

Bluff Fort Visitors Center - Co-op Replica Dedication

October 12, 2013



Back side of the Co-op – northward looking



Corinne Roring, Hole-in-the-Rock Foundation president, and board member Grant Taylor at the podium



Groundbreaking two years earlier, October 12, 2011 Images by Allison Yamanoto

The following talks and dedicatory prayer were transcribed from a video recording. The first words of Elder Nash's remarks were missing from the video.

Robert McPherson, Professor of History at Utah State University, Blanding Campus:

Well, well, thank you. It's good to be here. I have to confess when Lynn Stevens asked me to give a presentation, he said "We want you to keep it 10 minutes, Bob." I thought "10 minutes. 10 minutes that's just enough time to cough, say excuse me, and sit down." So, I'm going to do the best I can, and I'll try to maintain the 10-minute limit. The other side of it is though, I've got a sure way of making sure that I haven't been up here too long. You see, I'm programmed for fifty-minute classes; I teach. To make sure that this isn't going to happen I'm taking my hat off. They had these hats underneath there and it was a great thing for me. Notice the people with bald heads up here all wearing hats. And those that have hair, President Redd. So, I can tell that after 10 minutes my head's going to start saying, "Get your hat on" so I'll sit down.

As I thought about how I could best present this, you know this area in the 1880s into the 1890s and even into the early 1900s was known as the dark corner. The

reason it was the dark corner wasn't just that it was southeastern Utah, also northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona. It was known as a place where people could disappear because there was not a big population here. And so, as I thought, how can I talk about the impact of the things that went on here in a way that will be meaningful and yet we can speed things along if you will and keep to my 10 minutes, I'm going to use a technique pioneered by Harvey Schwartz of Hoboken New Jersey. I'm sure you've all heard of him. It's called the "Who da Thought" technique. So, I'm going to use the "Who da" technique to kind of tie things together cause I've given up any chance of having a smooth flowing narrative. So, let's just have some fun and think about what this building that's behind me was (like) a number of years ago.

Starting with the "Who da;" who da thought in 1879 a six-week trip would turn into a six-month ordeal. And in doing so, once they got here instead of settling where they were planning on going which is Montezuma Creek and the Aneth area where there were already some Mormon people living and where there were already some non-Mormon people living, this group chose this place to settle, to establish the settlement of Bluff.

Who da thought that six-month experience would have such a great impact in terms of cooperation, working together, hard work, and not giving up. We've already heard the words today in "Sticky-ta-tudy" which really, really capsulizes what that whole experience had to be about. And yet as you read the accounts, we realize that people get along really well and there really was a feeling of cooperation.

Who da thought that on April 24, 1882, in a community like this where people were struggling physically and had no money, no finances at all, that they'd get this idea of starting a store, a co op and this at a time when throughout Utah there were other places where co-ops were established. They were churchrun and church-owned. They were starting to move more and more towards private enterprise. But this one started out as a private enterprise. This was a group of individuals who saw the need and decided that "this is something that we need to do." There was no economy in San Juan. There were not banks, there were no other towns, so here you are a lone group in this sight, saying "Let's start a store." This co -op has been called by various names: "San Juan Cooperative Company," "San Juan Mercantile Stock-Raising and Manufacturing Company," but usually it's just called "The Bluff Co-op."

Who da thought that the first president would come from the rank and file of the people here that settled. Platte D. Lyman was the president and the vice president was Jens Nielson who was so thankful for having an entity that he could pass his tithing through, and the store was very prominent and played a prominent part of that because otherwise he'd have a hard time given the fact was that there were no other towns around that could handle the economic side of what needed to be done. He had also with him some names that I think a lot of you are at least aware, probably some of you are related to: Charles Walton, Kumen Jones, Hyrum Perkins were the first directors.

Who da thought that in five months this store would pay a ten percent dividend. I look at what I get from my bank right now. Hey, let's start a co-op. Let's get something going here. But if that's impressive, in one year, the first year, a 25 percent dividend. For a number of years (and I didn't have all the records but at least six years) it paid a 40 percent dividend. Now I'm not saying that it was always totally successful, like any economic institution this economic institution, the San Juan Co-op or the Bluff Co-op had its ups and downs, its fluctuations. In 1893 there was no dividend because of the financial crisis that was playing out throughout the United States, so it was not just a small community thing but was tied into the regular economy that was in play throughout the United States.

Who da thought that the stockholders would work in pairs to freight in the supplies that they needed. In the summertime, supplies came from places like Durango, Alamosa and Mancos, Colorado. In the winter when the snows came, and travel was a lot more difficult and even impossible through the mountains these folks went down into New Mexico to the northern New Mexico towns and freighted the goods up here that were needed for the store. It could take anywhere, depending on where you were going, from two weeks to six weeks for a turnaround trip depending upon exactly where you were pulling your supplies out of. That's a lot of dedication to something. Everybody had a buy-in. Just like everything that happened here in Bluff. People are connected and have a buy-in. It's that cooperation again.

Who da thought that the mothers as they hung their children's laundry out on the clothesline to dry in the sun would take so much pride in having embossed across the bottom of those underpants "The pride of Durango." That was one of those unforeseen benefits that they had.

Who da thought that when they came, and I say the people of Bluff who came in 1880 with a thousand head of livestock (this would include primarily cattle and

horses), that seven years later the store, not talking about just the co-op owned 32,000 cattle, 11,000 sheep and had a capital stock of \$150,000. And who da thought that when the Texas cowboys came in and brought their longhorns out here in direct competition with the Mormon settlers for the pasture lands and with the Navajo people that were running their livestock and so forth, that by 1892 they would sell 5,000 head of longhorn cattle to the Bluff Co-op to add to their numbers so the competitors kinda got swallowed up by the people who lived here. Who da thought that. I'm sure they didn't at that time.

Who wouldn't have thought that the major clientele for this store besides the people in the town were the Navajo and Ute people. In 1908 a military group came through and was performing a survey. They determined that the co-op served 65 Ute people and by the way Bluff was a favorite winter camping spot for the Utes and so they were very, very familiar with this spot when the settlers came and established the town here. The co-op served 65 Utes, 950 adult Navajos. Listen to this, only half of those 950 adult Navajos lived within a radius of 60 miles at a time when people voted with their feet as to where you were going to trade. That says a lot about the co-op and how well it was accepted by the Native American people who lived in this area.

Albert R. Lyman who was born in 1880 and who was born (in Fillmore, Utah) and raised in Bluff left a wonderful eyewitness account of what the log store, which was the first co-op building, looked like when there were Navajo people in here trading. I love this description. He says "the Navajos came with their produce to trade in the little log store which was generally surrounded with a motley tangle of cayuse saddled ponies, rawhide ropes, bundles of wool pelts, and snarling mangy dogs. Trading was to the Navajos a rather festive occasion, deliberate and drawn out. They camped nearby until it was finished to their satisfaction, crowding against the wood window counters in noisy talk and laughter and always a stifling cloud of tobacco."

Beatrice Nielson, probably some of you are related to her, she also left a description, but this was of the co-op that we've had reproduced here. She said "They purchased blankets, pelts, silver and wool the latter often being washed, carded, spun and dyed with roots and bark, then knitted into stockings or woven into cloth. The interior of the store had an L-shaped counter which allowed them (speaking of the Indians) a space about eight by twelve feet and in this narrow area they jostled each other, smoking, laughing and giggling with the clerk in their high-keyed lingo for higher prices on their wares." I can just picture that.

Who da thought that in the middle of the desert, the Bluff co-op would become heavily involved with boats and boat building. During the spring when the run-off was high and the river was flowing, overflowing its bounds, the Coop hired a Navajo person to run a boat, to bring people across the river with their wares, with their wool, their blankets, whatever they were selling. Martha Mez? who was a young girl at this time, recalled what a frightening experience it was with the sand waves sloshing over the side of the boat, not sure exactly where they were going to hit the other side of the shore or if they were going to make it at all. She recalled that, (when) I interviewed her a long, long time ago. She has since passed away. Her memory was very, very clear that it was a scary experience when she came across.

Who da thought that in 1893 when the gold rush occurred (December of 1892 and the next three or four months into 1893), that Bluff would become heavily involved in boat building. After the boats were sold, it was a one-way trip because the boats were heading down towards Mexican Hat, down towards Clay Hills, down towards what's now Lake Powell. It's said by one observer that there were a thousand hopeful miners that passed through Bluff a day and they were looking for easy transportation and that became it. So, the Bluff Co-op became involved in that aspect of it.

Who da thought that the log cabin that started this whole process would, by 1889, result in a two-story store that housed a post office, the store and of course the community center that people were dancing in last night. It was a thing of affluence. And I want people to listen carefully. I want you to all be disciples because this is a thing often said about Bluff that really kind of sometimes gets misunderstood in this quote. Albert R. Lyman (and again I'm taking this directly from something that he wrote) said "Bluff had the name of being the wealthiest town for its population to be found in a number of states;" sometimes you hear in the United States west of the Mississippi and so forth. And what he's saying here, and I don't know where he got this figure, that was the rumor. But the town of Bluff was a very wealthy town because of its involvement with the livestock industry.

Who da thought that a trader John Hunt would buy this building in 1920 for \$6,000. Five years later, during a robbery attempt, this building was destroyed. The person, alias Fred Starr, understood that enough dynamite is good and that more dynamite is better. Consequently, he as well as the store went upwards into the heavens for a short period of time.

Who da thought that we'd be here in 2013, the exact spot of the original building being dedicated to a new building and we as individuals hopefully rededicating ourselves to the principals of cooperation, hard work, and "Stickie ta tudy." At a time when many want something for nothing, Cleal Bradford (a dear friend of mine) reminds me that in San Juan we hold our hand differently. Where partnership and working together is the key. Cooperation has always been the key to survival in this area.

We started off in the dark corner. We now live in a very light corner. As the 20,000 visitors that come here every year, that come and visit this fort and hear this story every year of cooperation, partnership and help. How fortunate we are today to have people who have this same spirit of cooperation, vision of what can be, and have the "Stickie ta tudy" to actually make it happen. So that's ten minutes of "who da" history. Thank you.

Elder Marcus B. Nash, General Authority Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Remarks and Dedicatory Prayer:

[Hole-in-the-Rock Pioneer, Arabella Smith] . . . Putting their oldest son on a quilt, placed the baby between his legs and then told them not to move until their father came back for them. Ada, their oldest child, sat in front of her brothers' and she prayed. Then leaving the three children and positioning herself behind the wagon, Belle Smith grabbed the reins of the horse attached to the back of the rig and Stanford started the team down the hole. The wagon lurched forward and then downward. With the first jolt, the rear horse and Belle were both catapulted into the air. Recovering she pulled on the lines with all her strength and her courage and I would add and with all her faith. A jagged rock cut a jagged gash in her leg from heel to hip as they careened down the steep incline. The horse behind the wagon fell to its haunches and was dragged most of the way down the incline, making I believe a very good brake. Belle, clothes torn with the grievous wound hung onto those lines with all her strength and faith all the way down. Together with her husband, they muscled that wagon to the bottom and to the water's edge. After dressing his wife's wound, Stanford raced as much as you can up that steep incline only to find the children exactly where they had been left doing exactly what their mother had instructed them to do. After returning down the incline with the children to the wagon, a group of brethren approached them having belatedly realized they had left them behind. They were now coming to help with ropes and chains. As they approached, Stanford called out "Forget it fellows. Belle here is all the help a man needs."

I believe those pioneers accomplished the impossible because as these stories show, they were one. They were absolutely unified as Kumen Jones stated (already read) in this quote “All was cheer, and all was good cheer and hustle.” And the Lord called them on that mission and God commanded, and I’ll use his words now “Be one and if ye are not one, ye are not mine (Doctrine and Covenants 38:27).” When we are one in following the master, miracles happen for he is a God of miracles and He who has all power in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28:18),” (and this is scripture that I’m quoting), always, always labors alongside His servants (Jacob 5:72). And His servants, they were one in following the Lord’s call.

I also believe there’s a substory here that’s a great lesson to each of us. The story of Stanford and Belle Smith and their three children. This is another reason why the pioneers experienced the miraculous power of God. A strong marriage in the fight in pulling together, unified and pulling literally in doing the Lord’s will. And the children doing their part as well, obeying with exactness. Strong families working in a strong company, unified, and pulling together in fulfilling the Lord’s work will always produce miraculous results.

Now I commend each here. So many have done so much, working in that same spirit of unity for an objective approved of God. Small wonder that together you’ve achieved a beautiful, even a miraculous thing. And I must say in that same spirit with which Bishop McMullin spoke to us, that the miracles from your unified effort have only begun, and I bear you my witness that this is in fact the work of God, and I believe they (the pioneers) knew that. That’s how they could do what they did with that knowledge. Perhaps they read this scripture, “Therefore dearly beloved brethren, let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power and that we may stand still with the utmost assurance to see the salvation of God and for His arm to be revealed.” I bear witness of the God who led them, of his power to lift, to save, to make whole, to bring about miracles in His work and in our lives. I bear that witness to you humbly. This is His Church, this is His kingdom, and again the history; the miracles that we have seen in the past are only a prelude to the miracles that will come to pass in the future. I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ amen.

I think now is the time to offer the dedicatory prayer, and I’ll offer that on assignment, again from the First Presidency.

Dedicatory Prayer:

“Our Father in Heaven, we bow our heads before Thee unitedly in this place made sacred by the sacrifice and efforts of so many who have offered their all in thy

work. We are grateful for them. We are grateful for the legacy of faith that is ours. Now we pray at this time, and in fact dedicate this place unto thee, that this may be a place of peace, of reflection, a place of remembering, and learning. May it be a place where many feel constrained to exclaim to themselves or others that the spirit of God resides here. That this will be a place where many will be edified, strengthened in their faith, others drawn into thy faith. That this may be a place of strength and of harmony and of joy, a place where many will come to remember and continue to remember the blessings of the gospel and the power of faith in thee. As we leave this place, we also leave a blessing upon this place as it is dedicated unto thee and thy work and a blessing of thy children that it may be protected against the elements and it will be protected against harm and against evil, and that it may be a haven, a shelter from the storm. A place again where all may come and feel of thy peace and that all may derive strength from the faith demonstrated and move forward in faith so that thou mayest perform the miracles that thou hast for thy people and in this world. We express to thee Father our love, our gratitude for Thee and for thy Son, for His matchless love and example. We pray that thou wilt bless us that as a people we may likewise learn here unity and oneness, in following thy prophet in doing those things that would be most pleasing to Thee. We would also leave a blessing upon this place as part of this dedication, that families may be strengthened, that love may grow in peace, and harmony abound. These blessings we leave this dedicatory prayer with an expression of gratitude to Thee and love and bounteous blessing in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.