

## The Historian's Friend: A Conversation with James L. Kimball Jr.

*Richard Ian Kimball*

### Introduction

This "Conversation with a Historian" inaugurates what will become a regular feature in *Mormon Historical Studies*. For each issue, an interview with an esteemed Mormon historian will appear. Not only should it prove useful as a historical repository but also it should prove enlightening to young historians looking for role models. We are pleased to begin this feature by interviewing a behind-the-scenes fixture of Mormon history, James L. Kimball Jr. Jim recently retired from the LDS Church Historical Department where he had worked since 1975. Almost every Mormon historian is familiar with Jim's engaging personality and his willingness to help. Though no monograph appears with his name on the spine, many volumes of LDS history have been shaped at least in some small way by Jim's work.<sup>1</sup> It is fitting that this space will first be dedicated to an unsung Mormon historian. I take particular pride in this selection because Jim is my father. I interviewed him at his home in Salt Lake City on 29 September 2000.

### The Interview

*Richard Kimball:* Let's start at the very beginning. Describe your childhood—where you were born, when you were born, the circumstances, your youth.

*Jim Kimball:* Well, I was born in Salt Lake City on the 1st of

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RICHARD IAN KIMBALL received a B.A. in American Studies from Brigham Young University (1993) and an M.A. and a Ph.D. in History from Purdue (1995, 1999). He is currently an instructor in History at Brigham Young University. The author acknowledges Erin Elton, a research assistant at BYU, for her help in making a transcription of this interview.

January 1932. I shouldn't have been born on the 1st of January 1932. I should've been born on the 22nd of February—not New Year's Day but on George Washington's birthday. But something happened. My mother went to the hospital, and I came out a little earlier than I should have at three and a half pounds. That doesn't mean much today to most people; but when my mother went home after ten days, which was abnormal, I stayed in the hospital for probably another month.

I grew up in a very nice neighborhood and had some good friends. I belonged to a little club where every Friday night we talked about anything we wanted to. Sometimes we just played games. They were all nice kids—good kids. I appreciated where I grew up very, very much. I was very involved in the LDS Church, and I enjoyed those folks. I was involved somewhat in the Scouts there. There were a lot of boys who were in the Scouts in my ward—more than usual, probably much more than usual. They were very, very good leaders. I still think of them quite fondly. I don't know that they taught me any specific thing. They were folks who seemed to have their heads on straight.

*Richard Kimball:* Where was this?

*Jim Kimball:* This was in what we called Bonneville Ward in Salt Lake City in the Bonneville Stake at the time. I then grew older and went into the Park Ward, a ways away. We had some interesting people in that ward as well. We had a head of the Pharmacy Department at the University of Utah and Henry Eyring, who was in the Physics Department. It was interesting to me, I think, because I don't think any of us in the whole group ever thought there was any other choice in life but to go to the university. Not everybody went, but it was in the culture. It was in the ethos of what we should do, and I thought it was an important kind of thing to do.

*Richard Kimball:* Tell me about your parents.

*Jim Kimball:* My father is J. LeRoy Kimball. He was a physician and surgeon. I was told that he always had more patients in the hospital than anybody else. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know. He was always very well treated and liked, and he always treated the nurses kindly and always did well with the patients. It was nice to be Dr. Kimball's son, I guess.

My mother is Marjorie Dahlen. Her family was from Provo. She had a bunch of sisters who had girls, and my mother treated her nieces like they were her own sisters. She would take them out to lunch, write them notes, send them handkerchiefs—the way of the day, I suppose. For me, it was nothing more than positive. I enjoyed them all.

*Richard Kimball:* How did you end up studying history at the University of Utah?

*Jim Kimball:* When I was growing up and when I started thinking about

going to a college, there was the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, and there was BYU down in Provo. At that time, BYU was not a very well-respected school. Very few people, at least in my area, ever went there. They did not have very many books in the library. I suppose some teachers were very good, but the university was not very well thought of anyway. Later on, BYU became a much better environment for scholarship, but I enjoyed my time at the University of Utah.

I guess I kept asking my mother many, many questions; and finally she said, "I think the best thing you could ever do would be to go into history." And I don't know whether at the time I even knew exactly what that meant. She said to major in history, but at least it put the thought of history in my mind. And as I went to the University of Utah, there was a man in my neighborhood by the name of David Miller who was a good teacher. At that time, there were only about four or five men in the History Department, and they were teaching a lot of American history courses. He was a tall man—had big, huge hands. He was very interested in going places and seeing things. He would go and take shots and photographs and would come back and show us the pictures of what he had seen. He had jokes that he would tell, and people would flock to his classes.

I think he turned a great number of people on to history because of the way he taught as well as what he taught. He would bring things that his father had owned as a child. He did not teach me Utah history, although I learned a great deal of Utah history from him.



*James L. Kimball Jr.  
Photo courtesy of Richard Ian Kimball*

For example, he told a story about John C. Fremont when Fremont first came to Utah in the 1840s and went to one of the islands there that he named “Disappointment Island.” Now it’s called “Fremont Island.” Fremont was looking through a spyglass, and the spyglass cover had his initials, “JCF,” on it. At one point, he lost the cover; and, in his disappointment, he named the island.

Well, David Miller’s folks or grandfolks ran cattle on “Disappointment Island,” and David thought, “Gee, wouldn’t it be nifty-gelifty if I could find that spyglass?” And so, as he went on for his master’s degree and doctor’s degree, he worked on the Great Salt Lake. Well, over many years, his father, of course, died; and David looked through his trunks and personal possessions. Lo and behold, something glinted at the bottom of one, and he picked up a piece of metal with the inscription “JCF.” When he told us about that in class, he picked the watch out of his pocket and sent it around the class. When we touched that, we touched something historical—something that really existed, way in the past; and I just thought that was really neat. And so I suppose that helped me to enjoy western history, which remains one of my interests. Later on, I came to teach it. I thought about David Miller almost every day I taught, though he never taught me a western history class. I will be eternally grateful to him, and I know others will be as well.

*Richard Kimball:* When your father participated in a fellowship at Tulane University, you spent several years in New Orleans. What did spending those years in New Orleans mean? How did that period affect your development?

*Jim Kimball:* We had a very nice home that we rented in Metairie, which is in the northern part of New Orleans, and we were there for three years or so from 1944 to 1946. We went to church at an LDS branch that met in downtown New Orleans. When I was twelve or thirteen, my folks allowed us to travel wherever we needed to go on the bus. We would have to get on a trolley that would take us to church every Wednesday night. We were there in daytime and at night. We were there when the first Mardi Gras got started after World War II. We traveled through the French Quarter.

My mother had been a history minor in college, and everywhere we would ever go, the trip was as good as the arrival because Mother always made us stop at historical markers. We talked about the French, and we talked about the Spanish buildings that were there—old, old buildings that were really meaningful to me as a child. Some of what happened to me was that I became intrigued with seeing the things I was talking about or had heard about in school. It meant more to me, perhaps, than it ever meant to others.

I went to grammar school in New Orleans, and before you could gradu-

ate from grammar school, you had to pass your courses or reach your twenty-first birthday. At twelve or thirteen years of age, I was sitting in classes with others who were eighteen years old. For two or three weeks, a boy was there who was twenty and who had come back from the army, and he was there only until he turned twenty-one. Kids at the school smoked in the boys' lavatory. They told dirty jokes. I didn't know what a dirty joke was, but I knew that some of it wasn't very nice. We had a very beautiful teacher, Mrs. Wazo. I think it must have been her first or second year out teaching. She was really very sweet. She taught me a great deal of stuff, and I enjoyed being there.

I guess I just like to breathe the air where somebody has done different things than what I have done. It's not very unusual for anybody perhaps but me, but it was interesting to live on our street in Metairie.

*Richard Kimball:* When you were at the U, did you go to the Institute?

*Jim Kimball:* I went to the Institute. There were three men there whom I enjoyed very much as teachers. Even now I want to call T. Edgar Lyon "Brother Lyon." He knew a great deal about Mormon history. He had known many older folks who actually knew Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. He had talked to them, and I think that had a great forming influence on his own life. He could just talk about all of Mormon history in story form, and I think I remember everything he said. In fact, I took his class twice. I graduated from Institute at the end of my four years, and I went back and I post-graduated, and I took his classes again. On a religious basis, his classes, as well as Lowell Bennion's, reinforced some of my own thoughts. I had thought something that maybe somebody else knew, and maybe I'm not doing so bad after all.

*Richard Kimball:* How did your mission experience shape you?

*Jim Kimball:* I started at the university at eighteen and went to one quarter of school. It was a Mormon feeling that boys should go on missions for the Church, and I went to Great Britain. My trip to England—I hope I did something religious—helped me spiritually, and I think it also helped me historically. There was not a place I went that I did not try to find out what happened in that area. And some of those experiences were very, very fine for me. Just walking down the street, I thought, was great.

About one week after I arrived in Britain, at a place called Huddersfield in Yorkshire, the branch was going on a little outing. They were going to go west to a place called Blackpool where they would turn lights on, and they had different comic-strip characters and important men who would be all out in lights and would be very entertaining. I got to go along with them; and, as we went in the bus, I noticed we went through the town of Olan. All of a sudden, I remembered that my mother's grandmother had been from

Olan—and that’s where she had joined the Mormon Church. And I thought to myself, “If there was no other reason for me to be sent up into that area, it was really nice to have just thought of her as I went through Olan—and it was an interesting experience for me in such a way.

After my mission, history just seemed to be a little more interesting to me. At my final interview with my mission president, he asked, “What are you going to do when you go home?”

I had never really thought of what I would do. I had thought a little bit about teaching, but I didn’t know. He said, “You know, seminary teaching would be a good thing to do. You’re a good teacher. You might try that out.”

That had never come to my mind—never. So I came back, finished my degree at the U, and got a teacher’s certificate. I was not married, though most of the folks who go into the seminary program will be in the beginning. Ninety-eight percent of them will be at first. But I was not.

The man who hired me suggested where he would like me to go, but I had some choices. I had to make a choice, right then. So I thought, “Well, I don’t want to go to East High, where I graduated, because I knew everybody there,” and I was just a young man, twenty-two, and I was hardly out of high school, let alone college. I knew everybody. So I went to West High School. When I got to the school, I thought I could be on my own. I wouldn’t have to worry because I would be out on the west side of the city. Nobody knows me over in that part of town. I discovered, however, that half the kids I taught had been delivered by my father. On visiting day, all the parents would talk about my father and so forth. I thought I was doing the right thing, but then I really began to wonder.

*Richard Kimball:* After teaching at West High, you spent some time studying at the University of North Carolina?

*Jim Kimball:* Before I began to teach seminary, my dad asked if I wanted to do some graduate work. I thought I would. I went to Dave Miller, and he took a book down from the shelf. The book was on the history of colonial America by Carl Lefler. He said, “This is just out from the University of North Carolina. That would be a good place for you to study.” So I applied. I really don’t think my grades were good enough. I went back there to the head of the department, who said, “Well, we’ve never had anybody from the West; we’d like to have you. So you’ve been chosen to stay with us.”

My time at North Carolina was a good experience. I was there for only a year and summer because I had to get back to teaching seminary. But I didn’t know what graduate work was. I was not disciplined like many of the other students were. It was almost like I was going into a brand-new pool where I didn’t know anything that was happening or anything that was going on. I didn’t know a lot of the lingo. I had been taught well by many

people, but I hadn't been taught all that I should have been taught at the University of Utah, though I thought I had done pretty well. It was a different experience, but I did enjoy it.

*Richard Kimball:* How did you become interested in Mormon history and the Nauvoo period?

*Jim Kimball:* It is interesting because my father, who was no historian per se, was interested in Mormon history. Anyway, he was born in Canada to Mormon parents who had lived down in Utah and then came back to Utah. One of our ancestors is Heber C. Kimball, who was one of the first members of the Twelve



*James L. Kimball Jr.  
Photo by Richard Ian Kimball*

Apostles whom Joseph Smith chose in the 1830s. My father went to medical school at Northwestern University in Chicago. At the end of his schooling, my father and mother had a little car, and they thought they would go down to Nauvoo, in Illinois, where Joseph Smith had lived, as had Heber C. Kimball. My father had always been taught that there was a Heber C. Kimball home that was still standing.

He drove down there, looked around, and by golly there was a home there that had a little sign in front. Now my great-great grandfather's name was Heber, "H-E-B-E-R," but the sign said, "H-E-R-B-E-R Kimball home." It was just painted in black letters by somebody who thought he ought to put something out in front. Maybe a Mormon had traveled by somewhere and asked about it, and he was going to be able to answer the

next time. My father felt that he was going to have something to do with that house. So my dad was very interested in the house, and some years later, we learned the name of the individual who owned the home.

Through correspondence over the years, my dad bought the Kimball home, restored it, and planned to use it as a vacation home for our family. After opening the home briefly for public tours in 1954, the great reception and wide popularity of the home made my father think that the restoration of Nauvoo might become much wider than just the Heber Kimball home. Eventually, the LDS Church became involved in the town's restoration with the creation of Nauvoo Restoration, Inc. He continued to play a role in the organization until his death in 1992. From watching the transformation of Nauvoo, not only did I become fascinated with the historical process of reconstruction but also I fell in love with the "City Beautiful."

*Richard Kimball:* Your love for Nauvoo led you to further graduate work at the University of Iowa. What was your experience like there?

*Jim Kimball:* One of the men I appreciated the most was a fellow who was going to be teaching there for a semester—Sidney Mead, an important scholar in American religious history. We got to know each other very well, as I took some of his history classes. He had gone to school at the University of Chicago at the same time as T. Edgar Lyon, whom I had known back at the Institute. Mead was very interested in me because I was a Latter-day Saint. He mentioned that fact quite a bit in class as we would go along, and he seemed to want to bring it in when we would be talking about various phases of American religious history. He made it a point, I think, to put in information about Joseph Smith and parts of the writings he had made. In Western History, there was a brand-new chap, Malcolm J. Rohrbaugh. He had just gotten a degree from the University of Wisconsin. He was a good teacher, and I got a lot from him.

*Richard Kimball:* After finishing your thesis on the Nauvoo charter and receiving your master's degree, you returned to the Institute program?

*Jim Kimball:* I came back to Salt Lake, and Church Education officials found out I was married. They said, "You don't have to stop teaching; go on with your seminary." I don't think I wanted to go on with it. While that didn't happen, although I had gotten married, I was able to stay, but I didn't want to. Well, I got back and I had been teaching some Institute courses at the University of Iowa, mostly to individuals who were not students. Some of them were teachers. I was in contact with people about a job, and they said, "Call us when you get back." When I got back, I was offered a position to teach Institute at Oregon State University in Corvallis. We were there for two years and had a nice experience. Then I transferred up to the University of Washington in Seattle, which was also a good experience.

*Richard Kimball:* Why did you leave the Institute?

*Jim Kimball:* Well, I didn't have the best experience with my boss. He was a very straight, conservative Latter-day Saint—a type whom I had never really met before to any great extent. We didn't hit it off very well. So after two years, I wondered about staying on and thought maybe it would not be the best thing to do. In the beginning, I had wanted to do what T. Edgar Lyon and Lowell Bennion did, and I achieved that. I had reached the top where I wanted to be; and when I got there, I didn't want to be there. But I found out that the Institute work, what I had to do as an Institute man, was different than what had been explained to me. Things had changed. Teaching had become secondary. I was a chief cook and bottle washer. I didn't enjoy spending time trying to call on people to register for Institute. Teaching was a great experience. I had met some fine men there, too. I have been blessed in that sense, I think. It became very difficult with my boss, so I decided to go back to Salt Lake City. As we were looking to move back, the man who was head of the area found a place for me in the Historical Department in Salt Lake where I split my time between that department and curriculum development writing New Testament lessons.

*Richard Kimball:* What did you do in the Historical Department?

*Jim Kimball:* One of the best experiences I had there was with the men and women with whom I was associated. They were as historically minded as anybody could have ever been, and I thought that their Church testimonies were just as great. They understood what it meant to look for truth. They understood what it meant to try to not just tell the same old story, but they were eager to try to winnow the false from the true in their writings. They were bishops in their wards; they were very active in their wards; they were trying to live the gospel. I had finally found a really congenial place where I wanted to work.

Leonard Arrington was eager to help anybody who would come. One day I was at my desk working, and he came by and dropped an envelope on my desk. I opened it, and inside was a \$100 bill. There had been a fund they had built up where they were helping young scholars. This would be one way he would help.

It was fine being associated with colleagues like Dean May, Jill Mulvay Derr, and Dean Jessee. They were interested in the same things I was. Our work in Mormon history changed some of our preconceived ideas about the historical Church, but it did not affect our testimonies of the gospel.

*Richard Kimball:* You were director of the Archive Search Room for many years, and I think you are mentioned in more prefaces of Mormon Church history books than any other historian. What were you trying to accomplish in the Search Room?

*Jim Kimball:* Well, when I was supervisor of the Search Room, my duty simply was to help people with their studies. At that particular time, there were a lot of things that people were able to see that had not ever been seen, but we were able to give them permission. Many people came in who were simply after their genealogies—their father and their mother and grandmother and grandfather, going all the way back, to learn how they joined the Church and things like that. But others were there because they wanted to write scholarly books. I just thought I should help them not feel afraid of being in the Archives Search Room. I tried to make friends and make them feel they were welcome—to make it a warm experience for them. I had made some very good friends there in the process. It was very nice of them to mention me. There were several individuals there like Richard Bennett, who became close friends and who will be friends for the rest of my life. I knew that some individuals who had been there before me felt that the only people who belonged in there were individuals who had doctorate degrees already—and wanted to do more study. They were not interested in the fellow who wanted to learn about his father's genealogy. They figured that we were not in the genealogy business. I thought we should treat them all the same. It's nice to be able to hear that what you wanted to do worked for some people because you know there are many others perhaps whom I didn't do as well for. But I hoped I could make them feel like they were my friends while they were there and not among people who were better than they.

*Richard Kimball:* So, in terms of the changes in Mormon history that you have seen in the last thirty years, what changes have you seen in the Historical Department?

*Jim Kimball:* Well, I haven't always been on the front line of where things moved. Before I arrived, I had experienced it as a person in the archives trying to do some work—and not being allowed to see certain things. At other times, researchers would come in and be permitted to see something one day, and they would come back the next day and the archives staff would say, "We don't have that book." And they would pretend they didn't have it. It was as if they felt they were the keepers of the records—they were the ones who decided who was fit to view certain records. People today think that the archives are closed, but I don't think that is the case. I think, in general, that even though some of it has been closed, the archives are more open than they had been before my arrival in 1975.

*Richard Kimball:* What advice would you give young historians?

*Jim Kimball:* I don't know what advice I would give to somebody except that no one should feel he or she has to study Mormon history and not tell the truth. I wrestle with that, but I still think that Leonard Arrington's advice is good: "Almost anything can be said if it's said the right way." But

you've got to find out what the right way is, and you might make a mistake when trying to do that. But I think we have more people today who are willing to go after the truth and not try to hide it. I don't know that everybody needs to know everything in the world. I think some things are mentioned that people can see in records that may not be right to mention.

*Richard Kimball:* Thank you.

### Notes

1. James L. Kimball Jr.'s periodical publications include "The Nauvoo Charter: A Reinterpretation," *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society* 64 (Spring 1971): 66–78; "A Wall to Defend Zion: The Nauvoo Charter," *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 491–97; and "LeRoy Kimball, Nauvoo Restoration Pioneer: A Tribute," *BYU Studies* 32 (Winter/Spring 1992): 5–12. He has also contributed articles in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* and the *Historical Atlas of Mormonism*.