Nathan Eldon Tanner

1898-1982

Official Declaration 2

Fourteen-year-old Hugh B. Brown was in the Tanner home when N. Eldon Tanner was born. "My first recollection of Eldon was his birth cry, as I waited to help if needed," recalled President Brown. "Ever since that time there has been a bond between us, as I instinctively recognized a child of promise."[1]

Eldon grew to manhood in Aetna, Canada, a small Latter-day Saint farming town. He learned to work hard from his father, who planted and harvested wheat and oats. Eldon would hurry through his farm chores because he wanted to read his school books. When the family moved from Aetna to Cardston, Eldon recalled waiting in line to register for classes. He said, "I saw in the far corner of the room two girls talking. I asked my friend Ken Woolf who the beautiful girl was. He said it was Sally Merrill (nicknamed Sara). I said, 'Someday I'm going to marry her.'"[2]

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[1] Hugh B. Brown, "President N. Eldon Tanner, a Man of Integrity," *Ensign*, November 1972, 13–14.

[2] G. Homer Durham, *N. Eldon Tanner, His Life and Service* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 21.

It took years before his revelatory comment came to fruition. It was not until Sara Merrill was hired to be a teacher in a three-room school, and Eldon was employed as a principal with responsibilities over her classroom, that the two young friends began to court. The courtship matured to marriage, just as Eldon had hoped. Sara wrote, "I have been so much more fortunate in my marriage than nearly anyone I know that I feel very thankful."[3]

Eldon supported his young bride as a schoolteacher and a principal. To make ends meet, outside the classroom he worked as a health officer and a constable. In an attempt to consolidate his efforts, he left academics and opened a small general store. As his store became profitable, Eldon added a gas station, a butcher shop, and a type of farm implement store. But as fate would have it, making money and attending to customers did not take the place of the classroom. Eldon sold his interest in his businesses and moved his family to Cardston in 1927. In that Latter-day Saint community, he accepted the position of principal of the Cardston High School.

While fulfilling his role as principal, Eldon was called to serve in the bishopric of the Cardston 1st Ward. Two years later, in November 1933, he was ordained a bishop. As his Church responsibilities increased, so did his community service. He was elected to the Cardston City Council and named a delegate to the 1935 provincial government. He was handily elected to serve in the government not just by a majority but by twenty-two of the twenty-five precincts.

While serving in his legislative position, Eldon was invited to join the executive council as minister of lands and mines. He was so efficient and effective as a minister, he was asked to head the Department of Lands and Forests and the Department of Mines and Minerals. This meant that Eldon had moved into the inner-circle of the Canadian government, becoming the first Latter-day Saint in the entire British Commonwealth to be named to a cabinet post.

In his dual position as head of the Department of Lands and Forests and the Department of Mines and Minerals, Eldon developed a system for leasing oil lands that benefitted the oil companies and the province of Alberta. Due largely to his efforts, Alberta was recognized as the fastest-growing oil producer in the world.

In 1952 Eldon left government service and returned to the private sector. He was named president of Merrill Petroleums. Two years later, he was named executive vice-president of TransCanada PipeLines Company. His main responsibility with TransCanada was to find solutions to the economic and political challenges confronting the company in

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[3] Durham, *N. Eldon Tanner*, 25.

constructing a pipeline that extended twenty-three hundred miles. Because Eldon was able to find solutions and push forward the pipeline project, he was recognized by the *Journal of Trade and Commerce* as the "Man of the Year." When the extensive pipeline was completed, Eldon resigned from TransCanada PipeLines with plans to retire on his three-hundred-acre ranch near Calgary. But then came a call in 1953 to serve as president of the Calgary Stake—a stake with nearly twenty-four hundred members residing in 21,600 square miles.

In 1960, while visiting with Hugh B. Brown in Salt Lake City, Eldon learned that President David O. McKay wanted to see him. The next day, at age sixty-two, Eldon was called by President McKay to be an Assistant to the Council of the Twelve Apostles. Two years later, he was ordained an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. One year after his call to the apostleship, he was named second counselor to David O. McKay in the First Presidency of the Church.

Eldon would go on to serve as a counselor in the First Presidency to Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and Spencer W. Kimball. President Kimball perhaps best explained why Eldon was chosen to be a counselor: "[He is] as approachable as a child, as wise as a father, and as loving as a gentle brother. … Certainly Nathan Eldon Tanner is a man to match our mountains tall, rugged, unyielding, immeasurable."[4] During his years in the First Presidency, Eldon saw an expansion of Church membership, large-scale construction of meetinghouses and temples, and the construction of the Church Office Building. He oversaw the rejuvenation of the business district adjoining Temple Square in Salt Lake City.

In the late 1970s, Eldon was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. He died on November 27, 1982, at his home in Salt Lake City at age eighty-four. At his death, the First Presidency issued the following statement: "With the passing of President N. Eldon Tanner the entire Church feels a tremendous loss. His unflinching testimony of God the Eternal Father and of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ has been a strength to millions over the earth."[5]

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[4] *Deseret News*, March 30, 1978.

[5] "President N. Eldon Tanner Dies," *Ensign*, January 1983, 9.