

# Stalking the Wild Document

An Interview with Lyn R. Jacobs



**L**yn Richard Jacobs is a man of many accomplishments. The son of Connie, a homemaker, and G. Richard, electrical engineer for the exhibits section of the LDS missionary department, Jacobs began developing his talents as a pianist, artist, taxidermist, and tailor while still in his teens. At twenty he entered the Canada Montreal Mission where he read copiously such Church writings as the twenty-six volume *Journal of Discourses*, the three-volume *Doctrines of Salvation*, and scores more. Upon his return, he worked at the LDS genealogical library in Salt Lake City, developing research materials that are still used there today. He graduated from the University of Utah in 1982 with two bachelor's degrees, one in French literature and another in philosophy. In 1985 he received his master's of theological studies from Harvard University. Conversant in French, German, Latin, Greek, and Coptic, Jacobs plans soon to pursue a doctoral degree in early Christian origins and Gnosticism.

This interview was conducted on January 15, 1986, nearly three weeks before Mark Hofmann was formally charged with two counts of murder and more than twenty counts of theft by deception and communications fraud (see story pp. 40-43). Jacobs agreed to be interviewed on the condition that he not discuss any of the documents which he understood were related to the bombing charges, especially the M'Lellin collection, *The Oath of the Free Man*, and *The Haunted Man*. However, several of the documents he was willing to discuss have now been listed as forgeries in the probable cause statement of the prosecuting attorneys. Because at the time of the interview there were only vague accusations, Jacobs's response to the forgery charges is general rather than specific. In spite of the impact of recent events, the editors feel this interview offers the insights of a close Hofmann associate. The views presented here are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily represent those of the editors.

**SUNSTONE:** When did you start collecting books?

**JACOBS:** As an undergraduate at the University of Utah. I did it as a hobby. I never intended making any money with it in the very beginning. I remember the very first book I bought. During an LDS institute

class, Reed Durham brought in a reprint of an early edition of the *Pearl of Great Price*, which is quite different from the editions used today. And I just thought it would be really neat—just out of the blue—to go see what a real one looked like. I went to Sam Weller's Zion's Bookstore, one of the first times

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I'd ever been there (about eight or nine years ago). Of course I was just this dippy student, and Weller knew very well I probably had no money. Nonetheless, he showed me a second edition Pearl of Great Price. It was fifty dollars. I just couldn't believe a book could be that expensive. It was amazing to me, as it would be for most laypeople. Still, I did buy the book, although it took me about a week to dig up every little penny I had. It was my first book, the beginning of my collection.

From there, I became interested in the very rarest English Mormon books: for example, first editions



of the Book of Mormon or Doctrine and Covenants, all the really expensive and rare items from Mormonism's earliest period. I have picked up some really choice gems, like a first edition of Emma Smith's hymnal, for example, which is worth about \$15,000. My primary interest, however, is in the foreign language publications of the Church, many of which are quite rare and possess great intrinsic value.

It took me almost two years to realize some of the books I had found in duplicate could be turned around for profit. And so I started trading many of them to obtain other things I wanted for my own collection.

**SUNSTONE:** Who were you trading with? Weller?

**JACOBS:** With Weller and others. I worked primarily with the Church archivist, Don Schmidt. The Church needed a certain number of things, specifically in the foreign language field, and they also had a lot of duplicates that had been piling up for years. I can only vaguely remember one time when I asked money from the Church. It was always easiest for me to trade since trading doesn't immediately involve any tax considerations.

**SUNSTONE:** You must have realized some cash from your book dealing.

**JACOBS:** Yes, some. But I have never made more than twenty-thousand dollars a year through the sale of books. Instead, I attempt to trade as much as I can. For example, I have a few extremely rare philosophical books. I have Descartes's *Discourse sur la Méthode*, the first edition of which was published in 1637. It's worth about \$14,000 to \$18,000. I own

Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, as well. It is worth about \$9,000. I could not have acquired these books if it weren't for trading. I can't dig up that kind of cash.

Being in Boston over the last two years has facilitated acquiring philosophical works, since you really can't find that kind of literature around here. I've therefore made some good contacts from the East for my own private collection.

**SUNSTONE:** When did you meet Mark Hofmann?

**JACOBS:** I met him around 1979 or 1980. I

remember the occasion clearly. I visited Deseret Book early one day. Mark was there and I had never met him before. He had just spoken briefly with Mr. Scow, who was running the rare book section at that time. I spoke with Scow briefly as well and then looked over at Mark and said, "Well, it looks like we've got the same sort of interest. What exactly do you do?" With this I opened the conversation, and we talked a little about what he was doing. He'd come in that day with some Kirtland bills or something like that. I said, "Well, maybe we'll see each other around again." It was a very brief encounter. I'm sure we saw each other again soon and eventually just ended up going to lunch and continued from there.

We didn't really consider working together for some time. I knew practically nothing about documents. I was accustomed to looking specifically for books. Consequently, if I found a manuscript, I'd often call Mark up and have him take care of it.

**SUNSTONE:** Did you ever become business partners?

**JACOBS:** There has been a certain amount of misrepresentation on this account. When I was working with the Church archives, there were times when Mark and I combined forces as it were. Let's say, for example, that Mark didn't have time to bring some item into the Church archives. Often we agreed that if he gave it to me to deliver for him, I would receive whatever cut I wished in trade. Consequently, I would bring the document in and tell them, "This is what Mark wants, and this is what I want." We used to do this kind of deal all the time with the Church archives simply because it was so convenient. Most

of my business with the archives was my own, however. I have worked with the institution much more than Mark primarily because I had a rapport with the Church archives with respect to certain collecting areas that might have been a little more developed than Mark's.

At one point during my last year at Harvard, I felt I had to make enough money to continue to support myself. That meant I had to sell a certain number of the rare books in my personal collection. Mark and I made a temporary business arrangement to facilitate the sale of some of these volumes. Occasionally we sold some books that belonged to Mark as well. We sold things jointly like this for just one year, 1984. It was only for convenience sake.

Mark has no real business partners. A partnership would be impossible for Mark to conceive because he's basically autonomous. In the sense that many of his friends worked with him at various times, he had many "business associates," including me, Shannon Flynn, Alvin Rust, and others. I have never thought of myself as Mark's partner but as one of his best friends. The only document we ever worked with in tandem that has any real significance is the Martin Harris letter.

**SUNSTONE:** There has been a lot of curiosity and even suspicion about how collectors like you and Mark are able to find such sensational documents like the so-called "salamanca letter." As Sheriff Pete Hayward put it, "I know for a fact that fifty of us couldn't find these papers in fifty years if we were looking for them. . . . But he keeps coming up with them." How do you respond to this?

**JACOBS:** There are several ways of answering this question. Perhaps the first thing to note is that Mark's success seems more spectacular simply because he has very little competition. Who else is running all over the country contacting antique dealers and document collectors? Certainly few of the Mormon collectors I know. Years ago, Wilford Wood, using money from his fur business, was able to spend the same sort of time Mark does now. Actually Wood spent more time because his children were all grown up. He uncovered magnificent documents and books for the Church, a countless number of items that have gone into the Church archives via Joseph Fielding Smith that we don't even know about or that few really recognize came from his labors because he didn't much advertise the fact. Besides, in those days, such things were not really newsworthy. David Martin used to do this sort of thing for a time as well.

Another reason for Mark's success is the sheer volume of material he handles. He had found several documents and books before his first major find, the Anthon transcript. These items were rather insignificant things and only rarely added to our knowledge of history. They were on the order of some land deed from Hyrum Smith, I.O.U. notes, mundane correspondence, and other such documents. They're all relatively important, at least for detailed historiography. Most are only two- or three-hundred

dollar items. But when you deal with scores of manuscripts like these, every once in a while you're bound to turn up three or four real juicy ones. It's that ratio people fail to realize. Because media attention focuses on the juicy finds, it appears to some people that Mark is simply picking up one or two documents a year—and always important finds. But that's not the case. Mark is busy every day of his life. And the odds of finding something really important are much greater when you're constantly fishing through piles of what Mark would often call "junk."

**SUNSTONE:** So how do you go about finding all these documents and rare books?

**JACOBS:** First of all, you have to make a lot of contacts and friends who are concerned about your personal interests. Once you've established such a network of contacts, you don't have to do all the looking yourself because these folks will notify you concerning available documents, various leads and will basically let you know what's going on.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you establish such a network?

**JACOBS:** Well, let's say you walk into an antique store in Independence, Missouri, for example. You'd probably tell the dealer you're looking for books, papers, manuscripts, or printed items from around the 1830s or 40s. The dealer might reply that he gets that kind of stuff periodically and would put you on a "want list." Often antique dealers don't have specific items in these areas, but most would probably suggest some place or individual whom you could visit who might be able to help. Mark is the kind of person who would attempt to contact every single one of these people. He leaves no stone unturned, no matter how inconvenient.

Collectors and dealers tend to hang out in the same sort of places. You meet a lot of contacts in bookstores, libraries, etc. That's how I met Mark and many other friends and associates. Actually when you meet another collector, you're also meeting a potential dealer, because many of these people sell on the side to finance their own collecting interest. Even when a collector won't sell you something from his personal collection, he's still a valuable contact because you can sometimes find out his sources.

Mark has met many people this way. He's been doing it for the past twelve years, so it's not surprising he has a network that is just incredible. Mark has friends all across the country and keeps in constant contact with most of them. That's why he had two home phones and a phone in each of his cars. Of course, this requires a lot of time, sometimes twelve to thirteen or more hours a day. It takes money, too. As a result, Mark reinvests a great deal of his profit right back into such business expenses as travel, hotels, lunches, and telephone calls.

That is the price you pay, and I know few who are willing to do it to such an extent. I'm really not prepared to work as hard as Mark does with my graduate program and career and all. So for me, selling books is only a part-time interest. I would rather collect than sell. But it's Mark's full-time profession.

**One advantage Mark has over some other collectors is that he usually has enough money to pay for things in one lump sum instead of spreading payments out.**

**Mark has guts, that's for sure. And he's been turned down an awful lot. Sometimes descendants don't want to bother with him or their heirlooms mean too much to them to show them off.**

One advantage Mark has over some other collectors is that he usually has enough money to pay for things in one lump sum instead of spreading payments out. This has made people a lot more amiable toward him or at least more cooperative. They would frequently offer him things first before offering them to someone else.

**SUNSTONE:** Is that unusual?

**JACOBS:** No, not really. Dealers and collectors usually like all their profits up front. If I were a dealer and somebody offered me instant cash instead of stretching out the payments, I'd probably offer books to him before anyone else.

**SUNSTONE:** So was it through this network that the Anthon transcript was located?

**JACOBS:** Yes. Interestingly, Mark told me that the Bible belonging to Joseph's sister which had the Anthon transcript in it originally came from a small antique store in the Midwest. The Bible made its way to Utah, where Mark acquired it. The complete genealogy of the Bible is in the hands of the Church archivist.

Mark bought the Bible instantly mostly because of its Smith family association. The Bible itself is of very little value. Mark figured he had a couple-of-hundred-dollar item there. It was only when he thumbed through it of course that he found the Anthon transcript stuck between some pages.

**SUNSTONE:** Wouldn't most dealers go through every page of a book before they bought it? If so, why didn't the person who sold it to Mark notice the transcript stuck between the pages?

**JACOBS:** Yes, if you're a book dealer, you go through every page. The primary reason for doing this is to make sure all the pages are there. Many antique dealers don't take old books seriously. I've gone into some antique stores and seen books stacked in a corner in complete disarray. To these dealers, the antiques are most important. They usually haven't got the time or inclination to go through books like a book seller would. On the other hand, I know book dealers who go into antique stores and thumb through every last page before they buy a book.

Mark bought the Bible for almost nothing. I don't know if the seller knew the significance of the Smith names in the Bible, but even if he did, that probably would not have given him sufficient reason to thumb through the book. Even Mark didn't look through it until he got home.

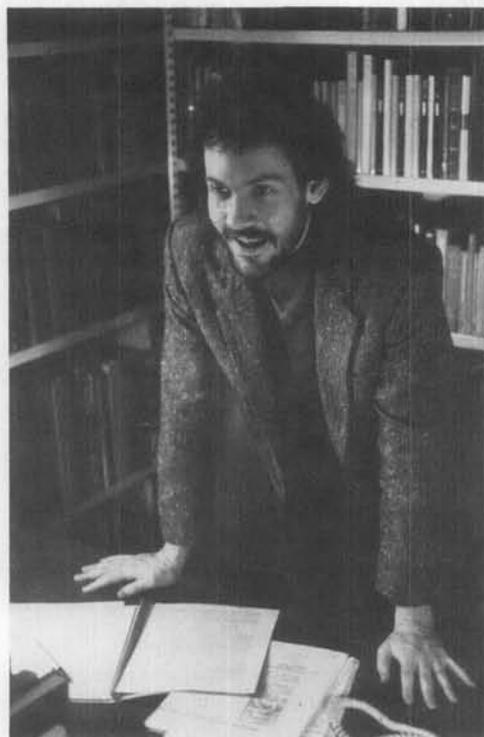
**SUNSTONE:** What did Mark do once he'd found the Anthon transcript?

**JACOBS:** I believe he showed it to A. J. Simmonds at Utah State and to an individual in the LDS institute there. Mark wasn't exactly sure what to do with it. He had never found anything of that calibre before. He apparently talked it over with his parents and the decision was made to offer it to the Church.

**SUNSTONE:** How much did he get for it?

**JACOBS:** He made some sort of trade. As far as I can remember, there was no monetary transaction at all. Dean Jessee looked at the handwriting on the back of

the document and felt that it was indeed Joseph Smith's. Dean is a remarkable individual. He is an extremely conservative handwriting expert. People tend to trust the ultra-conservative experts much more than those who just snap off a judgment. No one on this planet has worked with more Joseph Smith holographs than Dean Jessee, who compiled *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*. I don't know anyone who deals in Mormon manuscripts who questions Dean's ability and judgement concerning Joseph Smith's handwriting.



**SUNSTONE:** You said before Mark operated largely on tips and leads that form his array of contacts.

**JACOBS:** That is his primary method. There are a couple of reasons Mark does so well, and that is the first one.

**SUNSTONE:** In other words, things come to him rather than him having a particular document in mind and then going out and searching for it.

**JACOBS:** That is the second method he uses: his own personal research. Some LDS historians have simply assumed many important documents have disappeared. Mark does not make that assumption. He assumes such documents may still exist somewhere in the hands of some living descendant. For example, with the M'Lellin collection, he would try to find out what happened to William M'Lellin and try to locate his living descendants.

Mark tracks down descendants through a process sometimes called "reverse genealogy." It's much more difficult than doing the usual kind of genealogical research which begins in the present and reaches backwards. Mark starts in the past and comes forward. Although Mark knows how to do genealogy, he usually hires genealogists to do the work for him.

Once he has a family tree, he then begins contact-

ing various descendants, by letter, telephone call, or visit—an incredibly expensive and time-consuming process. Many people presume if a collection is in private, family hands, it is useless to go after it. Mark doesn't make such an assumption. If he finds something, he asks to see it. Mark has guts, that's for sure. And by the way, he's been turned down an awful lot. Sometimes descendants just don't want to bother with him or their heirlooms mean too much to them personally to even consider showing them off. I would guess out of every five people who have something, only one is responsive. As a result, there is still an enormous amount of stuff out there Mark never acquires. Even so, you figure that if he contacts everyone, the odds are still about one in five he will acquire what he's after. So the amount of work he puts in eventually pays off.

**SUNSTONE:** Has he gone through Church history thoroughly and made a list of the twenty-five most important documents?

**JACOBS:** He may have some specific documents in mind, but he generally focuses on various important historical figures. He would, for example, consider who was recording Church history at various times, such as John Whitmer, Thomas Bullock, or William M'Lellin. Mark reasons if they were recording and collecting historical information, where is it?

**SUNSTONE:** Does he have a fairly good grasp of what is in the possession of the Church at this time and therefore what might be out there?

**JACOBS:** Generally, I would say that is the case.

**SUNSTONE:** He must have specific documents in mind. He told SUNSTONE in a 1982 interview that he believed the lost 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript may exist, at least in part.

**JACOBS:** What Mark will say about the 116 pages—or any other document—is that anything *might* exist. I don't think there is any really convincing reason why we should believe they do. During the years Mark has had a couple of leads that suggest there may be references or perhaps even a transcript of portions of it somewhere, but it's my impression from my discussions with him that they probably don't exist in their original form. Recently there was a rumor of something in southern California supposedly having to do with the 116 pages. Mark decided not to attempt to go after the stuff when he found out exactly what it is. It may have something to do with a fictional account supposedly written in the nineteenth century by Sidney Rigdon called "The Book of Lehi." I suspect that's what it is. It is certainly not the 116 pages, or Mark would have gone after it. It's my opinion Mark's not actively looking for the 116 pages because he has so many doubts about it.

**SUNSTONE:** What documents have been uncovered through reverse genealogy?

**JACOBS:** The Joseph Smith III blessing is a good example. My understanding is that the collection in which it was found included many books and early newspapers as well as documents; it was a fairly

large collection that had come down through family hands.

My impression is that various people have known about this collection for years, but no one but Mark had the inclination to go after it. Mark was able to see the entire contents of it and determined some of the items were important. He eventually made an offer for the material and was able to acquire the blessing. Authentication of the blessing was rather simple because the Church has so many samples of Thomas Bullock's handwriting to compare it to.

**SUNSTONE:** You implied earlier that the M'Lellin collection was uncovered with this method. A great deal of rumor and controversy has surrounded this find. Did you work with Mark at all on the M'Lellin collection?

**JACOBS:** No, I didn't. Anything I have ever understood concerning the M'Lellin papers has simply been what Mark has told me about it in passing.

**SUNSTONE:** Have you seen any part of it?

**JACOBS:** No, not to my knowledge.

**SUNSTONE:** Do you believe it exists?

**JACOBS:** I have no reason to doubt the collection exists as Mark has described it to various individuals.

**SUNSTONE:** What about the Martin Harris "salamander letter"? Was there a different method for finding that?

**JACOBS:** Yes, and this brings us to another aspect of the document-hunting business. I think this is interesting because it concerns an area of collecting most Mormon collectors have never really pursued.

Mark became aware of the possibilities of this approach through his involvement in the Americana manuscript business. He has seen letters come up for auction that were penned by people like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abe Lincoln.

As a result, he realized something we often overlook: Prior to the invention of the telephone, if you wanted to contact someone you had to write a letter or pay a visit. He put it to me this way: Think of how many times you call someone each week—anyone, friends, business associates. Take all those occasions, divide that by five and that's about the number of letters a person in the nineteenth century might write each week. They could not write as often as we call people, but compared to today, the number of letters being written then was enormous. Of course a great number of those letters have been destroyed. But let's say for every thousand letters maybe three or four hundred could survive. That's still a massive amount.

Mark's reasoning is that with all the correspondence that probably went on among the early Saints, some letters must have survived whose historical content would make them valuable. It's reasonable to assume the Smiths and others wrote to their acquaintances concerning personal and local events, which would include those important to Mormon history. In fact, this is exactly the case with the 1829 letter from Lucy Mack Smith. My goodness, for all we know Lucy could have been writing a letter a

**Recently Mark investigated a rumor of something in southern California supposedly having to do with the lost 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon.**

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week telling friends and relatives about her family. It's simply fortunate that in the 1829 letter she happened to mention her son was translating gold plates. There could be letters about Alvin. There could be anything.

**SUNSTONE:** How and where have such letters survived?

**JACOBS:** A large number of letters simply accumulate in private estates. And when people die, there's often a pile of letters left. When estates are probated, many of these collections of letters go to major universities or historical societies. Others become available for purchase. For example, from what I understand there was a man in New York City who collected Joseph Smith holographs for the past fifty or sixty years. He died recently, and Mark purchased about ten or eleven letters from the estate. None of these documents has impressive historical content, but they were nice Joseph Smith holographs. Mark had known about them and luckily a bookstore that was working with the estate people was able to get them. They knew Mark was interested and notified him. An option was given to Mark, and he took it.

But aside from private collections most letters survive because people collect the stamps on them. The first American stamps that you lick and affix to an envelope were not really available generally until the 1830s or 40s. Consequently, when people wrote letters, they would write on a larger piece of paper and always leave one side blank. They would fold the thing up, and the blank portion would act as the cover or envelope. Envelopes were sometimes available but generally it was easier to create your own. This was especially true in some of the rural areas where paper was scarce anyway. These folded, self-covered letters are known as "covers" or "stampless covers." After it was sealed with wax, the folded letter was addressed and taken to whatever post office was closest. The postman would stamp it, not with a glue-on stamp like we use, but with a rubber stamp. Today we would call it a cancellation.

The stamp mark is what people are collecting. The post office of particular importance to Mormon historians is the Palmyra post office. It was one of the most popular post offices in the area, and as a result, a lot of covers still exist from that locale. Cover collecting is very popular in New England and other areas of the East simply because that's where most of the covers are. And they're very inexpensive. They'll usually run you five to twenty-five dollars a piece.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you go about looking for covers?

**JACOBS:** There are different ways. Fairs are held, like the antique fair that's regularly held in Salt Lake, where dealers get together and bring their wares into one large building and people can go through and talk to 150 dealers all at once. Fairs also give dealers a chance to see what their colleagues have and to dicker with them and try to make trades. A lot of covers are exchanged at these fairs.

Dealers also buy covers in bulk from auctions. They'll quickly categorize them according to area

and then just leave them. Often they don't look carefully at them. There are just too many. Certain people, Elwin Doubleday for example, represent major clearinghouses for a large number of covers. Doubleday buys extensively at auction, and many dealers buy from him and then mark the prices up.

Now if someone wants to be specific, like most serious collectors, they will write to various dealers and say, "I am looking for covers from such and such an area and period." There's nothing suspicious about it, because as with books, each collector may have a particular collecting interest and gaps in that area that he's trying to fill.

This has been Mark's approach: For the last several years he has written to various dealers asking for oval-shaped Palmyra postmarks, say, from 1825 to 1835, the period when the Mormons were there. Mark had a steady stream of these letters coming to him via the mail. And when he'd go back East, he'd check with the dealers in person. He used to order almost everything that said Palmyra on it. Mark has had to buy hundreds of Palmyra covers just to find three or four decent ones. That's what it takes, however. Many dealers will send you covers on approval. But if you look through what they send and return most of them, they're not going to continue sending much to you. You take a big risk, of course. But Mark's willing to take that risk, since it's proven to be fairly successful.

**SUNSTONE:** Are most people buying these covers only for the postmarks?

**JACOBS:** No, not everyone. I know some dealers who will look through their covers searching for the ultimate George Washington letter that everyone's trying to find. If somebody gets a letter that's dated during the Revolutionary War, he's going to open it instantly because it could be to or from somebody famous. If it's nothing, he'll just fold it back up and sell the thing for the stamp. This has been going on for several years.

**SUNSTONE:** So instead of looking for specific things, you would look at the postmark, because if Washington wrote the letter, his name would probably not appear on the outside.

**JACOBS:** That's correct; few of these stampless covers have return addresses on them. Now if the letter were addressed to him, his name would be on the outside and be recognized immediately. These cover dealers are not stupid. They know the important names in history, like Washington or Lincoln. But they can only know so much. So if someone comes along looking for a relatively unknown individual, say a secretary of Abe Lincoln, most dealers would not recognize the name. But that's the advantage manuscript dealers have over the cover dealers. And of course, very few cover dealers would recognize the important Mormon names like W. W. Phelps or Martin Harris, although they may have heard of Joseph Smith. And that's the advantage Mormon dealers like Mark have.

**SUNSTONE:** Would you say dealers are generally cagey people?

**JACOBS:** Well, there is an element of secrecy, but for a particular reason: Your clientele is essential to your fiscal welfare, and you don't want to give the names away to everybody or you may lose some customers. If you ask another dealer for a cover, you don't tell him who wants it or the dealer may make the sale himself. But you may let him know you're representing someone else and offer him a share of the profit from the sale. In that sense, there's a tremendous amount of trust and mutual back-scratching. You can keep names and sources secret, but misrepresenting the truth about the authenticity or integrity and so forth of any given document would not be tolerated.

**SUNSTONE:** Was it through this cover trading business that you found the Martin Harris letter?

**JACOBS:** Yes. Mark not only acquired the Martin Harris letter this way but also the Lucy Mack Smith letter, and others that have not received much media attention.

**SUNSTONE:** But aren't you the one who found the Martin Harris letter?

**JACOBS:** Unfortunately, my involvement in the discovery of the Martin Harris letter has been somewhat exaggerated during the past year, basically as a result of my desire to honor Mark's wishes in the matter. It must be clearly understood that although I technically located the letter, it was Mark who actually acquired it.

Let me explain. Mark considered moving to New York at one time so he could spend more time with his contacts and be closer to his sources. However, moving back there wasn't financially feasible for him and besides this is where his relatives live. Therefore, since I was going back for my graduate program at Harvard, Mark and I decided it might prove fruitful for me to take the names of some of his contacts and attempt to pursue them further.

Unfortunately, I didn't realize how time-consuming it was and was only able to contact a few people, mostly by mail. Through this list of people I found out that a dentist in Cortland, New York, had a little group of Palmyra letters dating from the 1830s that might be of historical interest. So I called Mark and gave him that tip. Soon afterwards Mark purchased the Martin Harris letter among other unimportant letters and immediately called to congratulate me for having located it. At that time we had a mutual understanding concerning our common ownership of the letter.

It was about the middle of December 1983 and I was about to come home for Christmas vacation, so we waited until I got to Utah to discuss what to do with it. He turned the letter over to me and told me he did not wish to become involved with the publicity he felt the letter would probably generate. Mark gave me full rights to do with it whatever I wished. Of course, I consulted with him on how to sell it, as I had no experience in selling such things. It was understood we were to share any profits that came from it.

Our first idea was to offer it to the Church. We

had previously shown a photocopied portion of the letter to Dean Jessee, who after examining it felt it was in Martin Harris's handwriting and therefore probably authentic. On that basis, I first showed it to Don Schmidt and to Elder G. Homer Durham, who was Church historian at the time. Because of the exceptional nature of the transaction, it was necessary to present the letter to President Hinckley. He read it, and although he seemed interested in the letter, he did not appear excited about its acquisition. He asked me some questions about what I would like for it. Among other things, I asked for a Mormon gold coin minted in Salt Lake in 1849. I knew the Church had more than one, but he declined. I also asked for one of their duplicate Book of Commandments but was turned down as well. In a sense I was just probing in the dark. He seemed to feel the price of documents was getting out of hand. The price I was asking may have been high. A Book of Commandments, after all, can be worth more than the amount we ultimately received for the letter. And in the end President Hinckley decided the Church did not want to purchase it.

We then decided to offer the document to Brent Ashworth. The letter was read to him, and he decided not to purchase it, although I don't exactly know why. It might have been because of the content, or perhaps the price we were asking. At that point, we speculated on whether we could sell it for \$30,000 or \$40,000. A few days later, Mark approached me and told me about Steve Christensen, who had some money to spend and had already made contributions to organizations such as SUNSTONE, for example. Steve was an attractive prospect because it appeared he would make the document the object of a significant research project. Arrangements were finally made, and I met Steve for the first time at Coordinated Financial Services. By that time, the sale contract had already been written and Mark and I signed it along with a few witnesses. It obligated Steve to pay \$40,000 at quarterly intervals in exchange for the document. That was the last time I ever saw the document. Later, Steve took it to have it authenticated and then planned to hire a couple of historians to produce a book presenting the letter in its historical context.

**SUNSTONE:** Recently the media have reported the involvement of Apostle Dallin Oaks and Seventy Hugh Pinnock in document dealing. Did you ever meet with either of these Church leaders?

**JACOBS:** No. President Hinckley and Elder Durham were the only General Authorities I have ever spoken with.

**SUNSTONE:** Why have you remained silent concerning the identity of the man who sold Mark the Martin Harris letter?

**JACOBS:** There are two reasons. First of all, as a dealer Mark did not want to give away this source and others since that can result in losing possible future items to a competing dealer. Second, this particular source is a very private person who is something of a recluse. Besides, I understand he sells

**President Hinckley read the letter, and though he seemed interested, he did not appear excited about its acquisition. He seemed to feel the price of documents was getting out of hand.**

In other words, it seems unlikely anyone could determine the pedigree of the Martin Harris letter beyond the person from whom we purchased it.

covers only as a hobby. He would not appreciate sensationalistic publicity; indeed, he usually doesn't even like to entertain people in his home. A major dealer like Doubleday might like the attention, but not this man.

**SUNSTONE:** If necessary, could you trace back the path the letter traveled before you found it?

**JACOBS:** Not effectively, no. The only time the origin of these letters becomes important is if they contain something valuable—and by then it's almost too late. It's difficult because often covers pass from hand to hand with nothing more than a receipt which mentions the quantity and geographic location of the postmarks. No specific record of the addressees on the covers or anything like that is mentioned. Therefore, it is possible to locate the last person from whom a particular letter was purchased but not usually any further back. As troubling as that may seem to some people, that's simply the nature of the cover business.

A TV report following the bombings broadcast Elwin Doubleday saying he had owned the Martin Harris letter at one time. The basis for that is this: He had previously bought a collection which contained some correspondence by an Oliver Phelps. It's my understanding this may have been a relative of W. W. Phelps, who apparently assumed possession of William's belongings, including various papers he left behind with his family when he went to Missouri. Much Phelps family material may have remained, but there's no proof the Oliver Phelps collection contained the Martin Harris letter. It does seem possible, however; so Doubleday may have indeed owned it at one time. No photograph or record was made of it, however, and so Doubleday can never be completely sure he had it.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you arrive at the prices on these documents?

**JACOBS:** Probably the most common way to establish price is through precedent. With books it's not particularly difficult to set a precedent since several copies of the same edition can be sold on different occasions. Once a book has sold for the first time, a precedent is set for the next copy.

With documents, setting a precedent is more difficult since each document is unique. A common solution to this problem is to put a document up for auction. You may have to arbitrarily attach a basic starting price, and whatever it goes for will set a precedent. Unfortunately, in the Mormon market there are really no auctions. Some people have suggested having Mormon auctions. I'd love to see that happen. In fact if I had to do it all over again, I would auction off the Martin Harris letter.

Some documents are not so difficult to price since some general precedents may exist on comparable items. For example, it's relatively easy to price some Joseph Smith holographs because so many have sold before. Now in the case of the Martin Harris letter, Mark had already sold a number of documents before and was starting to get a general idea of what certain individuals would be willing to pay for other

similar items.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you come to know what the market will yield on a particular document?

**JACOBS:** In that case, the concept of demand is essential.

**SUNSTONE:** And how is demand determined?

**JACOBS:** A good question. Why would someone be willing to pay the prices they do for the documents Mark has come up with? Actually there are many documents he can barely get rid of because they don't meet the criteria the buyers require of these documents. That's what we're talking about here: Why would someone want a Book of Mormon in French, a Book of Commandments, a Martin Harris letter, or the Lucy Mack Smith letter? Each collector has his own criteria. The Church generally has a comprehensive interest in acquiring everything. On the other hand, some private collectors such as Brent Ashworth seem to be more selective. I've never asked him why he bought the Lucy Mack Smith letter; I think it would be interesting if someone would ask him one of these days.

Some criteria, of course, are easy to surmise. Probably the most fundamental one is this: Does the document add to our knowledge of history? By this criterion, the Lucy Mack Smith letter was important because we have never had any verifiable notion of the contents of the 116 lost manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon. The reference to the contents of the 116 pages made the letter incredibly important to many people.

**SUNSTONE:** Would you say the prices commanded by Mormon documents are abnormally high compared to other equally old documents? For example, I was astounded to find a Betsy Ross document going for comparatively little—around \$5,000—compared to the Martin Harris letter.

**JACOBS:** First of all, the Ross document might not have had any important historical significance. I mean if the document talked about Betsy sitting around stitching the flag all day long, it could go for ten times that amount.

A Joseph Smith holograph usually commands from \$5,000 to \$15,000 depending on the content. To command a high price, of course, the content must be very important. A dippy little five- or six-line note, like one Mark sold a few years ago, actually sold for under \$5,000. On the other hand, the 1825 letter to Josiah Stowell is considered more important historically.

**SUNSTONE:** How much did it sell for?

**JACOBS:** I don't remember exactly, but I believe it was just under twenty thousand. Here's another example. There is an Eliza R. Snow manuscript now available on the market from a dealer named Rick Grunder. I believe he's selling it on consignment for a private collector. It's selling for \$20,000 because it represents a Snow holograph of "Oh My Father," the most famous production she ever penned. Now that may be overpriced. I don't know how the price was arrived at, but who's to say it's too much? We're

accounting for the personal taste of the collector. If it sells, then the price was not too high for at least one individual. Another, less significant, Eliza R. Snow manuscript might sell for only a couple of hundred dollars.

**SUNSTONE:** So the prices in the Mormon market aren't exaggerated?

**JACOBS:** How can I say they're exaggerated when people are willing to pay them? This is how supply and demand works.

**SUNSTONE:** But aren't the prices higher compared to the non-Mormon market?

**JACOBS:** No. And this brings up another criterion which affects price: rarity—which is not always related to the age of a document. For example, there are certain collectors who want to acquire the signature—just the signature—of every single person who signed the Declaration of Independence. This is quite a challenge. A couple of the signers—one of them by the name of Button Gwinnett—wrote and signed very little apart from the Declaration of Independence. Gwinnett's signature alone can go for somewhere between \$80,000 and \$150,000. On the other hand, a signature of John Hancock can often be obtained for around \$100. That's because John Hancock signed everything in the world. Few would even care if Button Gwinnett existed if he hadn't put his little John Doe on the Declaration of Independence.

Let me give you another example. William Shake-

book is worth about \$4,000 to \$5,000 now.

**SUNSTONE:** Because of the increase in demand and the decline in the number of them available.

**JACOBS:** Exactly. And an important book like that already has intrinsic value because it's the first Mormon book. Of course inflation contributed to the rapid increase of its value. Precedent, too, had its effect. Around 1972 somebody arbitrarily stuck a \$4,000 price tag on the book and got it. The minute someone paid that price, the whole network suddenly raised their prices. If any buyer complained, the dealer would point out that another copy had already been sold for that amount. That's how precedent works. By the mid-seventies it reached \$5,000. It just skyrocketed. Everybody wanted a first edition Book of Mormon, and the stores could not come up with enough copies.

**SUNSTONE:** How does an institution like the Church decide how valuable a document is and therefore how much they are willing to pay?

**JACOBS:** Well, it depends on how badly they want it and for what specific reason. For example, I think they'd like to have the Lucy Mack Smith letter, but Brent's got it. That's just the way it goes. They may not be willing to pay the money for it. How they arrive at what they're willing to pay is beyond me. I've never completely understood why they would decide to pay a lot for one thing and scarcely anything for another.

**SUNSTONE:** With Mormon documents, doesn't the

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peare's signature is extremely rare. It's my understanding there are only about three examples in existence. Charles Hamilton, a manuscript dealer in New York, once commented if he ever found an authenticated William Shakespeare signature, he would pay a million dollars for it. A million dollars for one signature of one man! Compared to this, the Martin Harris letter price of \$40,000 is nothing.

So those three things—precedent, content, and rarity—all help establish price. It's like first editions of the Book of Mormon. In 1965 you could still buy one for under a hundred dollars. Smart people quickly bought several of them. I know a man who bought one for each one of his ten children. The

price sometimes depend on whether it confirms or contradicts traditional Mormon views?

**JACOBS:** I don't think that's really so. To begin with, trying to evaluate whether a document is negative or positive is so subjective. It may be negative to some and positive to others, for example. And since some may wish to pay more for a negative document and others more for a positive one, those criteria don't really work until you've found the buyer you're going to be dealing with.

**SUNSTONE:** Does the degree of controversy engendered in a document's content affect your selection of a buyer?

**JACOBS:** Sometimes. For example, I've never heard

**Some buyers might be willing to pay whatever they have to in order to guarantee their exclusive right to do what they deem necessary with it.**

Brent Ashworth say he would only buy a document if it's positive, but most of the documents he has bought have been relatively free of controversy. You might have to look for some other buyer if the letter talked about one of Joseph's plural wives.

**SUNSTONE:** What about when the buyer is the Church?

**JACOBS:** Whether a document is controversial or noncontroversial doesn't usually seem to affect their buying habits. That's because they're interested in everything so they can build up the archives. Now what they do with the documents once they've acquired them is another matter.

**SUNSTONE:** Would you say the Mormon market is dealt with more secretly than normal markets?

**JACOBS:** Some individuals will not buy a document if it has been shown around to everybody else. Consequently Mark will often go to these people first. Such individuals want to be the first and only people to be offered it so that they can then advertise or conceal it if they so choose. Also, some collectors are reticent about purchasing a document which has previously been owned and publicly advertised by a fellow competing collector. For example, I understood from the beginning Steve Christensen didn't want the Harris letter published or advertised by anyone else. He wanted first rights on it. And so he asked us all to remain silent about the contents of the document from the very beginning. Basically, neither Mark nor myself were allowed to discuss the actual contents of the thing with the media until Steve released it himself. And that's been the case with some of the other documents Mark has sold.

**SUNSTONE:** But doesn't the secrecy affect the pricing? In the Mormon market it seems to me a particular buyer doesn't have a chance to know what other potential buyers might pay, therefore increasing the prices by the lack of competition.

**JACOBS:** Well, I think your comment is rather misleading and at best overgeneralizing. First of all, as I have already mentioned, most documents located and peddled by Mark, including those of particular historical import, have been offered around to several individuals competitively before any sale was realized. This certainly includes the Harris letter as well as the Joseph Smith III document, which was offered to at least two parties in the negotiation process. Even in the rare case in which a document may be offered to a client without the knowledge of other possible buyers, the collector could be influenced to pay a high price based on what documents of similar import have sold for in the past. The implication here, I realize, is that some buyers might be willing to pay whatever they have to in order to guarantee their exclusive right to do what they deem necessary with a document.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you go about finding buyers?

**JACOBS:** In the non-Mormon market that is not too hard, because you have auctions, dealers, and a well-established network of collectors. With Mormon documents, it's a little more difficult. Some dealers,

like Sam Weller, have an advantage because his store is centrally located and people can come to him and be placed on a want list. He might have a card file of five or ten people who are looking for a first edition of the Book of Mormon. Since Mark has no "document store," he usually advertises by word of mouth and has to spend time cultivating a network of buyers. Within that network, he would know basically what certain people would pay for what they want.

**SUNSTONE:** Do you have a general sense of approximately how many buyers there are for Mormon documents?

**JACOBS:** It depends on what kind of documents you're referring to. I would say there are only a handful of people who would be willing to pay large sums of money for special documents. But there are hundreds of people and institutions who would be willing to purchase a lot of moderately priced documents.

**SUNSTONE:** Once you've found a buyer, how do you convince him or her that your wares are rare and valuable and therefore worth your price?

**JACOBS:** Well, for example, if I were selling a book to the Church, and there were no precedent for its value, I would take it to the archivist to discuss the matter. I would explain from my research how many were printed, its impact on some area in Church history, and so on. In this manner an unprecedented price could be set jointly by both parties involved. A lot of dickering goes on, however, particularly when an arbitrary price is being discussed. Often, if you are well known for placing fair and reasonable prices on things, some people won't question your figure.

**SUNSTONE:** As a result of the recent bombing tragedy, the Martin Harris letter and other documents have been suspected as forgeries. What efforts have been made to authenticate it?

**JACOBS:** Because of his superb talents in the area of handwriting authentication, Dean Jessee was asked to examine the letter. Anyone who heard his presentation at the 1985 Mormon History Association conference will know that his efforts to authenticate it were as extensive as they possibly could have been, based on the existing examples of Martin Harris's handwriting. In addition to Jessee's work, the document was given to Kenneth Rendell to perform various chemical tests. Rendell has worked with documents for many years and is internationally acclaimed as one of the finest authenticators and document dealers in the world.

**SUNSTONE:** Did Rendell do the tests himself or did he send it out to various laboratories?

**JACOBS:** I understand he did some work himself. I know he's capable of doing certain paper tests. He has to farm out the work for other complex processes, but he knows whom to contact for that. And it was his responsibility to get all of that done. He has pronounced it an early nineteenth-century production. And Dean Jessee is persuaded that it is in the handwriting of Martin Harris. The FBI has recently

done a second series of tests on the Martin Harris letter, and as far as I understand, the document has been declared authentic for a second time as a result of extremely complex and expensive tests in the East.

**SUNSTONE:** In your experience as a book dealer, do questions of authenticity arise as you're buying and selling and trading various volumes?

**JACOBS:** Rarely. That's because it would be very difficult to duplicate an entire book. Even a title page would be hard to duplicate because it would involve matching the type exactly. If it were made through photomechanical means, the subsequent loss of clarity would be detectable. It's too easy to spot, even with the unaided eye.

I do some conservation work on books whose cover might be damaged or its binding falling apart, and so forth. A book can be re sewn, and modern cloth can be used to fix holes in the cover. Missing leather can be replaced. If a page is missing it can be replaced with a photocopy. Dirty pages can be washed to get water stains out of them. But all of this is done to make the book more complete and presentable and is inevitably detectable. It doesn't fool anybody and isn't intended to. I always discuss my repair work with prospective buyers.

**SUNSTONE:** Because you only located the Martin Harris letter, you did not see it until Mark showed it to you. Is that correct?

**JACOBS:** Yes.

**SUNSTONE:** And the man he acquired it from probably hadn't read it either?

**JACOBS:** That is correct.

**SUNSTONE:** So as far as you know, no one living can claim to have read it before it came from Mark Hofmann's hands. You don't have any first-hand knowledge of its actual origins.

**JACOBS:** If you're suggesting Mark forged it, it is not possible. Mark Hofmann is not a forger. I don't think Mark even knows how. He's never discussed possible methods of document forgery with me. The tests have demonstrated that the ink has been on the paper of the Harris letter for a hundred years. If it's a forgery, then it's a forgery from the nineteenth century. The tests have definitively proven that it must be from that period at least.

I've never had even the slightest reason to doubt its authenticity or to doubt Mark's integrity. I have never heard a negative statement concerning Mark's integrity from any archivist or professional. If he were a forger, how could he have gone so long without a single slip? There is just no way he could cover up some sort of a forgery scheme and not be detected at least once.

**SUNSTONE:** Some have suggested that you might be a forger.

**JACOBS:** That's ridiculous. What is their definition of forgery, anyway? I would suggest a forgery is the production of a document which is represented whether in sale or trade as being something other

than it actually is. To my knowledge, such a thing has never been perpetrated either by Mark or myself. I did make a repair on the Martin Harris letter because there was a small tear on it. It's not a falsification; it's not a forgery; it's a repair.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you do that?

**JACOBS:** There's a special tissue you can buy that you just iron over the crack and it just seals it up. That kind of stuff is done all the time. Mark can do some simple conservation work, but any extensive repair work has been done through the Church archives or some other professional. Mark simply doesn't have the knowledge.

**SUNSTONE:** How do you suppose these questions of forgery arose?

**JACOBS:** The reasons for that are difficult for me to ascertain except that people just simply don't like certain documents. They feel they can discredit a document simply by claiming it's a forgery so no one takes it seriously anymore. It seems to me it's only when a document becomes particularly offensive to people or in any way controversial that people decide it's a forgery. What's the matter with everyone? Why is it simply the Martin Harris letter that's a problem here and not the Lucy Mack? Is it simply because the Lucy Mack is a "positive" letter and the other is a "negative" one? Well, it seems like that's the case; that's what's happening over and over again.

I think the criticisms leveled against the Harris document are utterly absurd since it is obvious those making these charges don't have the expertise to make any valid comment on its authenticity.

**SUNSTONE:** One of the most outspoken proponents of the forgery theory has been the Utah Lighthouse Ministry. One would think that with their anti-Mormon mission, they would not question the Martin Harris letter's authenticity without good reason, especially since it supposedly supports their case against the Church. What do they have to gain?

**JACOBS:** I've always wondered that. I think it may be one of two things (or maybe both). So often such documents get stashed away; nobody talks about them anymore, and they just sort of fizzle out of public attention. That's really what started happening to the Martin Harris. It was mentioned by a few people in the very beginning and since Steve retained the document for so long without publishing it, the public eye was off the document to a great extent. Everyone sort of lost track of it. Well the anti-Mormons may have wanted to keep the thing going by claiming it to be a forgery.

The other possibility is that because certain individuals were crying forgery from the beginning, the anti-Mormons may have become apprehensive about using a document in their ministry which might not be authentic. If it were a forgery, it would make them look like fools. I just hope that the ravings of amateurs won't discourage future collectors from searching out other important historical documents which could still exist somewhere out there.

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