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LIVES OF THE SAINTS
At a time when Mormonism is booming, the Church is struggling with a troubled legacy.
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When the 2002 Olympic Winter Games open in Utah next month, the world will be greeted by a young, well-scrubbed, and ingratiating religion. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has its headquarters in Salt Lake City, and although its leaders have taken pains to keep the event from being called the Mormon Olympics, they view this as an unprecedented opportunity to make the acquaintance of billions of prospective converts.

Mormonism, which entered the twentieth century as the most persecuted creed in America, begins the twenty-first century as perhaps the country's most robust religion. During the past thirty years, the number of its adherents in the United States has increased by nearly two hundred and twenty-five per cent, to more than five million. (In the same period, the ranks of Southern Baptists, the other fast-growing major denomination in the country, have swelled forty per cent, to sixteen million.) At the same time, the memberships of older, more mainstream denominations, such as Methodism and Episcopalianism, have sharply declined.

The number of Mormons throughout the world may soon equal that of Jews, and, indeed, many see a parallel between the two faiths. Harold Bloom, the Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale, who has written about Mormonism in his book "The American Religion," observes that "Mormons have repeated in a deep sense the pattern of the Jews—they are a religion that has become a people." Like the Jews, the Mormons undertook an exodus that forged their early identity as a scorned people; and they believe that they are God's chosen. They divide the world's population between themselves and "gentiles"—a category that, for Mormons, includes Jews. Unlike the Jews, however, the Mormons are a missionary people, and the majority of them today are first-generation converts. Worldwide, according to the Church, the number of Mormons has grown by nearly four hundred per cent during the past thirty years, to more than eleven million. In "The American Religion," Bloom speculates about a time when American Mormons are so numerous and so wealthy "that governing our democracy becomes impossible without Mormon cooperation."

In 1847, Mormon pioneers followed Brigham Young across the Great Plains into what was then the northern extension of Mexico. They dreamed of creating their own theocratic empire, in a land they called Zion. That vision was eroded by the ceding of the Utah Territory to the United States in 1850, after the Mexican War, and by the subsequent admission of Utah as a state, in 1896. Yet it is striking how much of the dream has been achieved. Mormons constitute sixty-three per cent of Utah's population. (The figure includes non-practicing Mormons.) Virtually all statewide elective offices, from the governor down, are held by Saints, as Mormons call themselves. The state legislature is overwhelmingly made up of white Mormon Republican males. Three-fourths of the state judiciary is Mormon. The entire United States congressional delegation from Utah is Mormon. School boards, city councils, municipal agencies, and mayors' offices are dominated by Mormons. "The fact is we live in a quasi theocracy," James E. Shelledy, the editor of the Salt Lake Tribune, told me. "Eighty per cent of officeholders are of a single party, ninety per cent of a single religion, ninety-nine per cent of a single race, and eighty-five per cent of one gender."

The major secular institutions in the state often have a parallel, Church-owned counterpart. There is the University of Utah (the "U") in Salt Lake City, and there is Brigham Young University (the "Y") in Provo, which is the largest religiously sponsored school in the country. The non-Mormon Tribune is the state's principal newspaper, but the second-largest one is the Church-affiliated Deseret News.

Church affiliates also own the state's biggest television and AM radio stations. Most public junior high and high schools have a Mormon seminary available for religious study. The Mormon majority tends to perceive institutions that are not owned by the Church as anti-Mormon, especially in Salt Lake City, the only major city in Utah where Mormons are a minority (about forty-five per cent of the city's population). "This causes some cultural and religious divisions that are not present in the rest of Utah," Shelledy said. "It's frustrating for the non-Mormon majority in the city, because the cultural boundaries are already set, and there is little opportunity for their input." The city's energetic mayor, Rocky Anderson, a former Mormon who left the Church at the age of eighteen after what he said was "an intense period of self-examination," has made bridging the divide between non-Mormons and Mormons a priority of his administration. "I believe we'd have a far better community," he told me, "if people could break out of their isolation on both sides."

Saints compare their headquarters in Salt Lake City—an imposing complex of buildings set against the Wasatch Mountains—to the Vatican. Brigham Young, who founded Salt Lake City, mandated that streets be numbered according to their distance from the pale neo-Gothic granite temple that stands at the center. Young's regimented thoroughfares are a hundred and thirty-two feet wide—wide enough to turn around a train of oxen, he decreed—so there is a lot of high-desert sky between buildings. In this setting, the handsome state capitol nearby looks a bit captive.

Temple Square, the ten-acre heart of Mormonism, is a serene enclosure. The Tabernacle, home to the celebrated choir, stands in the middle of the complex, facing the multi-spired Temple. Simplicity is the sensibility at work in this cloister. Although Mormon temples are often impressive pieces of architecture, the icons and crucifixes and frescoes that adorn many Christian churches are notably absent here—as if decoration were an affront to the pragmatism that Mormons pride themselves upon. Even the occasional stained-glass window shies away from depictions of religious passion in favor of geometric patterns. Across North Temple Street is a new conference center, a million two hundred thousand square feet in size—nearly ten times as large as the old Tabernacle—which can seat more than twenty-one thousand people.

Salt Lake City is a pleasant town that is often ranked as one of America's best places to live; it's clean, has a low crime rate, and provides ready access to ski slopes and wilderness areas. The extremes of wealth and poverty that characterize most American cities are not evident in Salt Lake City, in part because of the Mormons' emphasis on frugality and charity.

Some Mormons regard the forthcoming Olympics as the fulfillment of a prophecy. "We shall build a city and a temple to the Most High God in this place," Young told his followers. "Kings and emperors and the noble and wise of the earth will visit us here, while the wicked and ungodly will envy us our comfortable homes and possessions." But the International Olympic Committee's choice of Salt Lake City for the 2002 Games was accompanied by less welcome news. First came the revelation that members of the Salt Lake Bid Committee had boosted its candidacy by dispensing more than a million dollars in cash and gifts to members of the I.O.C. The United States Attorney's office indicted two of the Salt Lake committee's leaders, David Johnson and Thomas Welch, both prominent members of the Church, on bribery and other charges. It was expected that their trial might implicate other leading members of the Mormon establishment, including Michael O. Leavitt, the governor of Utah. Last August, however, the federal judge in the case, David Sam, who is also a Mormon, threw out the key charges, calling them an "uninvited federal intrusion" into the state's affairs. Johnson and Welch faced additional charges of conspiracy and fraud, but the case was dismissed by Judge Sam last November. The federal government has appealed the decision.

In the meantime, the Church was obliged to revisit the most horrific episode in its history. In 1857, a wagon train of migrant families heading to California was massacred in southwest Utah. A hundred and twenty people were murdered in a grazing spot called Mountain Meadows. The Church had long denied any responsibility for the massacre, blaming a few renegade Mormons and a band of Paiute Indians, whom the Church accused of killing the women and children. In 1999, at the request of the descendants of the victims, the Church rebuilt a small monument at the site. The gesture became a public-relations disaster when construction workers discovered a number of bones that seemed to indicate that the women and children had been shot at close range, apparently by Mormons, rather than killed by the arrows, clubs, and knives of the Indians.

The traditional Mormon practice of polygamy, which the Church officially banned in 1890, also became a subject of renewed controversy when the Tribune published a series of articles about child abuse and welfare fraud in polygamous families. The articles revealed, among other things, that polygamous marriages were still flourishing in various parts of the state, and in greater numbers than ever. When Tom Green, a man with five wives and thirty children, flaunted his life style on talk shows—he was eventually tried and convicted on charges of bigamy and criminal non-support—the Church was obliged, once again, to try to come to terms with its most vexing legacy.

THE LEADER

The president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a ninety-one-year-old man named Gordon B. Hinckley. I visited Hinckley in his spacious, sun-filled office in Temple Square, which is comfortably but plainly furnished. Hinckley's manner is more corporate than pastoral. He has a round face with a genial expression, and eyes that dance about smartly behind trifocals. Among his followers, his youthfulness and energy are legendary, as is his vinegary humor. "All writers should be put in a box and thrown in the sea," he said as he rose to greet me. Like every other man I had seen in the Temple complex, he was wearing a black suit, a white shirt, and a dark, narrow tie. His office was full of Americana and personal mementos: a bust of Lincoln; a portrait of the Church's founder, Joseph Smith; a photograph of Hinckley at the White House handing Ronald Reagan a set of Mormon scriptures; another of him with the talk-show host Larry King. On a shelf behind Hinckley's desk was a buffalo skull, an ancient coin that he described as a "widow's mite" ("to remind me of where the Church's money comes from"), and a slab of wood from a black-walnut tree he had planted more than thirty years ago, which was used for the pulpit in the new conference center. "I'm a farmer at heart," he said. "Never a spring has passed that I've not planted some trees."

Seated behind a massive wooden desk, which was covered with correspondence and reports, Hinckley told me, "I don't think the Church has changed so very much as the perception of the Church has changed." He has been instrumental in that shift, having modernized the Church's vigilant public-relations department, in the nineteen-thirties. As I placed my tape recorder on his desk, three smiling dark-suited men from the P.R. office placed tape recorders beside it.

Before assuming the top job, in 1995, Hinckley was the acknowledged power behind the throne. He is by no means the oldest man to lead the Church. David O. McKay led it from 1951 until his death, in 1970, at the age of ninety-six. McKay's successor, Joseph Fielding Smith, died at ninety-five. The Church is run by the Quorum of the Twelve, also known as the apostles, and by a three-man group known as the First Presidency. The longest-serving apostle ascends to the presidency upon the death of the leader. The system may help resolve disputes over succession, but it has also resulted in a gerontocracy whose leaders have sometimes been physically or mentally incapacitated. Hinckley, however, is constantly flying around the globe, visiting missions, dedicating temples, writing books, giving speeches, and holding press conferences. He is widely regarded as the most accessible and capable leader the Church has had in decades.

"I'm the third generation in this Church," he told me. "My grandfather joined the Church in his late teens in Nauvoo." Nauvoo, Illinois, was a refuge that the Mormons created in 1839, following an order by the governor of Missouri to run them out of the state. But Illinois soon proved to be worse than Missouri. In 1844, after an anti-Mormon mob murdered Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, the Mormons headed west. Hinckley's grandfather Ira was among them. Thousands died on the trek across the Great Plains, including Ira's wife and his stepbrother, Joel, who both died of cholera on the same day in 1850.

Hinckley showed me a small bronze figure of a pioneer standing beside a grave. "Here's a little statue somebody made of that event, portraying my grandfather's burial of his wife in a coffin he made somewhere, we know not where. And afterward he picked up his eleven-month-old daughter and carried her to this valley." Hinckley's voice grew thick. "Now, that's my background in this Church, and it's real, and it's pragmatic, and it's Mormonism."

In the Mormon scheme, every person is a potential divinity. The adage "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be" expresses the Mormon belief that God was once a human being, with a wife and children. But Hinckley did not seem interested in discussing matters of theology. When I asked him to characterize God's connubial relationship, he replied, "We don't speculate on that a lot. Brigham Young said if you went to Heaven and saw God it would be Adam and Eve. I don't know what he meant by that." Pointing to a grim-faced portrait of the Lion of the Lord, as Young was called, he said, "There he is, right there. I'm not going to worry about what he said about those things."

I asked whether Mormon theology was a form of polytheism.

"I don't have the remotest idea what you mean," he said impatiently.

"More than one god."

"Yes, but that's a very loose term," he replied. "We believe in eternal progression." By that he meant that human beings can evolve toward godhood by following the Mormon path. "You want to be a reporter always?" he said. "You want to be a scrub forever, through all eternity? We believe that life, eternal life, is real, that it's purposeful, that it has meaning, that it can be realized. I wouldn't describe us as polytheistic."

I asked Hinckley what role the Church planned to take during the Olympics. There would be no proselytizing of visitors to the Games, he assured me. "We intend to be gracious hosts," he said. "We're not bad people, and we do things in a pretty decent way, when all is said and done." When I brought up the bribery scandal, his tone hardened. "I just regret very much that this has occurred, but the Church has not been a party to it in any sense whatsoever," he said. Of the two men under indictment, he said, "I don't keep track of every member," and added, "Certainly we believe in the concept of you're innocent until proven guilty."

As I was leaving, Hinckley cautioned me against speaking with the Church's many critics, who, he said, are not a part of the "life of the religion." He said, "I'm a living part of it. These men"—he indicated his public-relations officials—"are a living part of it. They know why this thing ticks. They know why this is the fastest-growing religious element in the United States and in the world, almost. They know why we're able to send out sixty thousand missionaries. They know why we can build meetinghouses all across the world, four hundred a year. It is an absolute miracle what this Church is doing."

REVELATIONS IN GOLD

In 1820, in the little town of Manchester, New York, a fourteen-year-old named Joseph Smith had a visitation. It was a fertile and turbulent time in American religious history. Old beliefs were losing their influence, and new ones were arising that were more responsive to America's revivalist spirit. The upstate region where Smith was living was known as the "burnt-over district," because of the religious fevers that continually swept through it. One morning, Smith, who was trying to sort out the claims of truth that each denomination put forward, went into the woods to pray for guidance. He had no sooner knelt than he sensed the presence of a higher power, and felt himself surrounded by darkness. "Just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the Sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me," he wrote in a brief memoir. Out of the light stepped two "personages," hovering in the air, whom he took to be God and Jesus —"beings of substance, of form, and of personality," as Hinckley described them to me. Smith managed to ask these beings a question: Which of all the sects was right? "I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the personage who addressed me said that 'all their creeds were an abomination in his sight,' " he wrote. A moment later, he found himself lying on his back, gazing up at the empty sky. He went home and told his mother, "I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true."

Three years later, Smith had another visitation, this one from an angel, called Moroni, who revealed to him that an ancient book written on golden plates was buried nearby on a hill called Cumorah. Smith began making annual pilgrimages to Cumorah, waiting for a further sign. In 1827, he eloped with a young woman, Emma Hale. In September of that year, he returned to Cumorah and again he encountered Moroni. This time, the angel entrusted the golden plates to him, along with a pair of "seeing stones," called the Urim and Thummim, which permitted him to translate the strange language inscribed on the plates (identified by Smith as "reformed Egyptian").

In 1830, Smith published the five-hundred-and-eighty-eight-page Book of Mormon. It was prefaced by the statements of eleven witnesses who claimed to have seen the golden plates and, in eight cases, to have actually "hefted" them. The plates themselves, however, were no longer available for examination. With the "translation" finished, Moroni had reclaimed them and taken them back to Heaven.

The Book of Mormon purports to be the history of two tribes of Israel—the fair-skinned, virtuous Nephites and the dark-skinned, conniving Lamanites. The Nephites and the Lamanites battle for centuries, eventually carrying their feud into North America. In the midst of their warfare, the resurrected Jesus suddenly appears in the New World, demanding repentance. He teaches the Nephites the Lord's Prayer and delivers a discourse similar to the Sermon on the Mount. The two tribes are temporarily reconciled. But, four hundred years later, the Nephite leader Mormon is slain, with hundreds of thousands of his people, in the final triumph of the Lamanites. Mormon's son, Moroni, survives to record this last event on the golden plates, which are then buried on Cumorah.

Written in a florid style—Mark Twain called it "chloroform in print"—the narrative was compelling to many who read it, and even to many who only heard about it. The idea of a new, homegrown faith that posited the divinity of the individual struck a chord in a young country whose settlers believed, in Harold Bloom's words, that they were "mortal gods, destined to find themselves again in worlds as yet undiscovered." In Smith's vision, the New World became the new Holy Land, and he located the Garden of Eden near Independence, Missouri, close to the center of the continent.

By the time he was in his mid-twenties, Smith had become one of the most controversial men in America. Tall and fair, with a slight limp from a childhood operation, and sharp, rather feminine features that contrasted with a powerful build, he was a fascinating figure. The Book of Mormon, along with continuing revelations reported by the young prophet, formed the basis of a new faith. From the beginning, it was a missionary creed, and Smith sent emissaries throughout America and abroad. Thousands of followers were drawn to his ministry, including Brigham Young, a young carpenter in upstate New York, who became one of the greatest colonizers of the West. The Mormons, at first derided as cranks, were soon objects of fear and hatred, not just because of their heretical beliefs but also because of their communal economy, their monolithic politics, and, eventually, their practice of polygamy. In the nine years that remained in his brief life, Smith and his disciples were driven from one settlement after another, in what was an unparalleled assault of religious persecution in America. The epic migration of Smith's followers to Utah produced a people who were at once self-reliant and wary—"a sociological island of fanatic believers dedicated to a creed that the rest of America thought either vicious or mad," the novelist Wallace Stegner, an admirer, wrote of them.

In 1857, ten years after their arrival in Salt Lake City, the Mormons found themselves on the verge of war with the United States. A column of federal soldiers was advancing on the Utah Territory to unseat Brigham Young, the area's defiant and dictatorial governor. Young declared martial law and prepared his followers to burn down their homes and retreat to the mountains for guerrilla warfare. Meanwhile, a wagon train consisting of thirty well-to-do families, mostly from Arkansas, and a large herd of cattle, horses, and oxen entered Utah on the way to California. The Mormons viewed the newcomers with hostility, partly because of the recent news that one of the Church's apostles, Parley Pratt, had been murdered in Arkansas. Despite calls by some Church leaders for revenge, the wagon train was able to traverse nearly the entire state without serious incident, until they reached Mountain Meadows.

The events that led to the massacre have been a subject of historical dispute for nearly a hundred and fifty years. Mark Twain accused Brigham Young of ordering the killings. The Mormon historians James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, in the official history of the movement, "The Story of the Latter-day Saints," exonerate Church leaders and attribute the slaughter to "a band of Indians and a few ill-informed and overzealous settlers." According to the jailhouse confession of John D. Lee, who was an adopted son of Brigham Young and who was later executed by the government for his part in the incident, a band of Paiute Indians, three to four hundred strong, took the initiative, attacking the wagon train and then harrying it for four days. In Lee's account, the standoff was finally broken when he approached the wagons at the head of a squad of Mormon militia under a flag of truce and laid out what he said were the Indians' terms for surrender. The besieged families agreed to put down their arms in return for safe escort to Cedar City, about thirty-five miles away. Once disarmed, the men marched single file behind the women and children and the wagons bearing infants and the wounded. At a prearranged signal, the Mormons turned on the male captives and shot them all, leaving the women and children for the Paiutes to kill with knives and hatchets. In the end, only seventeen were spared, all of them children. Twain believed that the "Indians" involved were actually Mormons wearing war paint, which conforms to accounts given by surviving children.

News of the massacre prompted members of Congress to call for the elimination of the Church. A lurid report to Congress written by a United States Army officer, Brevet Major James H. Carleton, who arrived on the scene a year and a half later to bury the remains, further inflamed national feeling against Mormons. "The scene of the massacre, even at this late day, was horrible to look upon," Carleton wrote. "Women's hair, in detached locks and masses, hung to the sage bushes and was strewn over the ground in many places. Parts of little children's dresses and of female costume dangled from the shrubbery or lay scattered about; and among these, here and there, on every hand, for at least a mile in the direction of the road, by two miles east and west, there gleamed, bleached white by the weather, the skulls and other bones of those who had suffered."

Brigham Young managed to forestall a federal investigation into the massacre by agreeing to step down as the territorial governor. It now seems likely that Lee was made a scapegoat to appease public opinion and the forces in Congress opposed to Utah's bid for statehood. A Tribune columnist named Will Bagley, who is writing a book about the massacre, has found contemporary diaries which he believes demonstrate that Young ordered the killings and supervised a coverup.

For the Church, the execution of Lee put the incident to rest, until the construction workers came upon the bones of the victims two years ago. The practice of polygamy proved to be a bigger burden, which kept alive the hostility of Victorian America toward the sect. Writers such as Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle described the Mormons in terms similar to those the press uses to describe the Taliban today. Curiously, the Book of Mormon is replete with denunciations of plural marriage, as the arrangement is often called. Indeed, throughout Smith's life monogamy was the official doctrine of the Church. He himself, however, seems to have been a compulsive philanderer, and rumors circulated about his multiple "marriages." "What a thing it is for a man to be accused of committing adultery, and having seven wives, when I can find only one," he said in 1844, but by then it was known that he had taken more than thirty wives, and perhaps twice that many, with whom he "sealed" himself in secret ceremonies, "for time and all eternity." Some of the brides may have been as young as fourteen, and at least eleven of them were already married to close associates. Some he married after dispatching their husbands to the mission fields. A definitive tally of Smith's wives may never be established, but it is clear that in the last years of his life he was in a kind of marital frenzy, taking an average of one new wife per month, at the same time that he was building a spiritual and temporal empire, fielding his own army, and announcing his candidacy for President of the United States.

Emma Smith denied that her husband had made multiple marriages, even though she is reported to have chased one of Joseph's wives out of the house. Urged by his brother Hyrum to seek divine guidance concerning plural marriage, Smith produced a revelation in July, 1843: "I reveal unto you a new and an everlasting covenant; and if ye abide not that covenant, then are ye damned," the Lord warns. He goes on to say that "if any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent," it is not adultery in God's eyes, even "if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law." God then addresses the beleaguered Emma by name: "And I command mine handmaid,

Emma Smith, to abide and cleave unto my servant Joseph, and to none else. But if she will not abide this commandment she shall be destroyed."

Evidently cowed by this injunction, Emma kept her peace. Meanwhile, some members of the inner circle were appalled at Smith's behavior and told him so. William Law, a Nauvoo businessman, begged his leader to abandon his polygamous ways. Smith responded by excommunicating Law and his brother. The Laws then set up a paper called the Nauvoo Expositor, which published an exposé of multiple marriages within the Mormon hierarchy. Smith, who was the mayor of Nauvoo—at that time one of the largest settlements in Illinois—convened a town-council meeting, in which it was resolved that the Expositor was a public nuisance and must be shut down.

The governor of Illinois, Thomas Ford, called Smith's conduct "a very gross outrage" and said that he should stand trial. Smith thought of fleeing, but eventually he and Hyrum turned themselves in at a jail in the non-Mormon town of Carthage. A mob burst past the nonresisting jailers and shot the Smiths in a second-floor bedroom. According to a witness, Smith uttered his last words—"Oh, Lord, my God"—as he fell from the window onto the street. There he was propped up against a well and shot again by a four-man firing squad.

Smith's death did not bring an end to polygamy. In 1866, Brigham Young declared, "The only men who become gods, even the sons of God, are those who enter into polygamy." He set an example by marrying perhaps fifty-five women, an aspect of his life that is ignored in an official church biography, published in 1997. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was popularly assumed that Mormon women were little more than sex slaves, even though the women occasionally pointed out that they had chosen polygamous marriages. Moreover, Young encouraged women to take up the professions of law and medicine, and, as governor, he allowed them to vote, long before women elsewhere in the United States enjoyed such privileges.

In the nineteenth century, more than a thousand Mormon men went to prison for polygamy-related offenses, and many families fled to Canada and Mexico. In 1890, the United States Supreme Court sanctioned the nationwide confiscation of virtually all Mormon property, essentially authorizing that the movement be crushed. That year, the Church's president, Wilford Woodruff, received a revelation that inspired him to declare, in what is called the 1890 Manifesto, that plural marriage was no longer officially allowed. As Gordon Hinckley told me, "Polygamy came by revelation, and it left by revelation."

A Beehive

A paradox of Mormonism is that a faith with such an embattled history has fostered a community whose members are ostensibly so conventional. Mormons have managed to make themselves into an ethnic group without any of the usual markers of ethnicity—no distinctive language or accent, no special foods or music.

Mormons think of themselves as a people chosen by God to lead the rest of humanity to salvation. Submission to authority is an essential part of the religion. Mormons aim at being what they call themselves: saints. Charity, integrity, decency, courtesy, and clean living are the fundamental ingredients of the Mormon personality. Thanks in part to the Church's efforts to promote an image of worldly success, Mormons also think of themselves as being unusually industrious—"perhaps the most workaddicted culture in religious history," Harold Bloom says. Stephen Covey, a management consultant and the author of "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," who is descended on both sides from Mormon pioneers, told me, "There is a heavy emphasis in Mormonism on initiative, on responsibility, on a work ethic, and on education. If you take those elements together with a free-enterprise system, you've got the chemistry for a lot of industry." The symbol of the state of Utah is a beehive.

By far the most successful Mormon business venture is the Church itself. Among its largest holdings are the Beneficial Life Insurance Company, which has more than two billion dollars in assets, and the Bonneville International Corporation, a media company with eighteen radio stations concentrated

in Chicago, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. The Church reportedly owns more than a million acres of land in the continental United States (the equivalent of the state of Delaware), on which it operates more than a hundred and fifty ranches, farms, and orchards. It runs the largest cattle ranch in the United States, Deseret Cattle & Citrus, near Orlando, Florida. Although the Church is secretive about its empire, Time surveyed its assets in 1997 and calculated its net worth at a minimum of thirty billion dollars and its annual income at about six billion dollars, which, if it were a corporation, would place it in the middle of the Fortune 500 list. (In a letter to Time, the Church said that the figures were "greatly exaggerated.")

Saints are required to tithe in order to attend temple. They also fast one Sunday a month and give the money they would have spent for food to those in greater need. "We ask, in effect, between fourteen and fifteen per cent of people's income, including tithing and other things," one of the governing apostles, Neal A. Maxwell, told me. "We are equally demanding of time." In many respects, being a Mormon is like holding down a second job. Saints are routinely called upon to spend a Saturday making cheese in the storehouse of the local bishop or to take a year off from their regular job to work as a guide at one of the many Mormon historical sites. The Church runs one of the largest private welfare operations in the country, producing everything from granola to detergent under its own brand names. Almost all these goods are made by volunteers. "The practice goes back to the thirties, when Church leaders were worried as much about idleness as about the lack of resources," Harold Brown, the managing director of L.D.S. Welfare Services, told me. "We typically try to take care of our own. We believe the poor will be better blessed if they do as described in our doctrine: specifically, they should work for what they receive. The bishop may suggest that you help a widow down the street who has a yard she needs weeded. You can receive according to your need, but you are expected to work according to your ability."

Underlying Mormonism's cultivation of middle-class normality and hardheaded pragmatism is a deep core of mysticism. When Mormon children come of age, they are taken to a patriarch in the Church, who bestows a blessing that foretells their future. These prophecies are kept on file in the Church archives. At the age of eleven, Gordon Hinckley received a blessing: "Thou shalt grow to the full stature of manhood and shall become a mighty and valiant leader in the midst of Israel. . . . The nations of the earth shall hear thy voice and be brought to a knowledge of the truth by the wonderful testimony which thou shalt bear." Mormons are taught to pray for a "testimony" whenever they encounter doubts about the truth of their religion, and they look for guidance to their president, whom they also call a "prophet," "seer," and "revelator," because he is assumed to be in direct communication with God. "We believe in the principle of continuous revelation," Hinckley told me. "To me, it's so perfectly clear and understandable that the God who revealed himself in the comparatively simple days of the Old West would not fail to reveal himself in the very complex times in which we now live."

When I asked him to describe his own revelations, Hinckley demurred. "They're very sacred to me. They're the kind of things you don't want to put before the world," he said. But he added, "There's no doubt in my mind we've experienced a tremendous undertaking in the building of temples across the world, having just dedicated the hundred-and-second working temple of the Church. I believe the inspiration to move that work forward came from the Almighty."

Sunday-morning worship takes place in ward houses—the Mormon equivalent of neighborhood churches—and anyone is welcome to attend. A ward is part of a larger "stake," which is akin to a diocese. There is no separate clergy in Mormonism, and the officers are drawn from the membership. During worship, all Saints, including children, are called upon to give testimony in affirmation of their faith. All Mormon males can become "priests" at the age of sixteen, and when they become missionaries they graduate to the higher order of "elders." Only Mormons who have been approved by the bishop of their ward and the president of their stake are allowed to enter a temple. During Hinckley's tenure, temple attendance has increasingly come to define a good Mormon. It is in the temples that weddings and sacred rituals, such as the Baptism for the Dead, take place.

Mormons believe that the dead can achieve salvation through proxy baptisms, and this accounts for their keen interest in genealogy. If dead souls accept the invitation to become Latter-day Saints, they can be united with their families in the hereafter. "Baptism for the Dead is one of the most appealing

doctrines there is," Stephen Covey told me. "How can you possibly reconcile the justice of God with the idea that only through Christ can you be saved? Most of the world lives and dies and never even hears of Christ. There has to be some mechanism set up for all those who have ever lived to have an opportunity to hear of Christ." In practice, teen-agers line up in the temple to be baptized as proxies for dead people whose names appear on a computer screen. "We also have people who are called 'extraction missionaries,' " Elbert Peck, the former editor and publisher of the Mormon intellectual magazine Sunstone, told me. "They basically go to their little stake center and sit down at a microfilm machine and take these names and put them into our computer database." According to Richard E. Turley, Jr., the managing director of the Family and Church History Department, in Salt Lake City, as many as two hundred million dead people have been baptized as Mormons, including Buddha and all the popes, Shakespeare, Einstein, and Elvis Presley—what Peck dismissively calls "celebrity work for the dead." In the early nineties, some Mormons were moved to baptize victims of the Holocaust. The practice caused a great deal of friction with Jewish genealogists, who now monitor Mormon baptismal lists to make sure that Jews are not included.

The most distinctive badge of Mormonism is the sacred garment that adults are supposed to wear under their clothes at all times. In the early days of the Church, sacred garments resembled long underwear, but they have changed to accommodate modern styles. At some point early in the twentieth century, the undergarments were modified into "a kind of Calvin Klein jumpsuit sort of thing," as one historian describes it. Now short-sleeved two-piece garments are commonly worn, but they are still cut in a fashion sufficiently distinctive so that it's possible to spot a Mormon by the lines under his or her clothing. (Non-Mormon lawyers have been known to wear similar undergarments in an attempt to influence Mormon juries.) There is considerable folklore about the protective powers of the garments—stories about people whose underwear enabled them to survive wars or car wrecks. In 1977, a Wyoming beauty queen, Joyce McKinney, kidnapped a twenty-one-year-old Mormon missionary and handcuffed him to her bed in an attempt to become pregnant. His garments, he later said, kept him chaste. The garments lend themselves to such magical interpretations because they are discreetly embroidered with symbols derived from Freemasonry. "Most Mormons would say that the garments are a spiritual protection and a shield," Peck told me. "They remind us of our covenants, which keep us safe and clean and pure from the world."

Mormons think of themselves, in a larger sense, as Christians. They take Communion (usually Wonder bread and water); they celebrate Christmas and Easter. They regard the Bible as sacred but incomplete; the Book of Mormon, they say, is "another testament of Jesus Christ." To some other Christian denominations, however, Mormonism is essentially an overgrown cult. The Southern Baptists, who often find themselves on the side of the Saints in their campaigns against such issues as abortion and gay rights, have called Mormonism "counterfeit Christianity." Even the more accommodating Presbyterians have condemned Mormonism as a polytheistic heresy. "That just hurts us to the core," Peck told me. "To say we're not Christians—oh, that just makes us cry."

SOLDIERS OF THE FAITH

Salt Lake City is the official headquarters of the Church, but the spiritual home of the religion is in Provo, the site of Brigham Young University and of the Church's Missionary Training Center. Provo is the West Point of Mormonism; it is where the leaders of the Church are made.

On the day that I visited the M.T.C., a number of Mormon families were dropping off their children, nearly all of them teen-age boys in dark suits and narrow ties. Women can volunteer for missionary work at the age of twenty-one, but all young Mormon men are encouraged to give two years of their lives to the mission fields. From the moment they arrive at the Provo center, or at one of fourteen other missionary-training facilities around the world, until the day they return home, they are subject to rigorous strictures on their behavior. They cannot call home except on Mother's Day and Christmas, and can write letters only once a week. No dating. No television or radio. As I watched parents saying goodbye to their sons, Church officials circulated among them, passing out tissues.

More than half the missionaries are sent abroad, and fifty languages are taught at the M.T.C. When they arrive at their destination, they are expected to spend six days a week knocking on doors and presenting prepared lectures on Joseph Smith and the Mormon message. Two years ago, sixty thousand missionaries signed up two hundred and seventy-four thousand converts worldwide—an average of fewer than five converts per missionary. "You tend to internalize the values," Ronald W. Walker, a professor of history at B.Y.U., who served his mission in Georgia and Alabama, said to me. "The kids go out and may convert a few here and there, but, more important, they convert themselves."

The experience of having doors closed in one's face day after day leaves a lasting impression. "It's funny how people who served as missionaries often say it was the most difficult two years of their lives, and also the best," Mitt Romney, the head of the organizing committee for the Salt Lake City Olympics, told me. Romney served his mission in Paris and Bordeaux. He is the scion of one of the most famous Mormon political families; his father, George Romney, was the Republican governor of Michigan for three terms beginning in 1962, and a Presidential aspirant in 1968. "As you can imagine, it's quite an experience to go to Bordeaux and say, 'Give up your wine! I've got a great religion for you!' " he said. "It was good training for how life works. I mean, rejection of one kind or another is going to be an important part of everyone's life. Here I'd grown up as the son of a governor, from a wealthy home. No one had asked me about my religion, or cared, and now I was on the street, lower than a Fuller Brush salesman, in a place where Americans were not particularly liked, where I couldn't speak the language very well, and where selling religion, particularly Mormonism, was going to be very painful."

Romney, who was tapped by Governor Leavitt to take over the Games after the bid scandal, is a successful venture capitalist in Boston and a centrist Republican who ran a strong Senate race against Edward M. Kennedy in 1994. A tall, distinguished-looking man with his father's lantern jaw, he has proved to be a capable but controversial choice for the Olympics job. Non-Mormons, along with Church members who were worried about the appearance of cronyism, criticized Romney's appointment as an invitation for the world to view the Winter Games as the Mormon Olympics. James Shelledy, the Salt Lake Tribune editor, said to me, "The Governor conducted an exhaustive forty-eight-hour search for the best B.Y.U. graduate available."

In the ideal Mormon world, the youthful missionaries return to Provo after their service to attend B.Y.U. and to find a mate. The concentration of missionaries, students, and young families has made Provo the youngest city in America. It is beautifully situated, on the western slope of the Wasatch Mountains, but it lacks the usual bars and coffeehouses, the slouchy funkiness of a college town.

A powerful denominator of Mormonness in Provo is Diet Coke. Joseph Smith included the consumption of "hot drinks" in his list of vices that Mormons should avoid, along with alcohol and tobacco; as a result, coffee and tea are forbidden on campus. Soft drinks, however, pose a theological puzzle. Some Mormons believe that the injunction against hot drinks should include any beverage with caffeine. President Hinckley said as much on the Larry King show a few years ago, alarming many members of the faith who had grown accustomed to taking their caffeine cold. The Diet Coke advocates pointed out that the president's statement was not issued as a divine revelation, so there was still no official ruling on the matter, but caffeinated soft drinks disappeared from campus. Recently, however, the university has been embroiled in a dispute over whether the student paper should accept ads even for decaffeinated Diet Coke, which is seen as a dangerous substitute—like candy cigarettes. In the religion department at B.Y.U., I found only one professor who admitted to being a Diet Coker, but later that afternoon I joined members of the sociology department as, plastic mugs in hand, they headed for an off-campus convenience store.

During that outing, Tim Heaton, a professor of demographics, explained the "four 'C's" that distinguish Mormons from other Americans: chastity, conjugality, chauvinism, and children. A premium is placed on sexual purity, and Church studies show that among Mormon high-school seniors only ten per cent of boys and eighteen per cent of girls say that they have had sexual relations—respectively seven times and three times lower than comparable national figures. "Mormons are more likely to marry in their early twenties, whereas the national average is around twenty-six or twenty-seven," Heaton said. Family violence is at about the national average, but there is a marked

difference in attitude about parental roles, with Mormons inclining toward more traditional ideas about the father as the head of the household and the mother not working outside the home. The Mormon birth rate is about fifty per cent higher than the national average.

Utah has been called the land of milk and cookies, because of the vast consumption of these products (although Jell-O was recently voted the official state snack food). Perhaps because of the Mormons' lower consumption of alcohol and tobacco, their life spans are as much as eleven years longer than the American average. (Only the largely vegetarian Seventh-Day Adventists live longer.) On the other hand, Utah reportedly leads the nation in the use of antidepressants; Prozac prescriptions, for instance, are about sixty per cent above the national average. Death rates from cancer and heart disease are lower than in the rest of the country, but diabetes is higher. "Sugar is our great vice," Heaton said.

SECRETS OF THE MUMMIES

At Brigham Young, the study of religion is divided into Ancient Scripture—which includes the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and other Mormon texts—and Church History and Doctrine. These departments are housed in the handsome Joseph Smith Building. In an atrium, behind a pane of glass, is a statue of the ecstatic teen-age founder receiving his vision in the grove. It is one of the few pieces of permanent art on campus. When the university's art museum sponsored a travelling exhibition of Rodin a few years ago, "The Kiss" was hidden away in a basement.

I was curious why people who are so outgoing and capable would choose a faith that imposed such restrictions on their lives. I spoke to Robert Millet, a former dean of religious education at B.Y.U., and asked him if there was anything about Mormonism that he had difficulty accepting. "I think each of us would have our unresolved issues," he said. "For example, I doubt that any of us have all the answers on issues like plural marriage. We have what we call some 'shelf doctrines'—things we put aside for the time being. But being a Mormon is really a matter of faith, in that we accept the historicity of Smith's first vision—the angel, the plates, and so on—and go from there."

When I noted that Smith's veracity about the revelations might be questionable, given that he had lied about his polygamy, Millet replied, "The issue for us is do we apply the same kind of standards to the Bible and Biblical figures as we do to the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith. Clearly, the Christian faith is dependent upon acceptance of a divine miracle that took place on Easter morning, for which there is no evidence. Would you do a similar critique of Abraham, who, presumably, lied here and there? Or of Jacob, who took more than one wife? I mean, if you were a believer, you'd come at this from the perspective that the Lord is behind all this, and the deception, if there be any, is by design."

Across the campus from the Smith Building is a small house where the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies has its quarters. It is a controversial organization even among Mormons. The aim of the foundation is to demonstrate the historical truth of the Book of Mormon and other documents that Smith produced. Here I met with several professors, including Hugh Nibley, who is the most venerable figure in Mormon scholarship, although he is little known outside it. At the age of ninety-one, he was at work on his "fourteenth or fifteenth" book.

The Book of Mormon poses formidable problems for scholars. After many decades of research, not a single person or place named in it has been shown to exist. If Nephite civilization once covered the continent, where are the ruins? Nowhere in North America is there evidence of an ancient civilization that had, as Smith describes it, wheeled transportation or the capacity to make steel weapons, or a written language that corresponded to Egyptian. "People underestimate the capacity of things to disappear," Nibley wrote in 1957. Nor has DNA testing supported the Mormon belief that the Lamanites—supposedly a Semitic race—are the ancestors of Native Americans.

"Well, if it was all pure fiction, who on earth had ever done anything like that?" Nibley said with some asperity. "This is the history of a civilization, with all its ramifications having to do with

plagues and wars. The military passages are flawless. Could you please tell me any other book like that?"

Even more troubling for Mormon scholars is a document called the Book of Abraham. In 1835, Joseph Smith, who was then living in Kirtland, Ohio, bought a wagonful of Egyptian mummies from a man named Michael Chandler. Inside two of the mummy cases, wrapped in linen, were scrolls of papyrus covered with hieroglyphs. Smith gave the mummies to his mother, who charged visitors a quarter to see them. Meanwhile, he undertook a translation of the scrolls. Before long, he was telling fellow-Mormons that the scrolls contained the writings of two Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham and Joseph.

In 1842, Smith published the Book of Abraham. It purports to be an unfinished fragment of Abraham's autobiography, the very material from which the Book of Genesis was drawn. At the time that Chandler visited Kirtland, no scholar in America believed that it was possible to translate hieroglyphs; news had not yet reached America of the discovery of the Rosetta stone or of Champollion's success at rendering the hieroglyphic language into French. The Book of Abraham is disconcerting, not only because its dubious authenticity reflects on Smith and the Book of Mormon but also because of what it actually says.

The book describes a multiplicity of gods and posits the preëxistence of souls, and also delves into the subject of race. Pharaoh, Abraham says, was descended from Ham, whose line was cursed with black skin, and for that reason "he could not have the right of Priesthood." On the basis of this statement, the Church denied priesthood to black members until 1978.

After Smith's death, the papyri were sold to a collector, and for many years it was thought that they had ended up in the Wood Museum, in Chicago, which was destroyed in the great fire of 1871. Then, in 1966, a retired professor of Middle Eastern studies from the University of Utah, Aziz S. Atiya, who was doing research at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, decided to take a closer look at some fragments of papyri in one of the document cases. He said he realized at once that he had found the original scrolls for Smith's Book of Abraham. (Museum officials maintained they knew that the papyri had belonged to Smith, and said they granted Atiya access to them in the hope that he would convey them to the Church.) When the Church showed the documents to four distinguished Egyptologists, however, each of them came to the same conclusion: the papyri were ordinary Egyptian funerary documents and had nothing at all to do with Abraham.

This disclosure brought forth various defenses by Nibley and other Mormon scholars, who said, in effect, that not all the papyri had been recovered. They proposed that the Book of Abraham was more an inspired reading than an actual translation, but the fact that Smith had also produced a "grammar" of the Egyptian language weakened the theory. Gradually, the protests died down, largely, perhaps, because few members actually resigned from the Church over the issue. Today, even Nibley seems weary of the effort to authenticate the Book of Abraham. In his view, the controversy is of a piece with the entire Judeo-Christian tradition. "Very few scholars even believe that Abraham ever lived," Nibley said.

AN ABUNDANCE OF WIVES

Mormons who condemn the legacy of polygamy tend to speak openly and sympathetically about it as a practice that was part of their ancestors' trials of faith and survival. "Among my great-grandparents, we had at least two who were polygamous," Mitt Romney told me. One of them, a woman named Hannah Hood Hill, wrote a memoir in which she described the difficulty of sharing her husband with another woman. "She talks about how she and her husband wept together when he was asked by Brigham Young to marry another woman," Romney said. "My great-grandmother prepared a room for this new wife and knitted her a rag rug. Brigham Young ultimately asked him to take five additional wives. It was the great trial of the early Mormon pioneers." Romney told me that when his father ran for President his friends kidded him that there wouldn't be enough room in the

White House for a family gathering. "My dad had something like two hundred and thirty-two first cousins," Romney said.

Although Romney, like other Mormons, defends the practice of polygamy in the early days of the Church by pointing to a surplus of women in Utah, census reports for the time show roughly equal numbers of men and women. Church leaders were told to take multiple wives and "live the principle." In religions where polygamy is still practiced—for example, in Islam—the number of wives is usually a reflection of the husband's wealth; the currency behind Mormon polygamy, however, seems to have been spiritual. Only men are given the priesthood power of salvation, and through them women gain access to the celestial kingdom. Faithful women were naturally drawn to men who they believed could guarantee eternal life; in fact, Brigham Young authorized women to leave their husbands if they could find a man "with higher power and authority" than their present husband. Apparently, many of them did, as shown by the rate of divorce at the time.

After the 1890 Manifesto officially ended plural marriage, thousands of Mormons in good standing, including a number of apostles, continued to marry multiple wives in secret. When Congress demanded that furtive polygamists be rooted out, Joseph F. Smith, who was a nephew of the founder and became president of the Church, issued a Second Manifesto, in 1906, in which he declared that anyone who participated in the practice would be excommunicated. Nonetheless, Smith himself continued to perform secret plural marriages. In 1933, the Church's president, Heber J. Grant, began a determined policy to eradicate polygamy altogether.

Today, the Church regards anyone living in polygamy as no longer a Mormon. Those who do live in plural marriages often call themselves "fundamentalist" Mormons. Their number is a matter of speculation, since polygamists are generally reluctant to identify themselves. It is estimated that there are between forty thousand and a hundred thousand people living in polygamous situations in Utah, Idaho, Nevada, Arizona, and California. In the Salt Lake City area, the Allred clan is said to have more than three thousand members. Another well-known Salt Lake clan, the Kingston family, is thought to include about two thousand people. The Kingstons reputedly favor intermarriage between near relatives, in order to keep their line pure.

There are also uncounted numbers of "independents." Some of them live in trailer parks and wear long-sleeved shirts and old-fashioned dresses, conforming to the stereotype of zealots who reject the modern world and its trappings. The majority of them mingle easily in commerce and society. The Kingston patriarchs do so in a Lear jet.

Owen Allred, the eighty-seven-year-old patriarch of the Apostolic United Brethren, a fundamentalist order of Mormons, lives in the semirural community of Bluffdale, south of Salt Lake City. "I proposed to one woman when I was twenty-three, and she's been mine for sixty-five years," he told me. "I've never proposed to another, and I've got eight living wives."

"So they proposed to you?" I asked.

Allred nodded. "See that home over there?" he said. "That one, this one, and the two more along the way belong to the wife that lives in it." Allred claims twenty-three children and two hundred and six grandchildren. "I love those kids," he said. "A lot of times their mothers will say, 'Leave Grandpa alone,' and I say, 'No! Let them come to me.' Precious little darlings."

In 1998, a woman named Vicky Prunty paid a visit to Utah State Senator Scott Howell. Prunty had been to see him a couple of years before, when she was living with five of her six children in a shelter for battered women after leaving a polygamous relationship. Howell had helped her find another place to live. Now Prunty had a larger purpose: she wanted the state to crack down on polygamy.

"I was basically a foster, orphan-type kid that really wanted to be a part of an eternal family," Prunty told me recently. She had gone through a typical Mormon courtship, having met her future husband, Gary Batchelor, at B.Y.U. when she was eighteen. A convert to the religion at seventeen in his native England, Batchelor had just returned to college after two years of missionary service in Italy. He and Prunty were married in the temple in 1981, and they soon began having children. "For about seven

years, we lived a very mainstream, monogamous life," Prunty recalled. "Then our life took kind of a turn."

Prunty, who is a reflective, matronly woman of thirty-eight with bright-blue eyes, said that she and her husband began to read early teachings of the Church that linked godhood to plural marriage. In the course of their reading, they also learned that the tenets of an experiment in communal living, which Smith had called the United Order of Enoch, were being followed by a variety of colonies in the state. Prunty and her husband pledged themselves to one such group, called the Rockland Ranch, near Moab. Batchelor stayed in Salt Lake City during the week, selling cars, and his wife and children moved into a sandstone cave.

In 1988, Gary Batchelor met a nineteen-year-old legal secretary and student of broadcast journalism named Mary Morrison. During his visits to his wife and children, he began to talk about taking "the next step"—marrying a second wife. Prunty had her doubts—"I believed that plural marriages couldn't be lived in this lifetime," she said—but she felt that it wasn't her place to question her husband. At his urging, she wrote a letter to Mary and invited her "into the family."

Morrison, who had been reared in a monogamous family, was at first appalled. "I basically wrote her back and told her to take a hike," she recently told me. Prunty answered her with, in Mary's words, "a really kind letter, which impressed me." During the next several months, Morrison fasted and prayed for a testimony about whether plural marriage was right for her. By the spring of 1989, she had become "adamant" that it was, but she remained uncertain about the Batchelors as an appropriate family. She continued to pray. In October, she paid a visit to the Batchelors. She was greeted by Vicky, who was noticeably pregnant, and by a child who was hanging on her mother's skirt. Warmed by the sight, she "fell in love" with the whole family. "I was walking on air," she recalled. The plural marriage took place that December in a secret ceremony. Vicky was seven months pregnant with her fourth child. She took Mary's hand and gave it to her husband, symbolizing the family's step away from monogamy and into polygamy.

During the women's first year as "sister wives," Vicky had the upstairs bedroom and Mary had a room downstairs. "It worked pretty well," Prunty said, but she felt an "unreality" about the arrangement, even though Gary was careful to treat both women equally. At night, he would sit between Vicky and Mary, watching television and holding hands with both of them. "We'd act like brother and sisters until a certain time," Vicky said. "Then he'd either go upstairs or downstairs. There were times when I made myself put her laundry on her bed just to see his robe on her bedpost. That made it real for me." The fact that Gary loved Mary, and was not just having sex with her out of some kind of religious obligation, unsettled Vicky. Ten months after the marriage, Mary gave birth to her first child; a second one was born fourteen months later. Meanwhile, Vicky had her fifth child.

In the third year of the relationship, Gary stopped having sex with Vicky. "He told me I had already committed 'spiritual fornication' against him," she said. "I guess he meant that I was rebelling against his authority." She asked him for a divorce. "He put his hand to the square, like they do when they're casting out evil spirits," she recalled. "He started praying for my death. I don't even know what he was saying, whether he was speaking in tongues or what." One afternoon, she dropped off her oldest son at a karate lesson, then drove over to the house of another polygamous family and asked if she could join them. The husband agreed. "I thought it would be easier being the third wife than the first wife," she told me. "I thought that, with a different husband, maybe I could live the principle better."

Prunty's new relationship—it was never formalized in a marriage ceremony—lasted only a few months before the man broke it off. "Basically, he sat us all down and said he never did believe in polygamy—he just did it to have sex with more than one woman," she recalled. She appealed to Gary to take her back, but he refused. (They were divorced in 1993, and he contributes to the support of their children.) When she tried to reconcile with the other man, he became violent, and she fled with her children to the shelter.

Scott Howell was shocked by Prunty's story. Since leaving the shelter, she had met other women like her, and she told Howell about the existence of incestuous clans, in which birth defects were common. With the Winter Olympics four years away, Howell foresaw a huge public-relations

problem. "I didn't want to make this the No. 1 issue for foreign journalists coming into Utah," he told me. The solution, he decided, was to eliminate polygamy by 2002.

In Utah, polygamy abides in a legal fog. In 1935, the legislature passed an unenforceable law that made it a felony to cohabit with "more than one person of the opposite sex"—a statute that could conceivably criminalize anyone living in anything but a convent, a monastery, or a homosexual relationship. Howell's first act was to offer a bill that would raise the marriageable age, for girls, from fourteen to sixteen. A year earlier, a similar measure had been defeated by conservative lawmakers who were worried that it would encourage pregnant teen-agers to seek abortions in lieu of marriage. But Prunty proved to be a brilliant lobbyist. She formed a group of women who had been involved in polygamous families called Tapestry Against Polygamy, and she filled the gallery of the legislature with teen-age girls in wedding gowns. A compromise version of the legislation passed—girls could now marry at fifteen, with a judge's approval—and the state attorney general appointed a "polygamy czar."

To Mary Batchelor, Prunty's former sister wife, these developments seemed to be "modified ethnic cleansing." She and two other women, Anne Wilde and Marianne Watson, set about collecting positive stories of polygamous marriages, which they compiled into a book entitled "Voices in Harmony," which was published in 2000.

During the legislative session of 2001, Prunty lobbied for another bill, this one aimed at the leaders of the polygamous clans. The bill, sponsored by State Senator Ron Allen, would have made it a third-degree felony for a parent to allow a minor child to enter into an unlawful marriage or for any person to knowingly "solemnize" the union of a woman with a man who was already married. Anyone who "encouraged" or "promoted" such activity would also be subject to criminal charges. The state senate passed the Allen bill unanimously. It then went to the state legislature's judiciary committee, whose members decided to hold an open hearing on the bill.

When the committee opened its doors on the morning of February 14th, about a hundred polygamists showed up, a few with their children, and demanded to be heard. What followed was by far the largest public hearing in Utah's history in which polygamists aired their views openly. They were not advocating for the right to turn their daughters into child brides; in fact, some of them said that the marriageable age ought to be raised to eighteen. But they viewed marriage between consenting adults as a different matter. Owen Allred got up and said, "The man who wants several women to be his sexual partners can have children by them, and the state will support those children. He remains free of any legal accusation—until he marries more than one wife. Marry them, and he becomes a criminal. It is the marriage that becomes the crime."

Vicky Prunty reminded the committee of the dangers of incest. She said that one girl had come to Tapestry because she had been forced to marry her own father at the age of twelve. But many of the polygamists in the room said that they were opposed to incest and wanted to see it vigorously prosecuted. "The people here are not the guilty parties," Anne Wilde said. Mary Batchelor urged the committee to strike the words "encourage" and "promote" from the bill, "so that it couldn't be construed to make the teaching of our religious beliefs to our children a crime." The committee scratched that part of the bill.

After the hearing, the polygamists claimed victory. The lawmakers had modified the existing law by reducing the proposed penalty for performing illegal marriages, downgrading it to a misdemeanor. The polygamists seemed a little dazzled by what they had achieved. "This is a major day," Anne Wilde said. "It's the first time in a hundred years that this many people have come out in a public gathering in favor of a polygamous life style."

In any event, nobody was talking any longer about eliminating polygamy before the Olympics. "It's just too extensive," Ron Allen said later. "We've let this go on too long."

HOW BIG A FOLD?

A disproportionate number of Mormons have been elected to higher office in America; although Mormons account for only 1.8 per cent of the country's population, five of the hundred United States senators are Latter-day Saints. The Church made a decisive entry onto the national political scene in 1976, when it launched a five-year campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment. (The Church feared that it would lead to a "unisex" society.) The Church is now conducting a similar campaign against same-sex marriage. Two years ago, Church members in California were instructed to vote in favor of Proposition 22, which upheld the ban against same-sex marriage, and in some cases members were directed to donate specific amounts of money to the cause. Church-supported prohibitions against gay marriage also passed in Hawaii and Alaska. Two years ago, the Church threatened to withdraw its support of the Boy Scouts of America if the organization allowed gay scoutmasters. Since the Church sponsors more scouting units than any other comparable institution, the threat, if acted upon, might have ended the scouting movement in the United States.

Mormon theology played an unexpected role in the recent debate over federal support for stem-cell research. Although the Mormons' usual partner in the culture wars, Roman Catholics, categorically condemned experimentation with human embryos, the five Mormon senators lined up on the side of science. "I believe that human life begins in the womb, not in a petri dish or a refrigerator," Utah's Senator Orrin G. Hatch said in a hearing in July. For Mormons, human life is just one phase of existence. They believe that everyone has a pre-incarnate life as a "spirit child," during which each awaits his or her opportunity to begin a human term on Earth. Among Mormons, the moment when the spirit child enters its mortal body is uncertain—a theological nicety that has enabled them to be somewhat flexible on the issue of abortion. The Church opposes abortion except when a pregnancy is caused by rape or incest, when the life of the mother is endangered, or when the child's survival is unlikely.

In recent years, the Church has become more flexible on matters of race. It was clear, following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, that it could not exist in America if it continued to practice racial discrimination, and yet the issue of extending priesthood to blacks was not resolved until 1978, when the Mormons' president, Spencer W. Kimball, expanded the eligibility rule to "all worthy males." That statement enabled Mormonism to become a truly international religion. There are now more than a hundred and fifty thousand Church members in Africa. According to Jan Shipps, a prominent non-Mormon historian of the religion, race is no more a problem in Mormon circles than it is in any other major religion. At Mormon headquarters, however, all the top executives are still white men.

In 1993, a leading apostle, Boyd K. Packer, spoke, with alarm, of the "major invasions into the membership of the Church" by feminists, homosexuals, and scholars and intellectuals. A few months later, five Mormon intellectuals were excommunicated and one was "disfellowshipped," in part for their involvement with women's issues. Since then, dissent within the Church has been subdued. Mormon women are generally cautious about labelling themselves as feminists. The basic unit of salvation in Mormonism is the family, not the individual, and for many women in the Church the emphasis on eternal family unity is deeply appealing. "About eighty-five per cent of Mormon women are perfectly happy with who they are," Shipps maintains. "It's only an extremely vocal minority who feel that their position is not fully equal in the Church."

Those who are willing to speak out maintain that the standing of women in the Church is in decline. "I believe that women's participation in the Church will become even more limited," Lynn Matthews Anderson, a Mormon who is a freelance writer and editor, told me. She maintains that Church leaders have discouraged women from becoming missionaries. "The Church for Mormon women is entirely different from the Church for Mormon men," she said.

Many Mormon intellectuals seem unconcerned with the question of whether Joseph Smith was a genuine prophet or a confidence man. "The starting point is that I am a committed Mormon," Ken Driggs, a Mormon historian and a lawyer in Atlanta, told me. "I can't imagine anything else. Once you make that decision, nothing knocks you awry. I am aware of the conflicts; I know the Book of Mormon doesn't stand up to historical examination. But for me to decide that the problems are insurmountable would mean walking away from five generations of people before me. What really clicks, what really keeps us there, is the culture."

There are now more Mormons outside the United States than within it. This phenomenon may be the response to an appeal that goes beyond matters of religious truth. "Essentially," the historian D. Michael Quinn says, "the Mormon message attracts people who want to become Americanized."

Leo Tolstoy is said to have called Mormonism "the American religion." Travelling on a train in Switzerland in 1857, he had met a Mormon man, probably a missionary, who had given him a favorable impression of the new religion. Thirty years later, one of Brigham Young's daughters, Susa Young Gates, sent Tolstoy an admiring biography of Joseph Smith by George Q. Cannon and a copy of the Book of Mormon. "I read both the Mormon Bible and the life of Smith and I was horrified," Tolstoy wrote in a diary entry. "Yes, religion, religion proper, is the product of deception, lies for a good purpose. An illustration of this is obvious, extreme in the deception: The Life of Smith; but also other religions, religions proper, only in differing degrees."

Five years later, Andrew D. White, an American diplomat in Russia, had a conversation with Tolstoy about Mormonism, in which the great novelist reportedly said that "on the whole he preferred a religion which professed to have dug its sacred books out of the earth to one which pretended that they were let down from Heaven." Forty-five years later, a Mormon writer told the story with embellishments that were no doubt more appealing to his audience. In this account, Tolstoy told White, "The Mormon people teach the American religion; their principles teach the people not only of Heaven, and its attendant glories, but how to live so that their social and economic relations with each other are placed on a sound basis. If the people follow the teachings of this Church, nothing can stop their progress—it will be limitless."

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