

Former LDS Church historian D Michael Quinn has quoted the following remarks given to him during the course of an interview with Elder Boyd K Packer, then an Apostle of the LDS Church; “I have a hard time with historians... because they idolize the truth. The truth is not uplifting; it destroys. Historians should tell only that part of the truth that is inspiring and uplifting.”[1]

In a “personal memo” another Apostle, J Reuben Clark is quoted as saying the following: “If we have truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not the truth, it ought to be harmed”.[2]

Truth eventually reveals itself. In my ongoing search for truth in Mormonism, I came across an article in *The Improvement Era* of August 1946, written by Apostle John A Widstoe, titled “*Evidences and Reconciliations - What Manner of Boy and Youth was Joseph Smith*”[3]. Elder Widstoe begins the article by backgrounding the early life of Joseph and recalling events in Joseph’s life, his leg operation, and statements made by local Palmyra citizens as to the character of Joseph and his family. Obviously, these were positive statements that show Joseph and the family as ‘God fearing, hard working country folk’. The second half of the article is devoted to “anti-Mormon” statements that Widstoe advises, shouldn’t be relied upon as truthful. Widstoe’s thesis can be summarized in the following quote:

*“The resulting mass of anti-Mormon literature did not hesitate to blacken and malign the Prophets early years. These effusions of hate may be reduced to three charges: 1, The Smith family were unworthy people, 2, Joseph Smith, the Prophet, was a money digger, and 3, he was a user of peepstones.”*[4]

Widstoe doesn’t inform us as to what the ‘unworthy’ accusations were of the Smith family, only that some affidavits were collected to show how the Smith’s, were regarded in their community. Perhaps Widstoe alludes to the accusations of being ‘money diggers’ and ‘peepstone users’.

To refute the charge of the Smith family being ‘unworthy people’, Widstoe introduces us to an unsavory character P. Hurlbut, who had collected those affidavits from local Palmyra citizens that painted Joseph and the Smith family in a negative light.[5] In an attempt to show how evil Hurlbut was, Widstoe mentions that Hurlbut was cast out from the Church for adultery. It is interesting to note that most ex member ‘anti-Mormons’ are charged with being adulterers or sinners, otherwise why would anyone leave the so called ‘True Church’. Widstoe tries to deflect the impact of these affidavits by stating, “Competent students [of History] have refused to accept the value of these affidavits; or have ignored them”. He also attempts to further sully the character of Hurlbut/Howe[6] by ins-



Photograph by Welden C. Andersen and Richard E. Turley Jr.

inating that the affidavits may not be truthful and that “Even a casual examination of them [affidavits] shows that they were written by one hand in opposition to Joseph Smith and his claims. It was easy to secure signatures.”[7]

Widstoe then defends the money digging accusations, by confirming that Joseph was once employed to dig for a lost silver mine by a Josiah Stool, but which did not last long.[8] Widstoe gives the reader the impression that it was a one time only event and that the money digging/treasure seeking claims have been entirely exaggerated. Widstoe continues by stating; “Honest historians cannot safely make the charge that Joseph Smith was a professional money digger”.[9] Therefore any historians that don’t agree with him would be, in fact, dishonest.

Widstoe’s last defense is of the charge that Joseph was a ‘peepstone user’. He writes; “Anti-Mormon writers are prone to suggest that the Prophet spent his time in leading people into many a fruitless chase for lost money supposed to be revealed by peepstones”[10]. This is confirmed by ‘honest’ historians today. Of the many ‘treasure seeking’ attempts by Joseph, not one piece of silver or gold or any other treasure was ever found.

Widstoe concludes his remarks by stating, “Carefully examined, the charges against the Smith family and Joseph Smith... fail to be proved. There is no acceptable evidence to support them... Joseph Smith was not a money digger, nor did he deceive people with peepstone claims. It is almost beyond belief that writers who value their reputations, would reproduce these silly and untrue charges. It suggests that they may have set out to destroy “Mormonism”, rather than to detail true history”[11].

So to all you modern day historians: you’ve been warned.

Lets now compare Elder Widstoe’s article with the more recent Ensign October 2015 article titled, “Joseph the Seer”.[12]

Here are a few excerpts:

*““Seeing” and “seers” were part of the American and family culture in which Joseph Smith grew up...*

*“...The young Joseph Smith accepted such familiar folk ways of his day, including the idea of using seer stones to view lost or hidden objects...*

*“...Joseph and others assumed the same for their day... Joseph’s parents, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, affirmed the family’s immersion in this culture and their use of physical objects in this way, and the villagers of Palmyra and Manchester, New York, where the Smiths lived, sought out Joseph to find lost objects before he moved to Pennsylvania in late 1827.”*

It would now appear, that the current leaders of the Church, accept that Joseph was very well known for his use of ‘peepstones’, which is contrary to the words of Apostle Widstoe, or perhaps these writers don’t ‘value their reputations’?

The *Ensign* article further states:

*“In fact, historical evidence shows that in addition to the two seer stones known as “interpreters,” Joseph Smith used at least one other seer stone in translating the Book of Mormon, often placing it into a hat in order to block out light. According to Joseph’s contemporaries, he did this in order to better view the words on the stone.”*

Again, I state that of the many ‘treasure seeking’ attempts by Joseph using the ‘peepstones’, not one piece of silver or gold or any other treasure was ever found. However, it was by the use of these same ‘instruments’ (peepstones or seer stones) that Joseph translated the entire Book of Mormon as we have it today. Perhaps the stones were only meant for translation and not for treasure seeking/-money digging. We can only speculate.

We have come a long way since August 1946. I don't blame Elder Widstoe for not understanding or having a thorough knowledge of the truth about Joseph and his family. Perhaps he was just like me, and all current members of the Church today. We were taught a history that wasn't based on fact; a sanitized version of historical facts that our leaders told us was true and anything else was deemed false and "anti-Mormon". I wonder what Elder Widstoe would say today. Would he be 'inspired and uplifted' by this truth or would he be harmed by it.

---

[1] Apostle Boyd K. Packer, as related by D. Michael Quinn, "Pillars of My Faith," talk delivered at Sunstone Symposium, Salt Lake City, August 19, 1994.

[2] J. Reuben Clark, D. Michael Quinn: *The Church Years*. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1983, 24.

[3] John A. Widstoe, "Evidences and Reconciliations," *The Improvement Era*, August 1946.

[4] *Ibid*, 542.

[5] Widstoe names P. Hurlbut in the collection of affidavits, however these affidavits were published under the name of E D Howe. See E D Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion, from Its Rise to the Present Time* (1834).

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Widstoe, "Evidences and Reconciliations," 542.

[8] *Ibid*, 542.

[9] *Ibid*, 543.

[10] *Ibid*, 543.

[11] *Ibid*, 543.

[12] Richard E. Turley Jr, Robin S Jenson, & Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Joseph The Seer," *The Ensign*, October 2015.