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THE BUILDING OF THE CARDSTON ALBERTA TEMPLE

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> AMANDA
BUESSECKER

The Cardston Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (sometimes known as the Mormon church, hereafter referred to as “the Church”) was the first significant Modern building in Alberta and remains among the province’s largest and most notable religious structures of the early twentieth century (fig. 1). Construction began in 1913 and concluded with dedicatory services on August 26, 1923. While the architecture and community function of the Cardston Temple have been previously analyzed, very little has been published regarding the decade during which it was constructed, and no studies have previously looked at the reception of, and commentary about the Cardston Temple from within non-Mormon sources or other primary documents. The Church’s archival material about the temple during this decade is restricted and not accessible for scholarly purposes, but newspapers and periodicals published throughout North America at the time provide plentiful insight to the costs and furnishings of the temple and to the public’s response to the construction of such a building in Western Canada. This analysis of the primary documents associated with the construction of the Cardston Temple will examine the timeline, costs, materials, and reception of this monolithic edifice.

MORMON PIONEERS IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA

The Mormon pioneers first migrated from Utah to Western Canada in 1887, led by Charles O. Card after whom the town of Cardston would be named. This expansion was motivated by the 1882 Edmunds

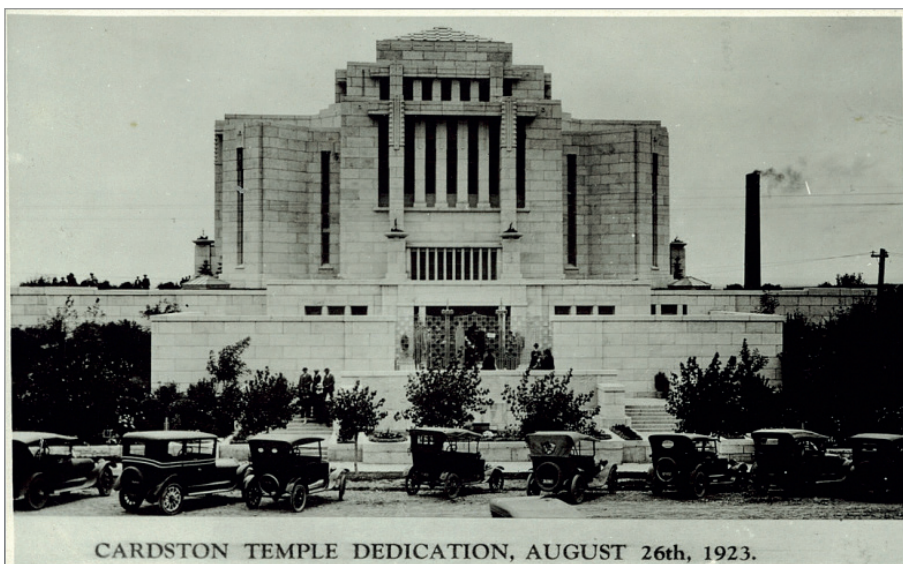


FIG. 1. POSTCARD FROM THE CARDSTON TEMPLE DEDICATION. | PEEL LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA, PC 12050.

Act which threatened fines and jail time for polygamists, and both Mexico and Canada were being explored as potential places to preserve the Mormon matrimonial tradition.¹ Card, under instruction from higher church leaders, selected 41 families for the journey. Many signed up grudgingly for the trip to the “Land Desolation,” a reference to a northern Book of Mormon landscape that was marked by the bones of its previous inhabitants and was contrasted with the land “Bountiful” to the south.² Although most expected the voyage to be temporary, only ten families followed through with their commitment to the trip when spring arrived.³

While preserving plural marriage and escaping incarceration for practicing polygamy may have contributed to the Mormon movement to Alberta, the practice did not become a factor in the settlement’s success.⁴ In 1888, John W. Taylor and Francis M. Lyman, members of Church leadership from Salt Lake City, accompanied Card to Ottawa with a petition to obtain permission for the lawful practice of polygamy in Canada. Their request was “firmly refused” by Justice Minister Sir John Thompson and Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald.⁵ In 1890, Church president Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto and officially renounced the practice of polygamy in the church, and the following decade a penalty of excommunication for those who continued to enter polygamous unions was instated. Defending polygamy may have influenced the settlement in Alberta, but it did not determine the decision to stay.

Card’s attitude toward the “land desolation” was transformed, rather, when he learned about a prophecy made by Joseph Smith in 1843 that the “nation of Great Britain . . . would never persecute the Saints as a nation” and that at



FIG. 2. THE CARDSTON TABERNACLE, 1912. | COURTESY OF THE CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY, THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS.

a future time “we should seek refuge in her dominion.”⁶ The Canadian desolation became a Canadian refuge, and Card was no longer an exile tasked with scouting new land but a pioneer whose mission was to fulfill the prophet’s prediction.⁷

Brooke Brassard argues in her paper “Prairie School in the Prairies” that the years between 1888 and 1912 were formative for the Mormon pioneers in Southern Alberta, with architectural decisions reflecting the community’s transition from temporary refuge to permanent residence. First, small meetinghouses were built, but by the turn of the century the Alberta Mormons were building larger, more permanent structures such as the Alberta Tabernacle (fig. 2). Inspiration for these structures was taken from neighbouring towns, including Lethbridge, where “church architecture typical of the western Canadian frontier” was dominant.⁸ Prior to the construction of the temple, Mormon buildings in Alberta were meant to be “inoffensive”

and to blend with the surroundings.⁹ The Cardston Temple, however, broke from the architectural styles of previous buildings, marking the permanence of the Mormon settlement in the Alberta grasslands. The monolithic structure served as a form of permission for the generation of Latter-day Saints that had grown up in Canada to become truly Canadian; their future was in the Mormon towns of Alberta, not in Utah.

A TEMPLE FOR CARDSTON

Plans to build a temple in Canada were announced by Joseph F. Smith in the semi-annual general conference of the Church on October 4, 1912. It had been more than 35 years since Brigham Young, the second prophet of the Church, announced in 1875 his decision to erect a temple in Mantí; no other church leader had yet initiated the building of new temples since Young’s death. Mormon temples had already established a traditional location on a hill as a way to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy

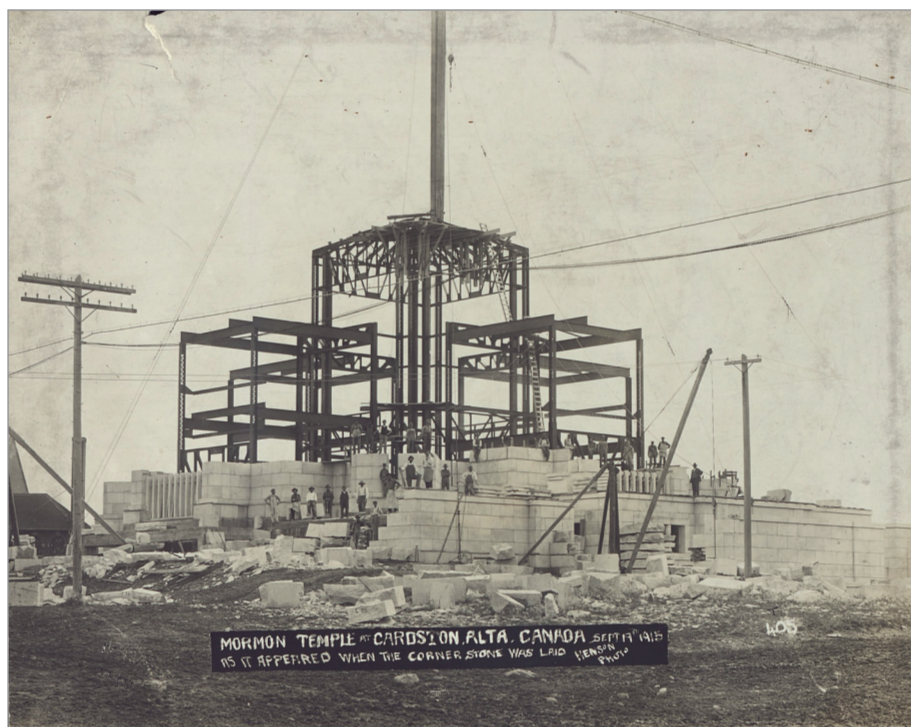


FIG. 3. THE CARDSTON TEMPLE DURING CONSTRUCTION, 1915. | COURTESY OF THE CHURCH HISTORY LIBRARY, THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS.

found in Isaiah 2:2: “In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it,” although there is no doubt that finding a hill in the prairies presented somewhat of a challenge. Two areas were considered: a small hill in Raymond, proposed by the Taylor Stake, and another site in Cardston, favoured by members of the original Alberta Stake established when Mormon pioneers settled in the area.¹⁰ The Cardston site, situated on Lee Creek, was chosen later in the year, fulfilling a prophecy made by John W. Taylor on October 8, 1888, that the specific location would house a temple in the coming years.¹¹

The temple site alongside Lee Creek was dedicated by Joseph F. Smith on July 27, 1913, in a day that Edward J. Wood, Alberta Stake president, described as

“the great day for Canada; *the greatest day in our history!*”¹² Many church leaders gave inspirational sermons, and the thousands congregated on the hill sang hymns including “O Ye Mountains High,” written by Charles Penrose of the First Presidency of the Church, who was present at the site dedication. Ground-breaking for the building occurred later that year on November 5, 1913.¹³

The cornerstone ceremony, an important gathering event in the history of Mormon temple building, took place in September 1915. By then, the foundation of the temple had been constructed (see fig. 3). A metal exoskeleton had been raised, and the cornerstone was laid on Sunday, September 19, in a ceremony led by apostle David O. McKay, who later became the president and prophet of the Church. Edward J. Wood’s journal retells the events of the day:

It had rained nearly all night and was very muddy in the morning, but it didn’t dampen our spirits at all and nearly 2000 people gathered in the tabernacle where we marched in order according to our position and priesthood to the Temple square—headed by Bro. Mackay and took up our positions on a platform erected around the S.E. corner where the stone was ready to set and the following programs of a most memorable event in our history . . . it rained and hailed—but it didn’t matter at all.¹⁴

Like the site dedication, there was much singing, praying, and preaching. A financial statement was given: \$127,450 had been spent. The granite stone was placed in front of a copper box—a time capsule—containing a brief history of Cardston and the temple there, a copy of the *Lethbridge Herald*, and lists of church leaders at the time.¹⁵ The capstone ceremony would occur two years later as the last of the granite was put into place on the temple’s exterior.

The building of the temple was primarily executed by local members of the faith and appears to have proceeded relatively smoothly, though setbacks and some tragedies are recorded. Long breaks in construction were undoubtedly taken due to the harsh winter climate, and the Great War caused further slowdown. On December 18, 1920, at least one tragedy occurred: Rudolph Herr died from injuries sustained six weeks prior when he fell through some wood scaffolding and into the baptistry, breaking an arm and a leg and fracturing his skull. In one touching note written about the end of his life, Herr had, only minutes before his death, been reported “fine” by nurses who had overheard him singing a hymn. “The hymn was Oh My Father,” the account remembers—the same hymn that had been instrumental in his conversion,

as Mormon missionaries sang it on the street of Copenhagen twenty years earlier.¹⁶

COSTS OF THE CARDSTON TEMPLE

As early as 1913, it was understood that the temple in Cardston would increase the value of land in the town for both Mormons and non-Mormons. An advertisement in the *Winnipeg Tribune* announced several lots for sale “within four blocks from the temple site at \$100 each. They will not last long at this price.”¹⁷ Yet, although nearly 7000 Mormons had congregated in Southern Alberta in the quarter of a century since Card brought the first Mormons to Western Canada, the building of such a massive structure was not possible through the meagre financial means of the Canadian Saints.¹⁸ Much of the funding came from Church headquarters, collected from tithing across the continent. The *Salt Lake Telegram* explains, however, that “many thousand dollars were contributed by members of the church in Canada,” and “much of the rough labor on the temple was contributed by members without pay.”¹⁹

While Church archives have few publicly accessible records about the building of the Cardston Temple, there are ample newspaper reports that provide generous insight to the costs associated with construction of the temple and reflect the opinion of the public on its construction. Throughout the early 1920s, newspapers around the continent published notices of its approaching or recent completion, sharing a few sentences or sometimes multi-page spreads about the history and beliefs of the Mormon people. Nearly all articles, regardless of length, mentioned the cost of the edifice. It was also commonly published that the temple, once completed, would be accessible only by

members of the Church. Many articles discussed the Church’s emphasis on eternal families, and the belief that temple work involves the Mormon worshipper performing proxy ordinances, such as baptism, for their deceased ancestors. Some media sources pegged the temple as “odd,” others called it “remarkable,” while another one claimed that the Cardston Temple would “surpass in beauty the church in Salt Lake City.”²⁰

It is unclear what the budget for the temple originally might have been, if such a budget existed at all. When the announcement was made that a temple would be built in Canada, the proposal from the architects is reported to have anticipated a modest cost of a mere \$100,000, and the *Deseret Evening News* placed the time of construction as “about one year.”²¹ Both of these original figures increased tenfold. When construction began, it was quickly evident that such a low figure was unachievable; newspapers later in the year published estimated costs of \$250,000, though even that figure increased exponentially throughout the next decade.²² By 1914, the estimate had increased to \$300,000 in one report and \$400,000 in another.²³ In 1919, *The Transcript Bulletin*, a Utah paper, provided an updated budget of about \$600,000 for the total price.²⁴

A report prepared by the temple recorder provides a breakdown of spending from 1913 to 1917. In 1913-1914, \$73,611 had been spent. Expenditures in 1915 totaled \$162,957, and \$228,037 in 1916. By mid-1917, the cumulative total was \$274,434, with approximately 10% of those funds having been provided by the local population and the remaining 90% originating from the Church’s funds in Salt Lake City.²⁵ By 1922, the *Calgary Herald* reported the cost of construction having reached \$720,000.²⁶ The *Vernal Express*, just prior

to the temple’s dedication in 1923, wrote that the cost had been “about \$750,000,” though compared to other sources that was a very modest estimate indeed.²⁷ The *Morning Register* of Eugene, Oregon, reported that the cost was “in the neighbourhood of \$1,000,000,” a figure corroborated by the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Leader-Telegram* (Wisconsin).²⁸ The one-million-dollar mark was also listed in both the 1920 and 1922 editions of *Popular Mechanics*, a periodical that also claimed the decoration in the Celestial Room alone had “amounted to nearly \$100,000.”²⁹ The highest budget, published three years before the temple was completed, was printed in Salt Lake City as \$1,250,000.³⁰ In contrast, a Presbyterian church was built in Cardston in 1921 for a total cost of \$17,000.³¹

The finest materials were sought for the temple, and construction utilized resources from not only across Canada but across the world. A report created by Sterling W. Williams, the temple recorder, outlines the origins of some of the temple’s materials. Approximately 300 train cars of granite were shipped from the Kootenay Granite Company, quarried near Nelson, British Columbia, nearly 500 kilometres away. The church paid a “very cheap rate” of \$0.55 per cubic foot, for a total of \$350,000.³²

The Canada Cement Company of Exshaw, Alberta, was contracted for 100 cars of cement, each car holding 1000 bags, and the steel was provided by the Manitoba Steel Company of Winnipeg.³³ The floors were tiled by the Elias Morris Company based in Salt Lake City at a cost of \$20,000.³⁴ The local women’s organization might have been responsible for sewing and embroidering linens or drapery in a smaller church meetinghouse, but for the temple this too was outsourced: interior curtains and veils were commissioned

from the Thornton-Smith Company, in Toronto, who described that “no expense has been spared to secure the very best of materials for this work.”³⁵

While it is certain that the numeric figure of the temple’s cost increased over the course of a decade due to inflation, the upward trend demonstrates the desire to complete every aspect of the temple with the finest material. Fewer reports exist as to the costs associated with its interior decoration, though the *Buffalo Courier* (Buffalo, NY) reports the following numbers: the rug on the Celestial room floor “alone cost more than \$7000” and a power plant was built on-site to heat the temple at a cost of \$69,000.³⁶ Chandeliers reported to be of pure bronze were placed throughout the temple, while marble was imported from Italy, Tennessee, Ohio, and Ontario. The paper exclaimed that “the question of expense was simply not considered.”³⁷ Over \$10,000 of gold was used in the decoration, according to a Wisconsin paper.³⁸

Joseph Young Card, the son of Cardston’s founder Charles Card, provided the most extensive report from inside the Church: “baths and toilets are of white marble trimmed with nickel and silver,” “interior electric wiring, only \$8,085,” “roofing of apex, \$13,000; skylights of prismatic glass \$19,111.”³⁹ Card’s report breaks down the total cost as \$1,000,000 for the structure itself and another \$100,000 for the interior furnishings.⁴⁰ While the construction was completed in 1921, the temple was not yet furnished due to a lack of funds—presumably, that final \$100,000. According to one oral tradition, Stake President Edward J. Wood announced to the architects Pope and Burton that he would soon take a trip to Utah and purchase manufactured furniture for the temple. In an offer that would have been typical of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose

architectural style heavily influenced the Cardston Temple, the architects proposed that they custom design the furniture to match the aura of the building they had laboriously designed—free of charge. It seems they were taken up on their offer.⁴¹

Although the temple was the first begun outside of Utah, it was not the first to be completed. On October 3, 1915, the Church announced its intention to build a temple in the Sandwich Islands. The selected site was in Laie, on the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii. The Laie temple, also designed by Pope and Burton, was a much smaller version of the Cardston Temple, at only 42,000 square feet compared to the Cardston’s nearly 90,000. The Laie temple was dedicated in 1919—though the relatively quick construction time was partly due to the fact that, unlike in Western Canada, construction could take place year-round—and is reported to have cost only \$200,000.⁴² While the cost of the Cardston Temple seems astronomical compared to that of the smaller structure in Hawaii, the price tag pales in comparison to what the Church had spent on the Salt Lake City Temple, and appears to be in line with the three other Utah temples that predate Cardston. President Woodruff confirmed in 1895 that the Salt Lake City Temple had cost a total of \$3,469,118.⁴³ A 1978 article in the Church’s magazine on the Manti Temple listed the cost of that building as just shy of \$1,000,000.⁴⁴ The Logan Temple is reported to have cost less—approximately \$600,000—but the fact is that the Church did not have a reputation of penny-pinching when it came to temple building.⁴⁵ In 1914, the *Daily Republican* of Pennsylvania listed the prices for the Salt Lake City Temple at a shocking \$4,000,000—possibly adjusted for inflation over the previous twenty years—while the St. George, Manti, and Logan temples were reported as each

costing \$3,000,000.⁴⁶ These three temples were each approximately 100,000 square feet—comparable to Cardston—while the Salt Lake City Temple was the largest, doubling the other Pioneer temples at over 200,000 square feet.

Prior to the temple’s dedication, while furniture was being completed, an open house was held. As is custom today, members of the public were invited to tour the interior of the building prior to its dedication, after which point the building would be accessible only to members of the Church with temple recommends. Although there was no fee to enter the temple, the town of Cardston certainly did not waste an opportunity to profit from those who wished to see it. A 1923 ad in the *Lethbridge Herald* described the temple as “one of the greatest architectural achievements on the continent,” and reminded potential visitors that “this will be the last year of the edifice being open to the public for inspection.”⁴⁷ Special campsites were reserved for tourists and the ad also reminded potential visitors that Cardston was “a nice motor drive from Waterton Lakes.”⁴⁸ The advertisement was not printed for lack of prior tourists, however, as over 10,000 people are reported to have visited the site in 1922 alone.⁴⁹ In total, over 50,000 tourists visited the temple prior to its dedication, with special trains from Calgary being arranged to bring the onlookers into Cardston.⁵⁰

The Cardston Temple was a significant architectural accomplishment both for the Mormon Pioneers and in the architectural landscape of Southern Alberta. It remains today as one of Alberta’s largest religious structures and is an important feature in the history of Modern architecture in Western Canada. The temple’s distinguished design, mammoth size, and source of materials made it noteworthy

throughout the country, and with a final cost of over \$1,000,000 and construction spanning an entire decade, there was ample time for the public to become involved in the unfolding of the temple's progress. Most frequently, the public was impressed with the temple: the *Vancouver Sun* described it as beautiful, stating that "even the craftsmanship of King Solomon [was] surpassed by these builders," though the authors of *Popular Mechanics* found the temple "odd" and referred to the "iron-clad rules" of the Mormon "cult."⁵¹ The overarching theme among nearly all reports was that no expense was spared. Today, the Cardston Temple's legacy is largely forgotten by the general population, who are not permitted to enter the building. During construction, however, the Cardston Temple was richly recorded and documented by those outside the Mormon community throughout Canada and the United States.

NOTES

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2. Tagg, Melvin S. and Lethbridge Stake Historical Committee, 1968, *A History of the Mormon Church in Canada*, Lethbridge, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, p. 27. See also Alma 22:30-31, *Book of Mormon*.
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6. Lehr, *id.*, p. 118.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Brassard, Brooke, 2016, "Prairie School in the Prairie: An Architectural Journey through Mormon History in Southern Alberta, 1888-1923," *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 42, no. 2, p. 143.
9. *Id.*, p. 148.
10. A Stake in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a group of wards—or congregations—similar to a Catholic diocese.
11. Tagg, *A History of the Mormon Church*, *op. cit.*, p. 72. See also Doig and Stone, "The Alberta Settlement," *op. cit.*, p. 63.
12. Edward J. Wood Diary, "Sun. July 29, 1913," in *Edward J. Wood Collection, 1884-1982; Journals, 1912 January-1915 December*, Church History Library, MS 7313. Emphasis original.
13. Tagg, *A History of the Mormon Church*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. "Rudolf Herr's story as told by his granddaughter Elayne Fitzner and grandson John Hollingsworth," *Cardston Historical Society Digital Archive*, PH 8133, Box 1, fd. 2, no. 24-26 [<https://www.blackfootdigitalibrary.com/digital/collection/cardston/id/416/rec/1>], accessed January 27, 2020.
17. "A Quarter of a Million Dollars," *The Winnipeg Tribune*, May 31, 1913, p. 12.
18. Wood, *The Alberta Temple*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
19. "Great Mormon Temple Constructed at Outlay of \$1,250,000 in City of Cardston Is Nearing Completion," *Salt Lake Telegram*, October 24, 1920, p. 2.
20. "Mormons Build Odd Temple in Canadian Town," *Popular Mechanics*, vol. 34, 1920, p. 180; see also "A Mormon Temple in Alberta Town," *Leader-Telegram*, December 17, 1919, p. 8.
21. "Mormon Temple for Alberta," *Chippewa Herald-Telegram*, February 23, 1913, p. 12. This number was reiterated in "Site for Temple," *Deseret Evening News*, July 28, 1913, p. 2; and in the "Passing News," *Improvement Era*, vol. 16, no. 5, March 1913, p. 524.
22. "Mormons in Canada," *The Windsor Star*, December 10, 1913, p. 7. See also "A Quarter of a Million Dollars," *op. cit.*, p. 12.
23. "Mormon Temple in Canada First on British Soil," *The Daily Republican*, June 1, 1914, p. 3. See also *Calgary Herald*, January 15, 1914, p. 7.
24. "Seventh Temple of Mormon Church Dedicated," *The Ogden Standard*, September 23, 1915, p. 6; and *The Transcript Bulletin*, June 6, 1919, p. 7.
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27. "Cardston Temple to Be Dedicated August 26," *Vernal Express*, August 3, 1923.
28. "Huge Temple Dedicated," *Morning Register*, September 2, 1923, p. 15. See also "Marble and Lumber from Lands Remote Used by Mormons for Cardston Temple," *The Vancouver Sun*, July 3, 1921, p. 7; and "A Mormon Temple in Alberta Town," *op. cit.*
29. "Mormons Build Odd Temple in Canadian Town," *op. cit.*
30. "Great Mormon Temple Constructed at Outlay of \$1,250,000," *op. cit.*
31. "Cardston Temple," *Calgary Herald*, *op. cit.*
32. "The Alberta Temple: Fact Sheet," University of Lethbridge Digitized Collections, p. 2, [<https://digitallibrary.uleth.ca/digital/collection/cardston/id/713/rec/1>], accessed October 3, 2022. See also: Williams, "Items Concerning the Building of the Temple," *op. cit.*, p. 2.
33. Williams, *id.*, p. 2-3.
34. *Id.*, p. 3.
35. Card, J.Y., 1923, "Alberta Temple is Masterpiece of Construction and Finish," *Lethbridge Herald*, August 28. Also available from *Cardston Alberta Temple: An Historical Record*, Digital Archive, University of Lethbridge.
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37. *Ibid.*

38. "A Mormon Temple in Alberta Town," *op. cit.*
39. Card, "Alberta Temple is Masterpiece of Construction and Finish," *op. cit.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. Personal correspondence with Michael Gibb, January 22, 2019. Gibb was the leading architect of the renovation of the Cardston Temple in the 1990s. Another version of the story is recounted in Wood, *The Alberta Temple*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
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50. Tagg, *A History of the Mormon Church*, *op. cit.*, p. 73-74.
51. "Mormons Build Odd Temple in Canadian Town," *op. cit.*; and "Mormon Temple Is Designed on Straight Lines," *Popular Mechanics*, vol. 37, no. 3, 1922, p. 333.