

“We were too disorganized to have any secret purpose. If we had a mission statement, it would be the inherent virtue of Mormonism, the right and value of independent thought.” —Allen Roberts

History of Sunstone, Chapter 2

DREAMS, DOLLARS, & DR. PEPPER

ALLEN ROBERTS & PEGGY FLETCHER YEARS (1978–1980)

By Lavina Fielding Anderson

ONE PLEASANT DAY IN 1979, PEGGY FLETCHER, Allen Roberts, and I settled down for lunch in the Salt Lake City’s Ristorante Della Fontana, formerly a church, but now sacred to the subtleties of tomato sauce and antipasto. At their invitation, I had come from the *Ensign* office on the twenty-third floor of the new Church Office Building, where I was an associate editor; they had come from the SUNSTONE office on the twelfth floor of the doomed, old Hotel Newhouse, where they were the editors. I’d known Peggy and Allen for years; I liked them both and appreciated their stimulating brand of lively faith and intellectual curiosity. A charter subscriber and occasional contributor, I loved SUNSTONE.

These were energetic times. We were all in our late twenties or early thirties and were exhilarated by the outpourings of Mormon history that had been triggered by the appointment of Leonard Arrington as Church Historian, in 1971. By 1979, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* had survived the organizational hiccups of its early editors, and now Mary Bradford and her crew were putting it out from Washington, D.C. And in the mid-seventies, SUNSTONE and *Exponent II* were created to serve the growing audience for popular but thoughtful ex-

amination and expression of Mormonism.

At lunch, over artichokes and olives, we eagerly swapped Mormon history gossip and talked publishing shop. With the veal parmigiana, they proposed: Would I become a full-time editor for SUNSTONE? It would mean leaving the *Ensign*, where I had worked with much complicated and ambiguous pleasure since 1973. I hesitated; it was tempting, but I couldn’t change jobs, especially with a large pay cut. They accepted my refusal in good grace, admitting it had been a long shot. Then we ate pineapple sherbet and speculated whether Sonia Johnson’s Mormon feminist crusade would succeed.

The waitress brought the bill. Allen reached in his jacket pocket, then looked at Peggy. “I don’t have the checkbook,” he said. “Did you bring it?”

She shook her head, wide-eyed. “I thought you had it.”

I pulled out my credit card. We left together, laughing at this symbol of SUNSTONE’s always precarious finances and at how tenuous and tenacious were the ties that bound the SUNSTONE community.

AN OFFICE OF OUR OWN

With more attention, couldn’t subscriptions and advertising be increased enough to generate a self-sustaining income?

LESS than a year earlier, on a summer day in 1978, Allen Roberts and Peggy Fletcher had descended the front steps of Edna Erickson’s home near the University of Utah, still shaken by the announcement Scott Kenney had just made there at a SUNSTONE meeting: SUNSTONE’s finances were not just red but hemorrhaging; there was no hope they could

LAVINA FIELDING ANDERSON lives in Salt Lake City with her husband, Paul Lawrence Anderson. She is president of *Editing, Inc.*, editor of the *Journal of Mormon History*, and a trustee of the *Mormon Alliance*. She is the editor of the forthcoming *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Signature Books). She may be contacted by e-mail at <lavina@utw.com>.

be improved in the future. Since helping found SUNSTONE in 1974, Scott had tried long and hard to get it to be self-supporting. This was not news to the volunteer staff. But now, the whole job had become too much. He announced the death of the magazine that had taken a major chunk of their time and energy for four years.¹

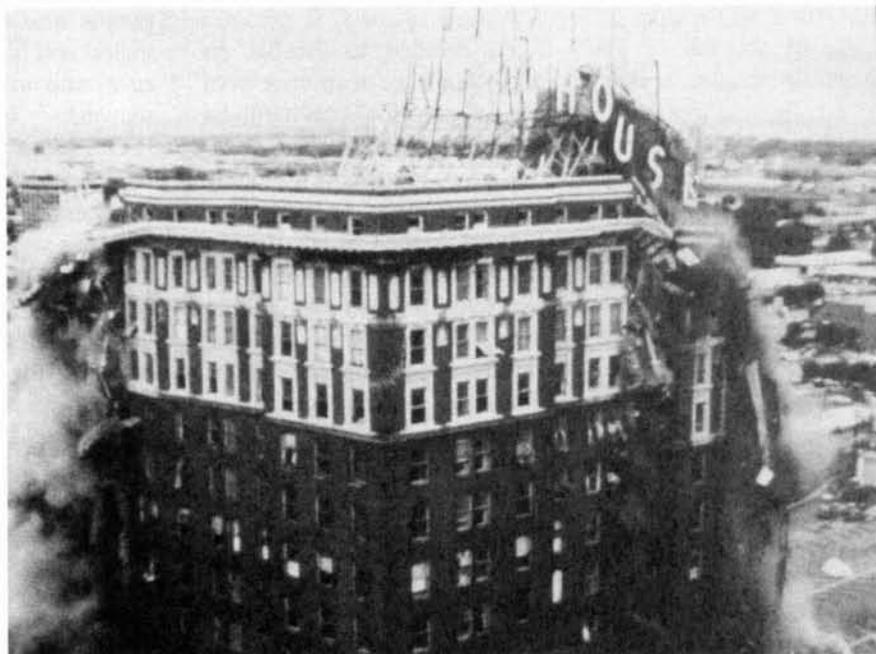
Scott's bombshell prompted anxious discussion. John Sillito desperately wanted SUNSTONE to live, pledging to stay on under reorganization by the old staff. Peggy had proved a successful fundraiser and editor. Allen was "well-spoken and intense, almost charismatic," John recalls. Running SUNSTONE was daunting, he remembers thinking, but "twenty years from now, we'll look back on this time. A torch has been lighted. What if it goes out?" He knew of the chill that was starting to descend on the headiness of Leonard Arrington's *Camelot*, and he knew some people wanted SUNSTONE and *Dialogue* to fail.

But a last-minute rescue failed to emerge in the meeting, and the group soberly dispersed, trying to absorb the tragic news. Allen and Peggy lingered, talking on the sidewalk. Then they moved to the grass and sat down. Hours later, they had pledged that they would not let SUNSTONE die—at least not without another gigantic effort. "It was a team effort," says Peggy. "Neither one of us could have done it alone, but we saw how we could together" as co-editors and co-publishers.

Allen gave the magazine its first office. In 1976, he and Wally Cooper had started what became Cooper/Roberts Architects, with a speciality in historic preservation. By 1978, the firm had moved into the Bud Bailey building, an old laundry building on 300 North Street in Salt Lake City. Peggy worked part time as a receptionist for Cooper/Roberts and did SUNSTONE part time. Essential SUNSTONE business was conducted on the fly in the firm's reception area.

SUNSTONE was anything but part time, however, and when Cooper/Roberts remodeled a back room, Peggy made it her SUNSTONE office, while first Frances Ann Smeath and then Susan Staker took over as receptionist. The little room was under the main bathroom, and the staff grew immune to the torrential sounds of overhead flushing that shocked visitors.

Soon SUNSTONE outgrew Cooper/Roberts's back room, and it rented quarters on the twelfth floor of the Hotel Newhouse in spring/summer 1979. Once a Salt Lake glamour spot, the run-down Newhouse was spacious and cheap—but not much more. Slated for demolition, most of the building was empty. Susan, who was lugging baby Bevan along in her infant seat, always packed a book, too, in case she got stuck in the slow, creeping elevator. Peggy remembers, "We'd begged and scrounged these battered pieces of equipment for our office.



Sunstone's editor cried when the demolition of historic Hotel Newhouse ended their sojourn there. Creating a modern product nurtured by the history-laden building was exactly what they were doing inside the rich Mormon tradition.

The first time I met Ken Woodward was in that office. He was the senior religion writer at *Newsweek*. He looked at our handsome, professional, ambitious magazine, then glanced around our office and asked incredulously, "You produce this here?"

The Newhouse was demolished in early 1980, and SUNSTONE was the last tenant to vacate. When it was imploded, Allen, Peggy, and other staff gathered in a party to bid it farewell. Sequential, muffled explosions brought an enormous dust cloud. As it cleared, remembers Allen, they saw "nothing where twelve stories of something had been. . . . [T]he building had disappeared before my eyes. I looked at Peggy. . . . I saw . . . tears on her cheeks." The SUNSTONE staff was not only idealistic but romantic and nostalgic.

Finances are an ever-present reality for SUNSTONE's leaders. Under Scott Kenny, SUNSTONE had no payroll, no rent, no phone bills; now, in working to stabilize the fledgling cause, SUNSTONE was acquiring relentless burdens of weekly and monthly cash obligations. Peggy and Allen had decided to take over SUNSTONE because, in part, they believed the organization's business side had been neglected by the volunteer graduate students who preferred the magazine's editorial side. With more attention and professionalism, SUNSTONE could increase its subscriber base—there *had* to be a much greater audience for SUNSTONE than currently existed, one large enough to generate self-sustaining income. Similarly, with more attention, advertising income could be greatly increased. But in their first year, their business success was less than they had hoped. One reason, they concluded, was that they were still doing

SUNSTONE on the side.

So in the fall of 1979, Allen decided to gamble on SUNSTONE's financial viability and took a leave of absence from his architectural practice. Working full-time for SUNSTONE, he could increase subscriptions and advertising enough to stabilize the organization and pay him a salary to support his family of four (later five) children. "SUNSTONE gave me a place to make a positive difference in the world. In the Church, despite my [high council] calling, I was replaceable. If I left, there would be somebody else in my chair the next day. But in SUNSTONE, I could see the difference I was making." The next year's accomplishments are still impressive in both their scope and quantity.

NEW PROGRAMS AND FEATURES

In Peggy and Allen's second year, Sunstone enlarged the magazine's reach, inaugurated a theological conference and fiction contest, and published a cartoon book and calendar.

A POWERFUL creation itself, SUNSTONE also generated collateral ideas like fireworks throwing off sparks. Article ideas, fundraising concepts, and new organizations burst into conceptual and sometimes actual life. For example, the SUNSTONE symposium grew out of a "what-if" conversation—what if friends got together for a weekend to talk theology? The retreat's potential to generate first-class papers for the magazine was an added impetus. Allen calls the symposium an example of "our innocence and naivete. We didn't know that we couldn't just do it."

The first symposium was held on 24–25 August 1979 at the University of Utah. Just before the first session, Allen and Peggy knelt in an empty room and fervently prayed for all to go well. And it did. Guest keynote scholar John Dillenberger, president of Hartford Theological Seminary, spoke on "Theological Impressions of Mormonism." The names of the nearly all-male Mormon participants impressively featured Mormon liberals and conservatives, including conservative BYU and LDS Institute scholars. Here is a sampling: Richard L. Anderson, Edward Ashment, Arthur Bassett, M. Gerald Bradford, Lowell Bennion, Davis Bitton, James Faulconer, Carlisle Hunsaker, Scott Kenney, Louis Midgley, Robert Millett, Hugh Nibley, Kent E. Robinson, Max Rogers, George D. Smith, Richard Sherlock, John L. Sorensen, John Tanner. Altogether, 308 attended, and it grossed \$4,720.

The symposium was not originally conceived as an annual event, but the next year, 1980, Allen and Peggy decided to host another one. Attendance doubled to 650, and income trebled to \$11,197. In the third year, attendance and income increased slightly. By 1984, a dizzying 1,036 attended, and income rose to \$33,193.²

If big thinking made the symposium possible, another grandiose idea, the Sunstone theological school, was never realized, but Allen and Peggy never quit dreaming about it. "Our idea was to find a historic building some place, adapt it as a school, and have classes in it with a research library and meeting facilities," recalls Allen. "Then we could have the same

people who were contributing articles teach classes on theological and historical subjects, charge tuition, spread our influence, and make some money." It's an idea that keeps being reinvented: in the late 1980s, SUNSTONE publisher Daniel Rector had a similar dream, and the Mormon Studies Seminar was recently organized by Mark Thomas, Scott Kenney, Karl Sandberg, Sheldon Greaves, and Allen Roberts. Among its first activities was a one-day seminar in February 1999 featuring renowned international scholars discussing the relationship among biblical archeology, faith, and history.

A smaller idea of Peggy's and Allen's that still thrives today was enlisting Bellamy Brown and his siblings to underwrite SUNSTONE's annual fiction contest in memory of their parents, Brookie and D. K. Brown. Because of the Browns' gift, this contest has raised the quality of Mormon short fiction, and through the years, it has regularly identified up-and-coming authors of serious Mormon fiction.

Allen and Peggy continued publishing the fundraising Mormon history calendars, which made money but were not a financial windfall. Far more successful were Calvin Grondahl's cartoon books. While crafting political cartoons that met the strictures of the *Deseret News*, Cal doodled his way to sanity. One day, he showed Peggy some Mormon sketches the *News* had rejected, particularly some with Joseph Smith and flying angels.

Grondahl's "ideas were really interesting," remembers Allen. SUNSTONE could print a ninety-six-page book quite cheaply, "so we told him to go off and do some more. He came back with an enormous stack. We laid them all out on these tables so we could walk around and pick up our favorites, then shuffle them in some kind of order." Cal was almost frighteningly fertile, coming back with numerous variations that fleshed out the vaguest suggestion. "What he couldn't do was spell," recalled Allen. "I ended up doing most of the lettering because about a third of the words were misspelled." One best-liked cartoon was captionless, showing priesthood holders at the front of a chapel with a proud father holding up what is indubitably the world's ugliest baby. Affectionate and funny, it caught a scene all Mormons recognized and articulated feelings all felt.

That first Grondahl book, *Freeway to Perfection* (1978) with its cover of a hitchhiker displaying a "KOLOB" sign, was "a financial boon." Allen showed it to an eager Deseret Book Store buyer, who ordered many. "We'll sell tons!" he enthused. A few days later, a higher-ranking administrator called to cancel the order. "They're too irreverent, even sacrilegious. They don't meet our standards." Perhaps Deseret Book found too many on-the-edge cartoons, like the suited bureaucrat sitting behind a vast desk and announcing judiciously to a minister in a clerical collar and sandals, "Actually, we here in LDS Church finance are not in the habit of buying out insignificant denominations."

Sunstone hired Richard Maher to distribute the *Freeway*. He filled his van with cases and placed the book in stores from California to Idaho, making it an Intermountain top ten best-seller. A sheepish third call came from Deseret Book: the store

