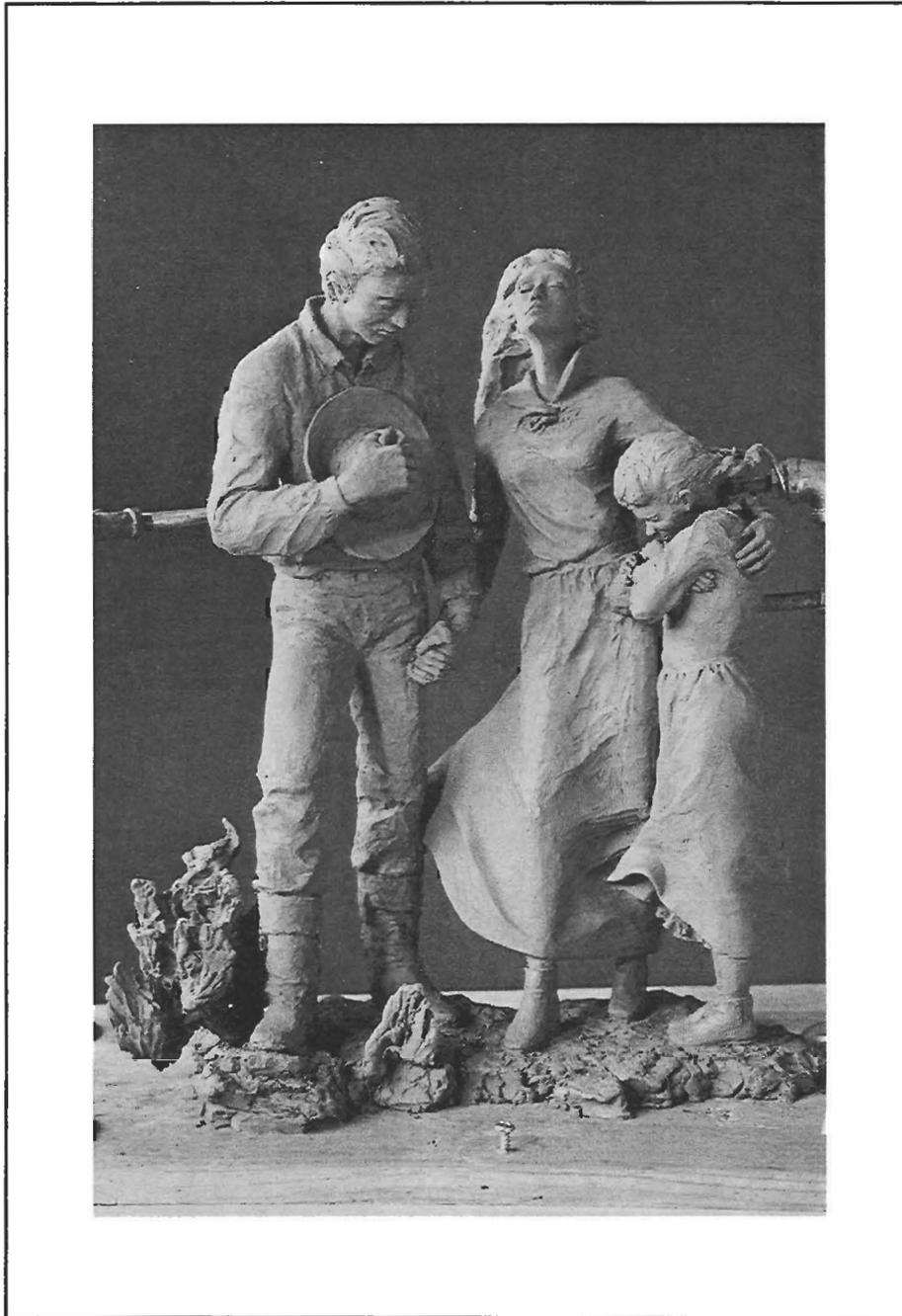
The name was changed to Kanesville in Spring 1848, to honor Col. Thomas Kane, who had helped negotiate between the Mormons and U.S. Army for volunteers.

Daniel Miller went to Utah in 1848, and was one of the original five settlers of Farmington. Henry stayed and was elected the first representative to the Iowa legislature from Pottawattamie County.

Henry left in 1852 as a captain of a wagon train. In the next ten years he would be captain of four more wagon trains, earning him the title of "Captain."



Some of Henry Miller's descendants.



***"The Family, an Everlasting Heritage"***

*Small replica of the statue sculpted by Bill L. Hill which will be placed in the Court of Memories at the Kanesville Tabernacle. An identical sculpture will be placed in the Pioneer Memorial Park in Mendon, Utah. Slide of sculpture furnished by Bill L. Hill.*