

Interview with Marc Clay
Friday, April 8, 2022
The Hill Cumorah Legacy Project

Recorded over Zoom.
Interviewee: Marc Clay
Interviewers: Myles Gaston and Leo Golia
Duration: 25:04

Transcript

[00:00]

Myles Gaston: Oh, yes, I'm recording.

Leo Golia: Okay, and it's also recording my side, so we're good to start. Thank you, Mark, for coming and speaking with us.

Marc Clay: You're welcome.

Leo Golia: I guess I'll start with our first interview question. This shouldn't take too long. We'll have—this shouldn't take longer than like 20–25 minutes. So, from what we—from a little bio we got from—I forgot his name [sic; Bentley Hutchings], but when we first learned that you will be our interviewer—or interviewee—we have found that you join the Church after seeing the Hill Cumorah Pageant. So, what about the Pageant appealed to you the most?

Marc Clay: So, I was really—I think the—in the—I went to see the Pageant before I was a member of the Church, before I was even seriously investigating, if that's the right word, seriously looking [or] considering joining the Church. I went to the Pageant with a girlfriend, and she said, "Let's go," and as you would, I said, "Okay," so I didn't make a decision strictly based on the Pageant that I wanted to go. I made the decision based on going with a girlfriend! But, when we got to the Pageant, it was much more than I expected it to be, and I don't know

that I had really high expectations or—you know—certainly, not well-informed expectations, but when I got there, it was a lot more. It was really an event, and though I didn't fully understand its references back to the Book of Mormon ('cause I had never read or studied the Book of Mormon before), but it was—two things. It was fun to watch, it was enjoyable to watch, it was an experience. And I just felt really good about it. You know, it wasn't an earth-shattering event, but I just felt really good about it. So...

Leo Golia: So, it was more that it was the first thing that introduced you to the Church of [Jesus Christ of] Latter-day Saints.

Marc Clay: Very much, [it] was very early in my time.

Leo Golia: All right. Have you ever directly participated in the Pageant? If so, what was your role?

Marc Clay: No, not really. As a Church member, I—some years, I would come in and help out with—maybe with security, and then, as a Church leader years later, I did—I would go and speak with the cast, usually early in the process, and sometimes at the closing meeting. So—but I never was a cast member or had a costume or any such thing.

Leo Golia: So, it's more like for logistical—you were there for more logistical reasons or...

Marc Clay: Or to provide some spiritual motivation to cast members as a Church leader, but yeah, the most of it was out in the parking lot or doing security or something helpful. Still, my favorite thing was just to go and watch.

Leo Golia: Of course. Myles, do you have any questions, like—?

Myles Gaston: Oh, excuse me. [5:00] So, what was your reaction when they decided to shut down the Pageant?

Marc Clay: Well, Myles, that's a good question because at the time, in my Church responsibility, I was one of the people making the announcement, or the two people making the announcement, to the local leaders about it. So, no question, I was sad that they decided to shut down the Pageant. It was a fun part of summer. It was something we looked forward to, bringing kids, grandkids, friends, and others—members and non-members—to Pageant. It—whenever I came, and I would probably come many summers once or twice to Pageant, and—but, as I would walk around prior to Pageant starting, or as it finished, I would always see some friends from somewhere else, you know, where we had... other areas around the Northeast where we had lived, other friends I've made along the way in life's journey. So, there were some aspects I really enjoyed about Pageant, and I thought it was—aside from that Pageant, it was helpful for the community, for the local communities. There was a fundraiser for the Lions organization and some other similar organizations that were selling food there at Pageant, so I was just disappointed that it was going away. I understood there were good reasons, but nevertheless it was a change I wasn't looking forward to.

Leo Golia: Yeah, yeah, that's definitely a reasonable reaction to that.

Marc Clay: There were some that were very... There were—there *are* a lot of local people in the Rochester–Palmyra area that put a lot of time and a lot of effort, year after year, into Pageant, whether it was making props or sewing costumes or the administrative side, whatever. You've got a cast of 800-plus and few other—a few hundred others to administrate it, direct it,

and so on and so forth, so it was no small undertaking, but they—but there was a lot of people that were really—and years of support—that were really disappointed, so...

Leo Golia: Yeah, from what we have seen and researched for this class, the one thing—I'm someone who did plays in my past, and just seeing the amount of, like, you know, work that goes into this thing... We recently did a thing for this class, as well, of archiving objects and looking at the various costumes and just the intricacies of it. It's very much ... a big undertaking, and I could definitely see the sense of community and the sense of teamwork that comes from that.

Marc Clay: Yeah. I think, too, that there was another side to that. So, you could—you can look at this, and you can say, well, if we've got all these support people doing costumes and wigs and props and swords and, you know, everything else that's gotta happen, and the 16 young men (teenagers) that would set up the stage every year and run the lights from the big light towers and so on and so forth—there were lots of people having great experiences, maturing experiences in [10:00] some cases. But you can look at this, on the other side and say, what good—what is the, in the broader picture, what—how does this change the Palmyra and Rochester communities and the areas around them, and what if I could take 25% of the people that were involved in Pageant? So, what if I could take 200 people and send them out in the community to do community projects instead of Pageant? What if I could get them to spend a week doing community projects? Would the broader community be better off than the time for Pageant? And, you know, I suspect, the answer is the broader community would be better off, but—so there are some tradeoffs to look at in this. But the Pageant had a long history, 75 years, and a lot of popularity, and hundreds of thousands of visitors had watched and—so, you can make a case going both ways, but there definitely are some perspectives on that, too.

Myles Gaston: Excuse me. So, do you know how exactly the Church is just planning to preserve this unique experience?

Marc Clay: Myles, we've done several things. We have digital, high-quality copies of—I think multiple years of Pageant. They've shown—the Church has shown one of them, I think the 2019 Pageant, on TV for those who wanted to watch, who were hoping to go live, and that got canceled because of COVID, the last year that they had announced they were going to show it. We've sent Pageant paraphernalia—costumes, information, pictures, props—to the Palmyra historical museum, to the New York State Historical Museum in Albany. We've sent a number of items to the Church's historical museum that—I'm not sure what—when they'll show them and how they'll do that—and we've taken many of the items and sent them to two other Pageants that will continue in the Church, so, in Nauvoo and in Arizona. So, there's been a good cross-section of—sharing of Pageant-related items that, hopefully, will live on.

Leo Golia: Yeah, it sounds like the Church is really actively preserving this, which is just a really great idea because, as you mentioned, it's such a big thing, and that, out of all the things that were created and that came from it, [it's] really great to hear that they're trying to preserve its legacy.

Marc Clay: Yeah. You couldn't save *hundreds* of costumes, *thousands* of costumes that we had, but they have preserved, with these museums in the Church and outside of the Church, many of them, and, as you've seen, many of them were quite elaborate and really well done. So...

Leo Golia: All right, I think we talked a lot about the Pageant, and it was really great hearing about that. We'd just like to talk a little bit more about, like, your specific position in the Church and what are some of your responsibilities. And, what is your position?

Marc Clay: So, you want me to work backwards, from where I am now?

Leo Golia: [15:00] Whatever's the easiest way you could talk about it.

Marc Clay: Okay. Um, maybe in the last three.

[Leo says something indistinct]

Marc Clay: I'm currently the first counselor in the Palmyra Temple Presidency. The Temple is—we built 170 operating temples around the world. There's another probably 80 that are—70 or 80—that are somewhere in the construction process. Temples are not normal. They're not everyday Church buildings for us, where we would do Sunday service, and kids play basketball, and there's other events for youth and for adults, Sunday school, etc. Those happen in our chapels. In the Temple, we bring members in that are worthy, and they're able to receive ordinances and blessings that will help them through this life and, we believe, the next life. And, as is talked about in the New Testament, we also enable a path forward spiritually for those who are deceased and already in the next life.

So, I'm helping administrate the Temple now. It's a three-year assignment that I started in August [2021]. Prior to that, I spent the previous five years as an Area Seventy. I had responsibility for helping senior Church leaders across all of Central and Western New York, from Albany to Buffalo specifically, and then worked with others to help supervise Church leaders across North America, [the] Northeast, including eastern Canada. And that was a five-

year assignment, and prior to that, I ran the Syracuse Stake Presidency. So, we take a group of congregations that we typically call a ward or a branch, and we take eight, ten, twelve congregations, and we group them together in what we call a stake, like a stake you drive in the ground, and so I was a stake president, supervising some eight congregations around the Syracuse area for the previous seven years, so... It's a bit of a feel for it.

Leo Golia: Yeah, that definitely is really interesting, and how long—just, especially, that you're talking about, this was in the last three years or so.

Marc Clay: This calling that I just started in August will last three years, but those other two were the previous twelve years of my life.

Leo Golia: Okay, so maybe—I probably just got a little confused with the timeline and things.

Marc Clay: So, that three years started in August, so I'll finish at the end of August of '24 in the Temple, and then the prior—from 2015 to 2020, I was an Area Seventy, and then from 2008 to 2015, I was the stake president in Syracuse. That help?

Leo Golia: Yeah, yeah. Do you have anything else to add, Myles, or any questions we missed?

Myles Gaston: Oh, if it's alright with you, may I ask what was your religious affiliation *before* you joined the Church of [Jesus Christ of] Latter-day Saints?

Marc Clay: Oh, Myles, that is a good question. When I was young, I was christened Methodist, and we went some years without going to Church. As a teenager, I joined the Episcopal Church, and then, I think in my early–late teens, early twenties, I didn't [20:00] go to Church very often. I was working two jobs and going to college and [was] busy. And... I actually played on a

basketball and baseball team with a bunch of friends, [a] softball team with a bunch of friends that were Mennonite, and then I joined the Mormon Church as a 24-year-old.

Leo Golia: So, with that—so, talking about this, how would you say your experience converting to the Church compared to someone who's been in the Church their entire lives?

Marc Clay: I think that—so, my wife is a third-generation Church member. Her grandmother joined the Church—I don't know—a long time ago. But everybody, regardless of whether you were born in a particular Church, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or you join the Church as an adult or a teenager, somewhere along the way, you've got to figure out—you've got to have a spiritual experience to tell you that this is the right place for you, that the people you're worshipping are real, and this has meaning for you in life.

So, I had been through several sets of missionaries. They would come each year, and they would get... I was—Kathy and I were married a number of years before I joined the Church, and the missionaries would come every year, and they would get the lesson three about baptism, and I would never invite them back. One year, some sister missionaries came, and they got to lesson three, and they talked about baptism, and, at the end of the lesson, they asked me to—we knelt down to say [a] closing prayer, and they asked me if I'd say it. I can't tell you, even today, exactly why I agreed. I wouldn't say it was like me to [laughs] necessarily to agree to say the prayer, but I did, and just—I asked about the prayer, about the Church, and about the Book of Mormon and Prophet Joseph's experiences here in Palmyra. The spirit just came unmistakably to me that night and almost knocked me off my knees. It was unmistakable to me. And I got up, and I didn't tell my wife, and I didn't tell the missionaries, and I didn't invite those missionaries back, and that may sound kind of mean—probably was.

About a year later, I called my wife, and I said, “Make me an appointment with the missionaries. I’m ready.” And I think, in this life, you’ve got—(A), you’ve got—as I said before, you’ve got to know if something is true or correct or right for you, and you got to be willing to live it. And it doesn’t do you any good to believe it and not live it. And you can’t live something you don’t—[doesn’t] easily to have meaning for you that you don’t believe in. So, at that point, I knew it was true, and I had decided I was willing to live it, and... I wasn’t living, like, a bad life. I just wasn’t ready to commit. That make sense?

Leo Golia: Yeah, I can definitely follow.

Myles Gaston: Yes.

Marc Clay: So here we are, 40-something years later.

Leo Golia: All right, I don’t think I have anything else to add. Do you, Myles?

Myles Gaston: No, I believe that’s everything.

Marc Clay: It was helpful?

Leo Golia: Yeah, you definitely helped us get more perspective not only on the Church, but also the Pageant itself. It’s just such a different experience, like, talking to someone about it than just reading it, or...

Marc Clay: Alright.

Leo Golia: I’m going to stop the recording now... [25:00]

Dublin Core Metadata for the Interview

Title: Interview with Marc Clay, Friday, April 8, 2022

Subject: Hill Cumorah Pageant, Church response, working for the Church

Description: This is roughly a 25-minute interview with Marc Clay, interviewed by Myles Gaston and Leo Golia. The interview starts out with introductions and how Clay was introduced to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by the Pageant. Along with this, the interview touches on his experience working with the Pageant and his reaction to the ending of the Pageant. The interview also touches on steps the Church is taking to preserve aspects of the Pageant such as costumes and video. This recording ends with Clay talking about his roles and experiences in the Church.

Creator: Marc Clay, Myles Gaston, and Leo Golia

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