

THE
HILL CUMORAH MONUMENT.

AN INSPIRED CREATION OF
TORLEIF S. KNAPHUS



BY ALLEN P. GERRITSEN

*The Hill Cumorah Monument, in enduring bronze and granite,
stands as a testimony to all nations, kindred, tongues and people that the
angel spoken of by John the Revelator has indeed come to earth. It also expresses
our thanks to God for His kindness in revealing these things to us.*

—Torleif S. Knaphus, June 1935¹





ARTIST AND SCULPTOR Torleif S. Knaphus was born on a farm in western Norway on 14 December 1881 to a family with Lutheran ties, strong family values, a love of the scriptures, and a desire to serve God. As young as age five, Torleif tended the family's sheep in the hills just beyond the farm. It was there that he first discovered his love for art. Having noticed his interest in nature's beauties, Torleif's mother gave him a sketchbook and encouraged him to draw what he saw while on the hillsides. He kept the book hidden from his father, fearing that he would think it was a waste of time. But Torleif found great joy in expressing himself in those elementary drawings.²

The Maturing Artist

After a short time, Torleif's father recognized the talent his young son had been given. Torleif painted portraits of famous people he saw in the newspaper, and his father would put them on the family's barn by the road for people to see and hopefully buy. Young Torleif also carved heads of birds and people in wood.³ An entry in his journal reveals his early love of art and the development of his artistic temperament:

As I grew, I turned out to be different than my brothers. . . . One could find me sitting with my little sketchbook eagerly occupied creating what my imagination brought to mind. . . . And in the warm twilight of summer evenings one could have seen me leave my bedroom and run outside to enjoy the spiritual sweetness of the beautiful summer night. . . . This was solace to my soul.⁴

Fifteen-year-old Torleif started his art apprenticeship at a nearby town by painting houses and decorative furniture. At 17, like his Viking ancestors before him, he became a merchant seaman on the North Sea. On his voyages he was impressed with

the beauties of the ocean sunrises and sunsets, the stunning midnight sun, and the northern lights.⁵ After two years, and partly due to his mother's pleadings, Torleif gave up being a seaman. He explained: "When our little vessel was tossed around by giant blue-green waves under the most dramatic sky in the great Atlantic zone, I decided firmly to be an artist."⁶ Though Torleif was a promising athlete, in 1901, at age 19, he traveled to the Norwegian capital of Kristiania (now Oslo) to pursue formal studies in art.

While Torleif was living in Kristiania, a roommate tackled and pinned him and another friend to the floor, "demanding us to buy tickets to a concert," Torleif later recorded. The three roommates enjoyed the Latter-day Saint musical concert, which introduced Torleif to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The three also went to other Latter-day Saint meetings. Torleif recalled, "It was easy for me to see and understand that this was the only true Church of God."⁷

Three months after being introduced to the gospel, 21-year-old Torleif was baptized in a fjord frozen over with two inches of ice that had to be cut through. Torleif's strong desire to be with the other Saints in Salt Lake City led him to turn down an art scholarship in Rome and to immigrate to



Utah in 1905. He found comfort in attending meetings with other Saints who had come from Scandinavia. Torleif particularly enjoyed serving the Lord through researching the lives of his ancestors, doing their temple work, and sharing his testimony through his artwork.

Sculptor for the Church

Emelia (Millie) Christensen became Torleif Knaphus's wife in 1909. Soon after, Torleif began to work for the church on numerous art projects.⁸ He started with decorative work in the Salt Lake Tabernacle and other church buildings, including carving the large rosette gracing the ceiling of the Salt Lake Temple's celestial room as well as the decorative sconces in that room.

In 1913 he went on a mission for the church to study art in Paris for one and a half years. On the way back to Utah, he studied art for four more months in New York City. After arriving home, he was asked to help with the artwork in the Hawaii Temple. Next he was commissioned to sculpt the oxen for the Alberta Temple's baptismal font as well as the awe-inspiring frieze "Jesus, the Fountain-head of the Church," which depicts Jesus teaching the woman of Samaria at the well. For the Arizona Temple, the church commissioned him to sculpt the baptismal font and the terra-cotta friezes around the exterior of the temple.

A few years before the church acquired the Hill Cumorah property in 1928, Torleif completed perhaps his most notable artwork—the original *Handcart Pioneers* statue. In 1947 he completed a larger-than-life replica of that statue for the Salt Lake Temple grounds. Torleif also sculpted busts of several church and civic leaders and was known among the Brethren on a first-name basis.

The Proposal to the Brethren

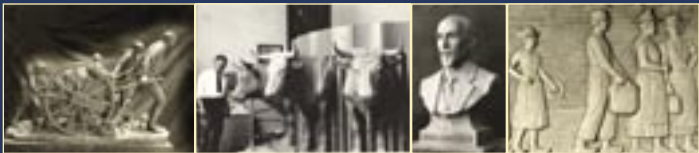
From the time the church acquired the property comprising the Hill Cumorah, Torleif had often spoken to the Brethren about creating a monument on that hallowed hill. His firm testimony of the restoration of the gospel created a desire to honor in a tangible way the sacred event of the angel Moroni's visiting Joseph Smith and eventually giving him the gold plates to translate. On several occasions in his life, Torleif sought guidance and inspiration by climbing historic Ensign Peak overlooking the Salt Lake Valley and making his projects a matter of prayer. This time in 1929 was no different.

Torleif's creative thoughts for a future Hill Cumorah Monument were not written in any of his journals, probably because they involved a sacred experience that he was reluctant to relate in detail. However, two accounts provide glimpses of this creative process and the unforgettable experience that accompanied it.

The first account is associated with Willard and Rebecca Bean, who lived at the Joseph Smith family farm during their 24-year mission in Palmyra, New York, to acquire properties in that area for the church. They became very good friends with Torleif Knaphus over the years. In 1964, at a fireside in Salt Lake City, Sister Bean shared these remarkable details:

Brother Knaphus told me this story. . . . As soon as he heard that we owned the Hill Cumorah, he started making sketches of what he thought an Angel Moroni monument and statue should look like. No one asked him to do this or knew what he was doing. After he had finished seven sketches, one evening all alone he climbed Ensign Peak which looks southward over Salt Lake Valley. In the darkness of night he laid the seven sketches out on the ground

Sculptor for the Church. See sidebar at end of article.



The church authorities were increasingly impressed with Torleif's work. For the Washington DC Stake Center, they asked him to make a smaller copy (11 feet 6 inches) of Cyrus E. Dallin's angel Moroni statue that stands atop the Salt Lake Temple. Torleif's copy now stands in the Museum of Church History and Art in Salt Lake City, and duplicates cap the spires of the Idaho Falls, Atlanta Georgia, and Boston Massachusetts Temples.⁹



and then he knelt in prayer asking the Lord if he had done the wrong thing. He asked the Lord to show him which one would be the right one to take to the Church Authorities, and if it was right and proper for him to even go to them. When he opened his eyes there was a light all around him and he could see every one of the seven sketches, even though it was dark. And then he saw an angel¹⁰ pointing with his finger to the one that he [Brother Knaphus] thought was the best and heard the angel say, “This is the one.” And then he asked, “How will I approach the Brethren? What will they think? Have I done the right thing to do this?” Then he, the angel, said, “You go to the Church offices in the morning. They will be waiting for you.”¹¹

Torleif went to the Church Administration Building the next morning to meet with the Brethren. After proposing that a monument be placed at the recently acquired Hill Cumorah, he laid before them the seven drawings¹² that depicted the monument and the angel Moroni. They looked them over and unanimously adopted the design that the heavenly finger had pointed to the previous night. The design was set in place, and permission was given for Torleif to continue with the project.

The second account of Torleif’s sacred experience comes from his second wife, Rebecca Marie Knaphus. She said the artist once told her that, during this period of time, Moroni visited him. She said he described him as being dressed in a white military-type outfit. It was an experience too sacred for him to elaborate on, even to her. She said that he gave no details to her about how, when, or where

the sacred event occurred and that he seldom spoke about it.¹³

The church commissioned Torleif to sculpt the 10-foot, gold-plated statue of the angel Moroni and to design and create the granite pillar and base of the monument (the latter two totaling 30 feet in height). He spent five years on the design and creation of this monument—more than double the time spent on any other single art project he undertook in his life.¹⁴ That a lot of thought and prayer went into this monument is seen in the detail of the angel Moroni statue and the bronze reliefs at the monument’s base as well as in the surprising degree of symbolism the sculptor employed.



The design and creation of the Angel Moroni Monument were Knaphus’s consuming passion for five years. All photos in this article courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted.



Symbolism of the Monument

Fortunately, the sculptor explicitly wrote of the monument's symbolism because of a special, personal experience.¹⁵ When David O. McKay, then second counselor in the First Presidency, visited the completed monument at the Hill Cumorah, he marveled at the imposing granite base and wondered about any possible significance or symbolism. When Torleif explained what his design intended to



The monument's rich symbolism is elegantly subdued yet deeply meaningful.

portray, President McKay was impressed. He asked Torleif to write down his explanation so the church could produce a plaque spelling out the symbolism for visitors to the monument. Placed several yards from the monument itself, the plaque explains:

THE SHAFT AND THE ORNAMENTATIONS THEREON SYMBOLIZE THE ADMINISTRATIVE PATTERN OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS WHICH WAS ORGANIZED BY REVELATION APRIL 6, 1830, IN HARMONY WITH THAT OF THE ORIGINAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH. THE REPRESENTATION OF LINES OF LIGHT FLOWING DOWN THE CENTER SYMBOLIZES THE PRESIDENT OF THE CHURCH, THE PILLARS ON EACH SIDE, HIS TWO COUNSELORS. THE DESIGN ABOVE THE PANEL, WITH TWELVE CONVENTIONAL LIGHTS, REPRESENTS THE TWELVE APOSTLES WHO ARE CALLED TO BE SPECIAL WITNESSES OF JESUS CHRIST. A SIMILAR ORNAMENTATION ON THE CORNERS SYMBOLIZES THE SEVEN PRESIDENTS OF SEVENTIES WHO ARE SPECIAL AMBASSADORS TO PREACH THE GOSPEL MESSAGE. THE ORNAMENTATION ON THE CORNERS BELOW THE PANELS REPRESENTS THE PRESIDING BISHOPRIC WHO OFFICIATE IN TEMPORAL THINGS.¹⁶

The Hill Cumorah Monument was the sculptor's own expression to the world of the historic event when the angel Moroni delivered the ancient records known as the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith. Torleif explained:

The Hill Cumorah Monument has an appearance of the symbolic pillar of light with upward leading lines so designed as to draw the thought of man towards Heaven and God and give heed to the Gospel plan.

The large figure at the top of the shaft represents Moroni in a position as though calling the inhabitants of the Earth to reverence of the Gospel message. His right hand is pointed towards heaven and in his left hand he holds the record.

WEST



On the west panel is shown Moroni delivering the plates to the young man Joseph, indeed one of the most remarkable dealings of God with man. God did not only reveal and speak to man but through His holy servant brought tangible material plates on which was written the Gospel plan as Jesus taught it to the people on this continent after His death and resurrection in Palestine.

... [O]n the south panel [are] three others [who] were permitted to see them by the power and glory of God. An angel of the Lord stood before them holding the plates in his hands and showed them the engravings thereon. He commanded them also to testify of the same and a voice

was heard from above saying that this record was true and the translation is correct. In addition to these witnesses, Joseph was permitted to show the plates to eight other men who handled them and examined the inscription thereon. This is shown on the east panel.

The inscription of the north panel is taken from the last book of this record called the “Book of Moroni,” which consists mostly of counsels and exhortations [*sic*] to the people of the time this record should come forth.¹⁷

SOUTH



It was through careful planning that this north panel containing the exhortation of Moroni faced the Sacred Grove, three miles away, where Joseph Smith received the heavenly visit of the Father and his Son.¹⁸

Torleif took time to meticulously hand carve in clay the north panel with the wording of Moroni’s challenge. Torleif’s preteen daughter, Marie Knaphus, was visiting Torleif at his studio when she asked the artist why the last panel just had words on it and why he didn’t do another “pretty” panel instead. Realizing a spiritual teaching moment, the caring father put his art tools down, swiveled his stool, and looked directly into the eyes of his young daughter. He said, “Dear, this *is* the prettiest panel of all, and I hope that one day you’ll come to understand, like I have, the true meaning of these special words”.¹⁹

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10:4)

EAST



NORTH





The Image of an Angel

Torleif envisioned the angel Moroni not as the world sees a “typical angel” but as the strong, ancient American prophet who was also a warrior and a respected leader among his people. With approval given for the monument, Torleif searched for an ideal candidate to pose for the image of the angel—undoubtedly the same image that was still fresh in his mind. He found the appropriate physique in a new friend, Elwin Clark, a bricklayer who had recently constructed a fireplace for the artist at his home in the Sugarhouse area of Salt Lake City. Clark had the muscular body Torleif sought to depict, and he agreed to pose for this special assignment.²⁰

However, Torleif felt that Elwin Clark’s face was too young to represent the mature and stately visage of the prophet Moroni. Torleif prayed and fasted to find a suitable model for the face of the angel. Because he traveled by public transportation to and from his studio in Salt Lake City, Torleif frequently walked wherever he needed to go once he was downtown. He used those occasions to search for an appropriate model. One day an older, bearded gentleman caught his attention. After following him for quite some time, Torleif explained in his “thick Norwegian accent,”²¹ that he would like to use the gentleman’s face to depict Moroni of old. The man was a rancher who had just moved back to Utah from Wyoming. With much discussion, Torleif finally persuaded him to follow him to his studio.



Because of his muscular physique, Elwin Clark was selected by Knaphus to pose for the sculpting of Moroni’s body. Photo courtesy of the Clark family.



Elwin Clark’s father, Hyrum Don Carlos Clark, was picked out of a crowd by Knaphus to be the model for Moroni’s face. Photo courtesy of the Clark family.



The statue of the angel Moroni near completion.

Younger Elwin Clark was already in the studio when Torleif brought the rancher in to pose for the face of the angel Moroni. To Torleif’s surprise, the older gentleman was Hyrum Don Carlos Clark, Elwin’s father.²² Torleif and the two Clarks realized they had been chosen as an answer to Torleif’s prayers to find suitable models for the image of the angel.

The Placement of the Monument

A tragedy came to Torleif during the construction of the Hill Cumorah Monument. His wife suddenly died in 1931, and he was left with seven children ranging in age from 20 years down to 16 months. He was both father and mother to his children for the majority of the time he worked on the monument.

In the summer of 1934, one year before the completion and dedication of the monument, Torleif accompanied Presiding Bishop Sylvester Q. Cannon and church architect Lorenzo Young and



their wives to the Hill Cumorah in New York. There they were to meet with the mission president and his wife. Torleif recounted this visit in his journal:

As we came to Palmyra, it seemed like coming home. It appears so clean and nice. There are large beautiful shade trees, nicely preserved and well-painted homes and stores. We found the road leading to the Smith Farm and a few minutes later, we were there.

We met Brother Willard Bean in charge of the Smith Farm and other Church property there. After a few moments' conversation, we drove over to the Hill Cumorah. As we got the first sight of the Hill, it appeared much finer in contour and line than I ever expected; and as we came nearer, it held its own in beauty and general appearance.

We drove up on the very top and what a wonderful sight it was. Rich fields, rolling hills with groves and farmhouses. . . . It was with quite a feeling of reverence that I walked over that ground where heavenly beings had walked and talked to man in this modern time. I felt the importance and responsibility of my visit there, and humbly wished that I would be able to finish the work I was doing in commemorating the

restoration of the ancient American records.²³

One of the main reasons Torleif was sent to the Hill Cumorah was to establish an exact location for the monument and the direction it should face. "We proceeded and experimented just where to place the Monument and what way to turn it," Torleif recorded. "We went down, drove up and down the highway, passing the Hill so as to see on which place it would appear the best and back again to the top of the Hill. The sun was just setting in the West, throwing its last mid-



Sculptor Torleif Knaphus oversees the placement of the gold-plated statue atop its imposing granite base and pillar.





The Angel Moroni Monument is a tribute to Torleif Knaphus's faith and testimony as well as a testament of the Restoration.

summer glow over the beautiful landscape. The pale full moon had just risen in the eastern sky, giving a beautiful contrast to the warm floating clouds.”²⁴ The next day the decision was made to place the monument so that the gold-leafed bronze statue would face north toward the Sacred Grove and the Smith family farm. It would also be facing what was then the Canandaigua Road. In 1934 the hill was fairly devoid of trees. By the time the monument

was dedicated the next year, 10,000 trees had been planted on Hill Cumorah.

In 1976 church leaders decided to rotate the angel Moroni statue 90 degrees to the west to face Highway 21 and to be in view of the ever-increasing pageant audiences. It was also decided to undertake a 30-year project to replace most of the trees with hardwood trees such as maple, ash, and beech.²⁵

Torleif made one more visit to the Hill Cumorah when the monument was erected and dedicated on 21 July 1935. President Heber J. Grant gave the dedicatory prayer to a crowd of over 2,000 attendees, in which he traced the pilgrimage of “a persecuted people” from New York State through Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and finally into the Great Salt Lake Basin in Utah.²⁶ President David O. McKay offered further remarks concerning the history of the church and declared, “There is no monument in the world today with which greater things are associated.”²⁷

In 1940, at age 58, Torleif Knaphus married Rebecca Marie Jacobson and later had six additional children. He died at age 83 on 14 June 1965 in Salt Lake City.

When we ponder the spiritual guidance that Torleif sought and received for the Hill Cumorah Monument, we realize that he was an instrument in the hands of the Lord in creating a tribute to his own testimony of the gospel. The humble Norwegian immigrant who found the restored gospel was privileged with the rare opportunity to add his testimony to the great latter-day work in a most inspiring and enduring manner that will continue to touch countless lives. Referring to the monument, he stated in his typical humble manner:

I trust that the imperfection of my work will not be [a]n offense, but that whoever sees this monument will investigate and accept the Gospel message as I have done, as it is the most precious thing to receive.²⁸ ❏

TORLEIF S. KNAPHUS

SCULPTOR FOR THE CHURCH

In addition to the Hill Cumorah Monument, Torleif Knaphus worked on many other projects for the Church—some very well known, others not so well known. Included here are a few of those pieces.



Handcart Pioneers statue
on Temple Square



Bust of President
Heber J. Grant



Joseph Receiving the Plates from the Angel
Moroni Monument



Oxen for
baptismal font
in the Oakland
Temple



Arizona Temple relief 1



Arizona Temple relief 2



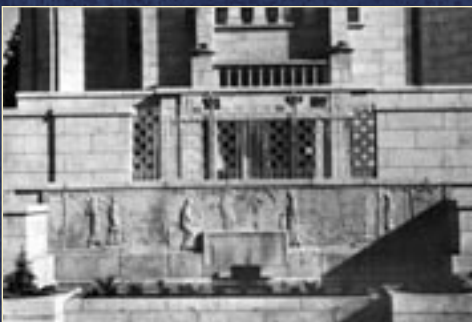
Torleif next to his School Children's Monument at the Salt Lake City and County Building



Melchizedek Priesthood Restored relief



Angel Moroni statue for the Los Angeles Temple



Cardston Temple relief



Torleif sitting in front of Arizona Temple relief 3