

# TIME

SPECIAL ISSUE

## Life on the Mississippi

An eye-opening journey  
along America's river of dreams



death. Yet within three years the new town of Nauvoo boasted 1,500 log homes and shops and 350 brick buildings. Its militia counted 4,000 men, roughly half the size of the U.S. Army at the time. Its visual and spiritual centerpiece was to be a magnificent white limestone temple, with a 165-ft. steeple visible for miles.

But the Saints' neighbors grew nervous about a heavily armed theocracy in their midst. In 1844 Smith was jailed, then shot dead by a mob and his flock harassed. In 1846, their temple barely completed, they reluctantly embarked on an extraordinary trek. It would produce another mighty settlement, near the Great Salt Lake. But Nauvoo, says Richard Ostling, co-author of the book *Mormon America*, quickly attained the status of a lost ideal: "the thorough expression of the Mormon kingdom of God on earth."

Over the next century, Nauvoo became a sleepy, almost entirely Roman Catholic river burg, whose hot events were weekly Fish Fridays and Chicken Wednesdays. Its working men labored in nearby Keokuk, Iowa, but their number shrank relentlessly as young people left. "By the time I moved here 10 years ago, it was pretty close to a retirement community," says Kathy Wallace, editor of the 500-circulation *Nauvoo New Independent*. At one point the only grocery closed for half a year for lack of business. When the Latter-day Saints, who had been trickling back for years, bought land in a historically Mormon part of town called the Flats and built a Mormonized Colonial Williamsburg called Nauvoo Restoration that drew 250,000 tourists a year, the income was welcome.

Not that there were no tensions. Mormon culture, for all its energy and sterling family values, can seem triumphal and even clanish to outsiders. Ken Millard, a Latter-day Saint who is also Nauvoo's city planner, admits that even after a century's exile, some Mormon tourists exhibited "an arrogance and ownership" regarding the town. Main Street merchants traded stories about shoppers who, arriving at the checkout, inquired, "Are you a Saint?" and if the answer was no, walked out, leaving the clerk holding the bag.

And then on Easter 1999, Gordon Hinekley, the Saints' president and prophet, announced that the church would rebuild the great Nauvoo Temple. Its agents were so confident that they applied for a building permit and scheduled groundbreaking for later the same month. The city council debate ran along monetary lines. The rebuilt temple would draw an estimated 1 million dollar-wielding visitors. But the pilgrims would strain the taxpayer-financed roads, sewers and police force, with its current night watch of one officer.

In the end, decency, pragmatism and fear of litigation triumphed. Says Jane Langford, the *New Independent's* owner: "It goes against the grain here to prevent people from using their own land." Plus, it's hard to stop them. Unlike locales that have contested the Mormons' current wave of temple building (a dispute in Belmont, Mass., seems destined for the Supreme Court), Nauvoo had no zoning laws and no desire to lock legal horns with an opponent worth some \$30 billion. When the Mormons anted up \$471,000 for town expenses, they got their permit. Most of the townspeople, says Wallace, "were proud of the council for getting some money out of it."

They have only gradually begun to realize the implications of the deal. Mormons now own an estimated 32% of the town land. An extension of Brigham Young University sits where there had been a

Catholic boarding school. Houses in the Flats once worth \$20,000 now go for \$250,000, and tax assessments have risen accordingly—longtime residents have every incentive to sell and leave. Meanwhile, temples like Nauvoo's serve as magnets for Mormon retirees, who take up spiritual tasks such as baptizing deceased ancestors of believers. It will take just 900 such immigrants to effect a Mormon majority in the town. Says Langford, the publisher, grimly: "They want to take back Nauvoo, and since they can't do it with guns, they are doing it

with money." If so, in the first of what would no doubt be many social changes, Nauvoo would probably go dry. E-mails Sonja Bush: "I own the Draft House in Nauvoo, and was informed tonight that the city planner (Mormon) referred to it as a place of sin. Boy! You should have seen it. Wednesday is 'Chicken Nite' and a lot of our sinners were in their 60s to mid-80s. They were kicking up their heels and having a sinful good time!"

It is hard to imagine Millard, the Mormon planner, uttering "place of sin." A worried-looking, bespectacled man provided to the town by the church as part of the temple deal, he is careful to use the word *we* in discussing the town's future. "We don't want to see

change in Nauvoo," he says, "yet there's no way you can stop [it]." This, in a country where change is the secular religion, is an almost unanswerable argument. But Millard gives it the inimitable Mormon spin. "The church believes in unity and harmony, and the official position is to work things out," he says. "But when there's a goal to accomplish, they like it to be accomplished."

—Reported by Julie Grace/Nauvoo



**GOODBYE TO ALL THAT?** Chicken Wednesday at the Draft House. The owner frets that a Mormon influx may put her out of business

#### CREVE COEUR, MO.

## Meeting Your (Film)Maker

The Cassity boys want their cemeteries to tell your life story

By JOHN CLOUD

**L**IKE OTHERS IN THEIR ANCIENT INDUSTRY, CEMETERY owners Brent and Tyler Cassity will bury you or burn you. But unlike your average gravediggers, they believe their most noble offering is to immortalize you. That's why their firm, based in Creve Coeur—it means Heartbreak—Mo., has the ambitious name Forever Enterprises. Besides providing the usual burial plots and cremation urns, Forever helps the living remember the dead by producing biographies of the deceased that can be viewed on touchscreen kiosks at the cemetery. That means the Cassity brothers may have found a way for people not to dodge mortality but to shape it to their liking.

"At traditional cemeteries, all you have is something carved in cold stone. There's nothing alive," says Tyler, 30. "This way, you can hear that person, see them as they were in life," says Brent, 33. The Cassitys have stored about 3,000 of their 10,000 biographies on the Web at [forevernetwork.com](http://forevernetwork.com) (the others will be digitized from videotape soon). But theirs isn't primarily a dotcom firm. Instead, it is focused on changing the cemetery by making the biography, rather than the remains, the focus of a visit. Eventually they hope to even insert touchscreens into tombstones.

The Cassitys learned the death business from their father, who ran funeral homes when they were kids. But the biography idea was their own. In 1986, three years after their grandmother died, they found an audiotape of her. The sweet voice made them happy and sad at the same time. "Why don't we have more than this?" they wondered. It's schmaltzy and, as they discovered, good business; Forever is set to earn \$11 million in revenues this year, up from just \$700,000 in 1998. The three-cemetery firm plans to acquire 10 more by year's end.

Forever is doing well because the Cassitys realized before anyone else in their glacially changing industry that many Americans would love to have their own A&E Biography. And not just "the terminally trendy," as a reporter described Forever's clients. Earl Essman, 72, a retired real estate manager and American Legion member, and his wife Marian, 71, decided in the fall of 1998 that they should make arrangements for their passing. Earl worked with Forever's head biographer, Cindy Stafos, to compile pictures and stories. He recalled going to summer camp and meeting Marian. He notes on their bio that their favorite song even before they met was *Where or When*, which Dion & the Belmonts made a hit in 1960.

"I'm going to give you a quote," Essman says, explaining why Forever will succeed. "It's from Andy Warhol, and it goes something like this: 'Everybody is entitled to 15 minutes of fame.' That biography is going to be ours." What Warhol actually wrote was, "In the future, everyone will be world famous for 15 minutes." Essman got the quote wrong, but he got the sociology right. Many of us believe we have a right to be famous. None of Forever's clients, folks who were dishwashers or lawyers, actors or plumbers, has ever asked that a biography remain private.

And they will pay a tidy sum for the broadcast. A bare-bones Forever package, including 10 photos and as much as 20 minutes of audio recordings to explain the pictures, with no music or video, costs \$600. Those who buy a Platinum Biography can include 115 photos, three songs of their choice, an in-home interview with the subject of the bio (if he isn't dead) and those close to him, and a videotaped reminiscing party with family and friends. A Forever editor then puts it all together into a movie—for \$4,195.

But the Cassitys say their product means more than traditional funeral fare—the coffins and flowers and sermons—that will be lost to history. The typical funeral costs something like \$7,000. The Cassitys don't want you to spend less overall, but they would rather

you devote less to a coffin, say, and more to your life story. That approach has made them outcasts in their own business. Many traditional cemetery owners think the brothers have found a new way to perpetuate a hoary tradition of mortuary science: gouging customers by pushing them to purchase needless fluffery when they are low. The Forever biography "sounds to me like an effort to turn an existential event into a retail one," says Thomas Lynch, a noted poet and essayist who runs the Milford, Mich., funeral company that his father started. (He knows something about turning memory into a retail event: his memoir, *The Undertaking*, was published in 1997 and is in paperback, available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) for \$10.36.)

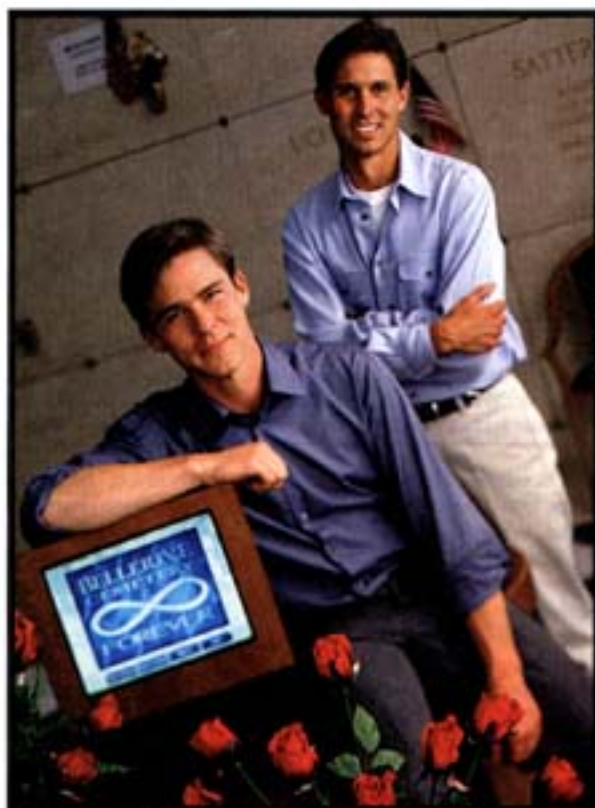
Lynch fears that the cemetery trend toward providing bio-kiosks, celebrity tours or even bird-watching sessions will turn these sacred places into amusement parks. "Once you say a cemetery has to be a place other than the place we put our dead, you open it up to the ridiculous," he says. When told that the Cassitys' Creve Coeur cemetery has a fitness walk, Lynch goes even further: "If we have a fitness walk, why not a concert, and if you have a concert, why not a rap concert? Why not have a chicken barbecue for the Rotary Club?"

Well, as it turns out, "we do have rap concerts," says Tyler Cassity defiantly. Or at least one, at the service of DJ Rob One (a.k.a. Robert Cory), a prominent fixture in the Los Angeles hip-hop world who died in March. "The people who come to us define who we are," says Tyler. "For us to define for them how they can remember someone, well, we're just not going to do that." The debate comes down to a central question: What is a cemetery for? Traditionalists think it is a place for rituals of closure, a place we go to for a funeral and return to only on birthdays. The Cassitys allow us to keep our dead loved

ones—or ourselves—open to new interpretations and new (if virtual) relationships with great-grandkids they (or we) will never meet. Instead of finality, the Cassitys' cemeteries offer a kind of manufactured immortality, a heavily edited performance of someone's life that shunts aside what was a cemetery's focus: the end.

And is there anything wrong with turning a cemetery into a theme park for memories? Not in the abstract, though the reality can be a little ... unreal. Few people tell the whole truth in their biographies. The Essmans, for instance, don't mention their previous marriages. Another client forced Forever's editors to remove all references to a deceased mother's mental illness.

But biographer Stafos says people are often unintentionally honest about themselves. One man, who prepared his biography with his wife, even though both are only in their 30s, described his wife's best quality this way: "She's a very hard worker." Other clients send regretful messages via their bios: they wish they had been better parents; they apologize to friends for a betrayal. "In the memoir culture right now, there's so much confession," says Tyler. "We're just a part of that." Maybe. But the Cassitys are also poised to extend that memoir culture, for better or worse, into all our deaths. ■



**HIGH-TECH DEATH MOGULS** Tyler and Brent in the marble mausoleum where they store ashes and digitized memories

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW HARRIS FOR TIME