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Hugh Nibley a scholar from early age

By Emily Schmuhl

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Most people wouldn't be surprised to learn Hugh Nibley was an extraordinary scholar, even at an early age. But some might be surprised, and amused, to learn what daughter Zina Nibley Petersen said he didn't know.

Petersen, Nibley's youngest daughter, presented on his early education as part of the weekly Hugh Nibley lecture series taking place at BYU to commemorate what would have been his hundredth birthday.

Petersen said that she's been asked many times how her father became the LDS apologist that the academic community revered.

"He had defensive armor against trivialities," said Petersen, a professor of English at BYU.

But Nibley wasn't always prepared for what the world threw at him, such as the first day of kindergarten.

Petersen recalled her father sharing that on the first day, his mother asked the milkman to see him safely to school. But when the principal, an austere, authoritative man, came strolling toward young Hugh, he ran all the way home and flung himself into his mother's arms to "escape the retribution of authority."

Soon, however, Nibley came to excel. All the elementary-aged students were submitted to I.Q. tests. As Nibley was testing, the comment was made that "he could fall asleep and not wake up for nine years (and) he'd still be ahead of everyone at school," Petersen shared.

Speed during the I.Q. tests was essential. Petersen said that the question that finally made Nibley hesitate involved the word "mosaic." At nine years old, Nibley was trying to determine if mosaic referred to the art technique or the Law of Moses.

Regardless, at age nine, in the fourth grade, Nibley had an I.Q. of over 200. The principal pulled him out of school and began to tutor him at advanced levels.

Though Nibley was gifted academically, he had unquenchable passion for his extracurricular activities -- especially his study of astronomy. Petersen told how young Hugh once came to the table with all his eyelashes cut off.

"(It was) in order to see through his telescope better," Petersen said.

It was the old, dusty volumes in his parents' attic that made Nibley gain a respect and love for ancient civilizations. He also wrote poetry and enjoyed playing the piano.

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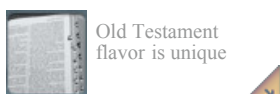
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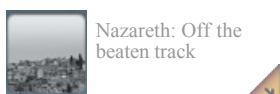
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Petersen said that Nibley used music as an escape, much like running or knitting.

"He was not invested in perfecting (his piano playing,)" said Petersen. He would make the same mistakes and errors in the pieces he played over and over again.

When Nibley went to an elite high school in Los Angeles, he befriended John Cage, the, what Petersen called, "wickedly disruptive, subversive intellectual," best known for his 1952 composition "4'33" where the movements are performed without a single note played.

English was Nibley's favorite subject and he enjoyed memorizing long passages from famous works of literature.

Petersen recalled that growing up, if she or her siblings recited a Shakespearean line, Nibley could give them the next line -- "or twenty," she joked -- and often corrected the initial line.

Nibley, however, still had some growing up to do. Often his siblings picked up his chores so he could be free to study. Once his brother, Richard, demanded Hugh help him with the dishes.

Nibley dried one cup. Then another. Then another. Then he looked at Richard and said, "But anyone can do this." He spun on his heel and left Richard at the sink.

"I hope that ended in some righteous fraternal violence," said Petersen.

Inspired by his love for Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nibley decided to go try and live off of the land. He went to Crater Lake in Oregon which, at the time, was considered wild.



During his week-long excursion, Nibley faced off with a cougar, bears, and wolves. One wolf even left a scar on his thigh when she sunk her teeth into it.

Nibley escaped to tell the tale, but not before he got sick trying to survive on huckleberrys alone and not before rats ate his shoes.

Young Hugh Nibley served in the Swiss-German mission from 1927-1930, which proved another profound educational experience.

Hugh wrote to his mother, Agnes, saying the pre-World War II German people possessed "...simply indifference, nobody seems to be really bad -- but who has a right to be satisfied?"

Nibley was chased out of a butcher shop by a woman with a meat cleaver; later he saw only the door of the butcher shop still standing after the town was bombed during the war.

Nibley would come home and attend graduate school and, again, excel academically. But Petersen presented two lists of things her father did and didn't know.

Things Hugh Nibley didn't know:

- There is no such thing as a free lunch.
- Academic degrees make you smart.
- When it is entirely appropriate to interfere in a teenager's life.
- When it is appropriate to allow someone else to interfere in your own life.
- Where he left the car.
- The mysterious physics of strawberry jam (everything would end up sticky).

Things Hugh Nibley did know:

- Generosity is simply the natural order of things.
- Ultimately, love and affection are not only more important than brains and drive, they are the only important things.
- The Book of Mormon is the word of God.
- Joseph Smith was a prophet.
- Institutions are as good or bad as their members. Goodness and evil can be found all over.
- Which one was Beavis and which one was Butthead.
- The importance of the Atonement.

"Lovers call it 'heart' when they give their full devotion to each other," said Petersen.

To take heart means to believe. Looking back on her father's life, Petersen knows that he believed with every ounce of his being. "He had a very good heart," she said. "That's what made the difference."

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