

**Interview with Dwight Schwendiman
Saturday, April 30, 2022
The Hill Cumorah Legacy Project**

Recorded over Zoom
Interviewee: Dwight Schwendiman
Interviewer: Daniel Gorman Jr.
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Transcript

[00:00]

Dwight Schwendiman: Got it.

Dan Gorman: Today is Saturday, April 30, 2022, after a very busy semester. [laughs] My name is Dan Gorman, and I am speaking to Dwight Schwendiman about the Hill Cumorah Pageant. Good afternoon, Dwight.

Dwight Schwendiman: Good afternoon.

Dan Gorman: And we are speaking over Zoom. I am in Rochester; you're in Utah.

Dwight Schwendiman: Yes.

Dan Gorman: So, to begin, Dwight, how did you become involved in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Did you grow up in the Church? Were you a convert?

Dwight Schwendiman: I grew up in the Church. My father was from southeastern Idaho, and my mother was from Salt Lake.

Dan Gorman: Mmm. And what was your career, [or] is your career?

Dwight Schwendiman: My career? I did graduate work, was a research chemist for ten years with Eastman-Kodak Company in Rochester, New York, after which I switched over into computer systems and was involved in the development and—the carrying it out to the different

plants of computer software that was used for the manufacturing of film and paper products. But I was involved both in the development as well as the training on that.

Dan Gorman: And working at RIT and going to school at the University of Rochester, I am well acquainted with Kodak. [laughter]

Dwight Schwendiman: [laughing] Although it's a much smaller company now than it was when I was there.

Dan Gorman: It is, but we have lots of buildings named after Kodak executives and Eastman this and that.

Dwight Schwendiman: Understandable [best guess].

Dan Gorman: So, Dwight, how did you first learn about the Hill Cumorah Pageant? Do you remember roughly when that was?

Dwight Schwendiman: Um, probably my first experience with Pageant was about 1957. My parents had relocated from Utah and Idaho and were—I grew up in Illinois, and we usually came west to visit family, but in '57 we went east to see some of the historic sites in the East. And one of the things we did was stop and see the Hill Cumorah Pageant. And the only thing that I can remember of that was sitting on planks that were on cement blocks that had been set up as seating, much more crude or ... [indistinct] [than] was at the time later, when I was involved.

Dan Gorman: Seeing the Pageant that early in the 1950s, and then being involved in it on and off for another—almost 60 years, you were privy to the script changing over time. What do you remember about the show back in the '50s?

Dwight Schwendiman: Frankly, at that point, very little, but where I can start to say remembering things... We moved to Rochester in the '70s, and so the script in the '70s was *pretty much* the same as was in the '50s, as I understand the history of it. In the mid-'50s, the—

there was a recorded soundtrack that was recorded and played, with the characters on the hillside pantomiming to the soundtrack. In the late—in the '70s, that was pretty much the same.

Costuming started to change about that time, and by the late '80s, a very significant change had been made in the costuming. The Pageant talks about two different groups of people [in] the American—the ancient Americas, between approximately 400 AD and 1000—or, one—400 BC and 1000 AD, and one of the groups of people were nomads and hunters, and so the costuming for them got into furs and antlers and things like that, where before [05:00] ... eh, what I remember are more head scarves and tunics and short skirts for both men and women.

Dan Gorman: And during this period where you lived in Rochester [and] had opportunities to see the Pageant evolving, what kind of roles did you hold in your local ward or stake?

Dwight Schwendiman: Up until—from [the] mid-'70s until late '80s, the types of things that I was involved with was either security on the Hill, keeping people from going into restricted areas where the cast was, or primarily it was parking cars [unclear—"in the back"?], and those got to be interesting experiences, especially when it was raining. We tried to move the cars in and out so that everybody had a chance to move, and you weren't just sitting there, waiting through the front half of a lot to leave while *you're* in the back. And I remember, one night, I was—I'd stopped—stepped between two cars so that I could get another line of cars to go out. And the guy who is—who I'd just stepped in front of, leaned out his window and said, "I'm with them; I don't know where I'm going," and put his bumper right up against my legs! And I said, "Okay! You can go." And [laughs] I let him go, and I got around behind him. And everybody else after that was kind of happy, just wait[ing] for their next turn. So [laughs], you meet all kinds of people.

Dan Gorman: And, aside from the Hill, too, I was thinking even about your local ward in Rochester—did you hold any leadership positions?

Dwight Schwendiman: I did. In the late '80s, I served as a bishop of one of the congregations. [A] bishop is a lay leader, the lay minister for the congregation. Later, in the '90s through—from about 1994, to 199—er, to 2003, I was in what's called the Stake Presidency, which is the administrative group of men who supervise a dozen or so units of the Church. So, I had different opportunities to serve in leadership positions.

Dan Gorman: Before we started this interview, you mentioned that, during the 1990s, you had an opportunity to be—you and your family—to be cast members in the Pageant. Would you like to talk about that experience?

Dwight Schwendiman: Uh, yes. In 1998 [sic; 1988], the script for the Pageant changed. So, we were there that very first year. And part of—and not only was there a new script, but a whole new staging. And, where before there had been wooden stages at different places on the hill, it was the new staging; it was fiberglass and aluminum, fiberglass gratings on top of aluminum [trades?], going up the hill, seven different stages. And you had to be careful going across them because, if you fell, the fiberglass grating could do a job on your knees and your legs. Over the years, rubber matting was put over them. The grating was used, and then the matting had holes in it so that, if it rained, the water would drain down, and it would not puddle on the stage.

In '88, my family and I were cast members. We were all over the place in different—doing different things. And we—my family and I were in one of the very last scenes *of* the show. The following year, that scene was taken out because it didn't *fit*. It just didn't flow with the rest of what it [the Pageant] was trying to do. And so, they [10:00] stopped at an earlier point, after telling of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the Prophet Joseph Smith, instead of

bringing it up to [the] modern day, they just kind of stopped at that [best guess]. And then, in '92, '94, and '96, we participated three more times. In each Pageant, my wife and I were what were called cast team leaders. Part of that responsibility of being cast team leader is the—if you're not in rehearsal, you had to be *doing* something. And so, the cast was broken down into groups of about 20—20 to 30 people, either by age group or—for the older couples, it was by marriage groups, and the cast team leaders were responsible to organize programs or activities that the cast members would be involved in when they weren't rehearsing.

Dan Gorman: We've spoken to a few other people who were cast team leaders or who have—had fond memories of their groups. One of the things that people have mentioned is that the different cast teams, some of them would be split up by age group. So, which years of participants would you work with? Young people? Older people?

Dwight Schwendiman: Uh, the very first year, in '88, we were responsible for—I think they were 11-year-old boys. And these are boys who had never had cast teams before. Most of them were children of staff members, and they'd already been at the Hill for a week to ten days, and so they were used to being able to do whatever they wanted, and wherever—go wherever they wanted. And to have a couple of adults (who really didn't know what they were doing) try to be responsible for them, uh, it caused for some—some tensions between us. By the end, things *kind of* worked out, but at the very beginning, it was tough. And then, we were camping in the campground just north of the Hill, and so my wife was up there most of the time, taking care of laundry and cooking meals for the family, and I was left alone with these dozen or so boys. And I was told once that I was the only person they'd ever met who didn't like being part of the Hill Cumorah Pageant cast.

Later, when we came back, we were with adults—adult couples—and that was *much* more pleasant for my wife. Plus, we were not staying in the campgrounds. That made it easier for her.

Dan Gorman: One other thing that's come up is that some participants would commute from their homes. Others, as you said, would stay at Zion's Camp. Others would bunk at local college dormitories that were —

Dwight Schwendiman: Yes, yes.

Dan Gorman: Rented out. And I'm curious, within the population of the cast, was there any sort of a sense of competing identities? Like, "We're the Zion's block!" "We're the dormitory block!"

Dwight Schwendiman: Those who were not in Zion's Camp always wanted to get it there, either to be part of the campground or to join after the production because they considered there was too much fun going on in the camp. And one of the things that were—was done was that, every night, between the end of the show and before a "lights out" was signaled, everybody buddy would get together in the pavilion and share food. And—particularly the teenagers who were not in Zion's Camp wanted to get in because that just seemed to be a lot of fun. Later, during the time—when I was President of the Pageant, to reduce that competition, we started to do the same thing down at the local college dorm. And that was able to be done for a couple [15:00] of reasons. One was we—for *years, many* years, going back into the '80s, the Pageant cast had stayed at the college dorms at Hobart and William Smith College[s] in Geneva. Well, in about 2010—2009, 2010—the local bus company—school bus company—that the Pageant had used for years, to provide transportation back and forth, was bought out by a company in Rochester. And not only—and the prices went up significantly. They didn't want to leave their

buses out on—at the Hill, which had always been done before. They wanted the buses driven back into Rochester, into their bus barn, and so prices went up.

And two things then happened as we looked. Could we reduce *cost*? One was, the Finger Lakes Community College in Canandaigua had just opened up some dormitories, which they made *available* to groups in the summer to rent out. And so, the Pageant was able to contract with the college to use their dormitories there. One very *positive* part of that was the rooms were *air-conditioned*, which they were not back at Hobart and William Smith. And secondly, by doing that, we were able to contract with the Canandaigua School District, who had their *own* school bus fleet, to use *their* buses and *their* drivers to provide the transportation. And so, that reduced the cost of the buses as well as the cost of the college. And being so much closer, we got our cast back to their dorms much earlier, so therefore it made it easier for them to have some kind of a— an ice cream social or some kind of snack, mix-and-mingle type of activity before they went to bed.

Dan Gorman: Speaking as someone who had very positive experiences with [the] YMCA's Model Congress,¹ those sort of experiences where students are exhausted and pushed to their limits, but having a wonderful time—those become important bonding moments, I think.

Dwight Schwendiman: Uh, they really do! They really do.

Dan Gorman: So, you mentioned a few moments ago that you eventually joined the Pageant Presidency in addition to being a cast team leader, a cast member.

Dwight Schwendiman: Yes.

Dan Gorman: How were you called to be *in* the Presidency?

¹ The YMCA Youth and Government or Youth in Government programs for high school students.

Dwight Schwendiman: Okay. I was called and asked to be the President the same way a bishop or a Stake President is called to be a lay leader in the Church, or someone within a ward is called to be a Sunday School teacher. I was sat down; I was interviewed. I was determined—my worthiness as a member of the Church was determined. And I was at least—initially, I was asked to be a *counselor*, so that I could learn what was involved to be a Pageant President. And the first year that I was involved in leadership action, I served as the counselor who was responsible for *facilities*, which meant getting the *buses* that would bring people back and forth, arranging the colleges, getting the dormitory set up, making sure we had Port-a-Potties [laughs] at the different places where we needed to be. So, those—having me responsible for security, parking—so, those kind of facilities, activities, I learned *that*. The other counselor in the Presidency of three was responsible for the cast teams that we’ve talked about: what happens to the cast when they are *not* rehearsing; [20:00] the devotionals; we would have joint meetings with everybody in the cast two or three times today; and the—more of the spiritual aspect of the Pageant, where I was the *physical* aspect of the Pageant. And then, after one year, I became President.

Dan Gorman: In that role—which I believe you said you held it from 2006 to 2015?

Dwight Schwendiman: Yes.

Dan Gorman: In that role, how much communication did you have to have between the communities around Rochester and the Church headquarters in Salt Lake City?

Dwight Schwendiman: During the year, it varied. Particularly into the fall, when we were getting ready to select our cast for the following year, and there were quite a number of phone conversations back and forth. And then, it was quiet for a period of time. And then, as we got into late April into May, things started to ... warm up again as we got ready for people who arrive in Palmyra to join the cast.

We had—our director, during that period of time, was on the faculty of Southern Utah—now, what? Oh, I can't think of the name of the university, and they've just changed it. *Oh*, it was called *Dixie* College in St. George, Utah, and they changed it to—just recently—to Utah Technical Institute of Utah, Utah Technical Institute, or something like that. There was a feeling that this “Dixie” had connotations of [the] Civil War, whereas the southern part of Utah, when the Mormon pioneers first came to Utah, because it was warm and it was dry, they referred to it as “Utah’s Dixie,” for the southern part. Anyway, he [the Pageant director] was on the drama faculty at the university, and he would have his staff of directors. Probably three-quarters of them were from Utah, and so we would be in conversation quite a bit, and he would be in conversation with Church headquarters. That’s on purpose [best guess].

Dan Gorman: As this Utah leadership came in, was the director Rodger Sorensen?

Dwight Schwendiman: Um, I came in just after *him*. Brent Hanson was his name. Brent had been the *technical* director at the same time that Rodger Sorensen had been the dramatic director—drama director—of the Pageant. And so, Brent’s responsibility was to make sure that the stage got up, that the lighting crew was trained [and so forth?], that kind of thing. And then he became the artistic director in 2005, I think it was. 2006 may have been his first year.

Dan Gorman: So—thank you for correcting me—so, as Brent Hanson became the director, and he brought in assistant directors from Utah, did you find that bringing in more Utah leadership changed how the Pageant felt? Did it change any of the contents?

Dwight Schwendiman: [sighs] *No*, not really. Because there was a given script, a given soundtrack, the—what was *said* was the *same* year-to-year. The music was the same year to year. What *changed* was how you presented the actions. Perhaps the actors were focused on the northern side of the stage, or maybe they were on the southern side of the stage. And each time

you made a change like that, people who would sit in different places would get different impressions of the show. I can remember, [25:00] during rehearsals, I'd go, and I'd sit at different places in the seating area. I'd go sit on the south; I'd sit on the north; I'd sit up front; I'd sit at the back. And the show was the same everywhere I *went*. I just saw different things! Because I could focus on different things, depending on where I was.

We had—one of the things that we tried to do was to cater to the hearing-impaired. And we would position them in a place where they were fairly close to the front, and then we had an interpreter stand in front of them, with the light on the interpreter, and they would sign what was being said in the narration. And one year, this woman, who was the—responsible for making sure they had people there each night to do the signing, said, “We’re having a problem, because we’re not seeing this one part of this one important scene. Is it possible for us to move *here* or *here*? Or what can we do so that our people not only can hear, but they can *see* what’s going on on the stage? And so, we brought the directors out, and we did some moving around. And we’ve made a—we made an adjustment of where we’re putting them. And they’d been in that position for years. But she came and said, “We’ve got a problem.” And we—so, we tried to fix it.

One other thing that we did was that we had a lot of Hispanics, particularly from New York City, come up to view the Pageant, and they were non-English-speaking. And so, we had a copy of the script written in—transcribed in Spanish. And we had someone who was seated to the side of the seating area with a microphone, and he or she, depending on the evening, would read the script in conjunction with what was going on onstage. So—and we had headphones—sets for our Hispanic guests, and so that they could hear and understand. That was, by and large, the only—those are the only *two* groups that we made special arrangements for. Although, one year, we received a request from leadership in New York City saying we were bringing a—they

were bringing a group of native Chinese out, and was it *possible* to have the script translated in Chinese? And I don't remember exactly how we made that happen. But we did. And working with the technical people, we found the place where we could put one person, and they were actually listening—rather than having something they could read, they were listening and translating as they were hearing the English script.

Dan Gorman: And I think those stories reflect how the Church is becoming an increasingly global institution.

Dwight Schwendiman: Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

Dan Gorman: As we come to the end of our time, is there any other memorable story, good *or* bad, you'd like to share from your experience in the Presidency?

Dwight Schwendiman: Um, I don't remember if I was just—if I was just an audience member or if I was in the Presidency. One of the questions I was frequently asked was, “Does—was the show ever rained out?” And the answer is, *yes*. Over the 75 years that I am aware of, or I will say from the 50—from [the] late '70s till now, I would say maybe a half a dozen times in that 50 years [30:00] was there a rainout, and not very many more times prior to that, although the Pageant was *not* shown during the three or four years during World War Two because of the need to be dark at that time.

But, anyway, we would go live, even if it was raining, *light* rain, and there—and then there's this one scene in the Pageant where the—it tells the story of this family [Lehi and his family] as they are journeying from the Jerusalem area in the Middle East over to the Americas, and they have to build a boat, and while they're on the boat, there's a storm. And the technical people had arranged so, [at] the top of the mast, there was a *sprinkler* head that would send water *all over* the stage so that, as you're sitting back in the audience, you'd get the *impression* of a

rainstorm. And then they'd have lightning strikes and thunder and various things. Well, this one particular night, it had been raining, and not a heavy rain, but it was raining, and it got to that scene, and the rain onstage came on, and as that particular scene ends, one of the prophets—one of the leaders of the *people*—kneels to pray and asks God to still the storm, to stop the storm, that they might continue their journey in peace. And, of course, the technical people would turn the water off, and the water would turn off on the stage. Well, on this particular night, not only did the water turn off on the stage, but the *rain* across the whole seating area stopped. And this lady sitting behind me said, “Now *that's* a special effect!” [laughs] And I thought to myself, “Yeah, that is, that is.”

But we had a *lot* of fun. And a lot of things. There were other times where we'd be on, and ... it'd be dry, and then the rains would come, and we'd have to clear the stage quickly, and nobody was ever injured in that regard. There are many things I could tell you, but that's probably the—to me, that's the most fun one, that lady [who said], “Now, *that's* a special effect!”

Dan Gorman: My final question for you, Dwight, is if you have any comment about the Pageant ending, and the way that it did, having to be canceled because of the pandemic.

Dwight Schwendiman: Well—yeah. Uh [sighs], we understood that it needing [sic] to be canceled because of the first year of the pandemic. That was—that did *not* cause grief in my family. The plan was—we had moved to Utah by this time—and we were planning that next year, since it was going to be done, well, we'll *skip* one year. Even though the Church pageants were being canceled that particular year [in 2020], they [the Church leaders] said, “We'll skip the one year [2020] so that we can have a *final* performance [in 2021].” And we—my wife and I decided we'd drive back so we could—our neighbor across the street, for the *44* years that we

lived across the street from her, she'd always turned down our invitation to go out to see the bank. But then, just as we were getting ready to leave, she says, "Oh, I want to see it!" But we couldn't; that was the year—COVID year—so it was off. We made our move [to Utah], and we said, "We'll come back, and we'll take you." And then, it got postponed that second year, canceled the second year, and they [the Church] said, "That's it. We *can't* delay the changes we're going to make at the Hill any further." And so, that was a disappointment that we were not able to get back that one last time and see it, but particularly to take her.

But being out here [in Utah], we did have the privilege of participating in a special *devotional* for the history of the Pageant, and I was asked to give the opening prayer for that [35:00] devotional.² And Brent Hanson, Neil Pitts—Neil was the President at the time it shut down—one of the other directors, and one—I'm blanking on the name—someone else spoke. We were there. And then, Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles gave the concluding thought [best guess], to bear tribute to the—*all* the people who'd been in the Pageant. And what we didn't realize until he started speaking is that, as a teenage boy, back in the '60s, that he and his brother had come up and been cast members in the Pageant. So, he had a tie there that we didn't understand, but we were able to be a part of that. And then, that devotional, after it having been recorded, was then shown Church-wide, and the last filming of the Pageant was then broadcast, and so we were able to see it together with friends out *here*. And that brings a few tears to my eyes suddenly [best guess], the thought of that.

Dan Gorman: I watched that program, and it was clear, the emotion put into it, although I do not remember what you said. I can go back and watch it now. [laughs]

² A full (and possibly unlicensed) recording of the Commemorative Devotional is available on YouTube. See Captain Trox [pseud.; YouTube username], "Hill Cumorah Pageant Devotional," produced originally by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, July 2021, YouTube, uploaded July 28, 2021, <https://youtu.be/CzNxhbYKVzg>.

Dwight Schwendiman: [laughs] Well, I'm a few years older than I was at that point in time, and my only fear was that, in going from where I was seated up to the podium to pray, I was afraid I was going to trip over my feet and fall on my face. The one benefit of that, though, was that, because it was being recorded, they could have re-recorded it without my tripping and falling on my face. So, it all turned out well.

Dan Gorman: Well, thank you so much for sharing your memories and your expertise on the Pageant with us.

Dwight Schwendiman: My pleasure. I could talk for hours.

Dublin Core Metadata for the Interview

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Description: Dwight Schwendiman is a retired research chemist and computer specialist who worked for Kodak. He first attended the Hill Cumorah Pageant in 1957 during a family vacation to LDS historic sites in the eastern United States. As a resident in the Rochester area, Dwight saw the Pageant change over time. He helped with logistics such as parking, led cast teams as a cast member in 1988, 1992, 1994, and 1996, and eventually served as Pageant President from 2006 to 2015. During this interview, Dwight also discusses his experiences in these different roles, Zion's Camp and the Pageant dormitories, and the 2021 Church Internet devotional celebrating the Pageant's history.

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