



A Mormon family gathered outside their sod-roofed log cabin somewhere in the Great Salt Lake Valley about 1868. The barren land, the

small, primitive dwelling, and the proportion of women and children to one adult male were typical of the time and place.

## The Mormons of Yesterday and Today

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The Mormons as you see them today present a striking contrast to the Mormons as they were 127 years ago when they were about to start moving their people across the Great Plains to the arid lands of Utah, then virtually unoccupied by white men. There were 16,000 Mormons in that original folk migration to Utah. Today there are more than 2,500,000 Mormons in the United States, plus another million in foreign countries, bringing the total to 3,500,000.

If you live in a prosperous suburb, especially out here in the West, you probably have Mormons for neighbors, for most Mormons today are middle-class business and professional people who have long since moved away from rural Utah to cities and suburbs throughout the West, and

also to some big eastern centers like New York and Washington. Metropolitan Los Angeles has become one of the largest Mormon centers in the world. Pasadena has a large colony.

You will probably find that your Mormon neighbors are at least comfortably situated economically and that some of them are well-to-do. If you are invited into their homes, as I have been when I've been asked to talk with them about their history, you will almost certainly find that in a Mormon home there is an all-pervading sense of an old-fashioned, wholesome, comfortable family life. If the talk turns to politics, you will find your hosts are conservative politically: they don't believe in new social experiments; they are suspicious of Democrats. They are devoutly



patriotic: Their sons go into the Boy Scouts when they are kids and serve their turn in the armed forces later. The dinner their wives will serve will be so substantial and so certain to end with homemade ice cream and cake that you'll find yourself drowsy just at the moment when you are expected to start talking. There will be no smoking, drinking, or hot beverages. There will be no profanity—that is, there will be no expletives to omit. You will be impressed by how well the other guests know one another, by the strong feeling of group solidarity. Clearly they share in common more experiences and attitudes than you will find among a number of non-Mormons.

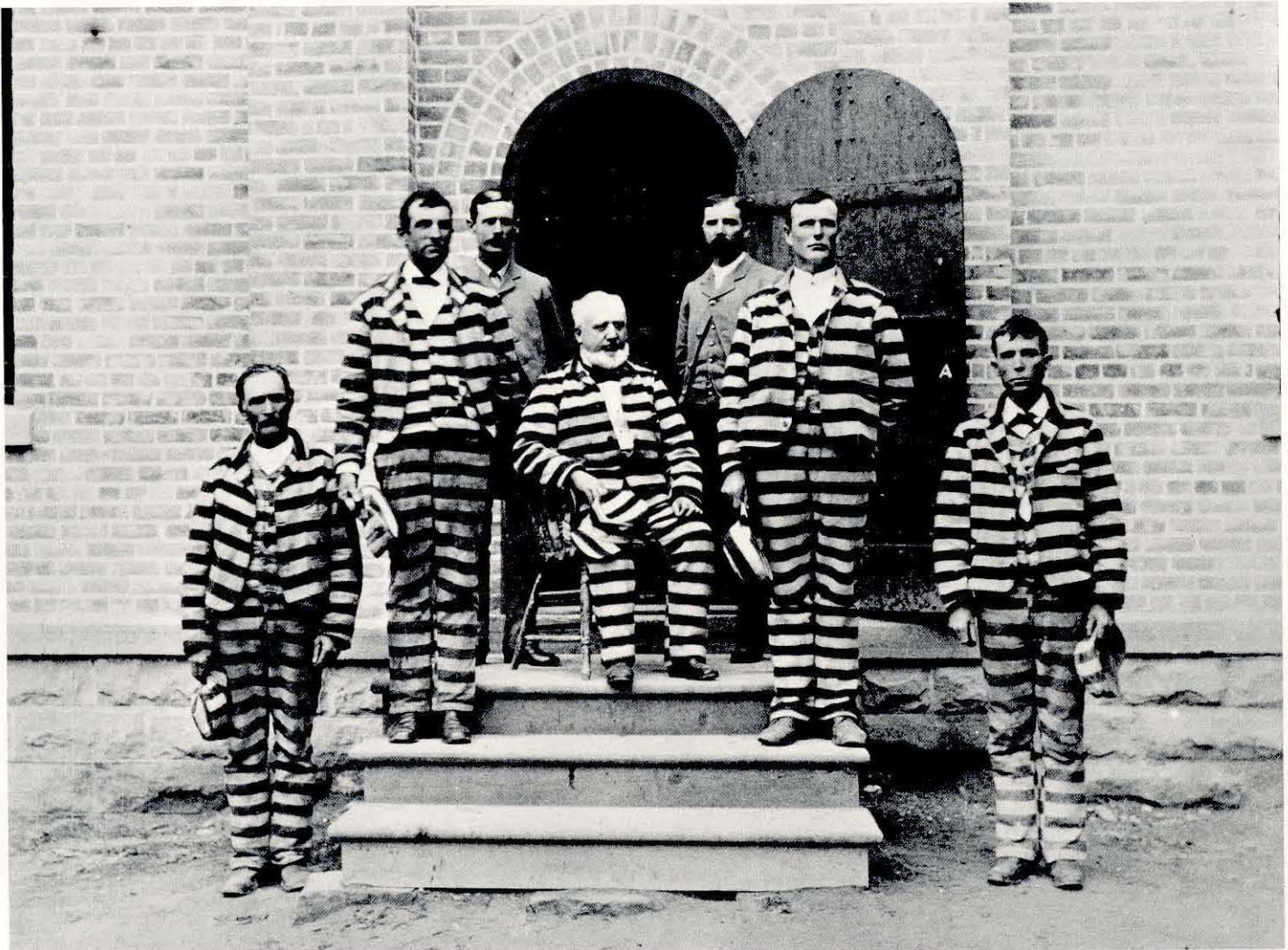
Contrast this with the condition of those 16,000 Mormons 127 years ago, as they huddled about campfires in Nebraska and Iowa, waiting to be told by Brigham Young when to start for Utah. Their new religion had come into being 17 years earlier, in 1830, and had won for itself persecution and scorn from the non-Mormon or "Gentile" majority. Their founder and prophet, Joseph Smith, had

been murdered in 1844 by a lynching mob of Illinois militiamen. The Mormons had been hounded out of three successive midwestern states in which they had tried to establish large group settlements.

Most of the Mormons of that day were poor and had had little formal education. Their American-born members were simple farmers or craftsmen, their English and European converts were former factory workers or artisans. They were already notorious for their social experiments and cooperative enterprises, which had revealed a remarkable ability to live together and work together. It was rumored that they had begun to experiment with that most sacred of American institutions, marriage, by trying polygamy—one man, more than one wife. By 1847 they had developed such a strong and distinctive group identity that they thought of themselves as almost a separate nationality. Indeed, ten years later, when the United States government had sent troops against them, they began to talk outright secession.

Beginning in the 1860's, Congress passed a series of laws to eliminate polygamy, and the result was the arrest and imprisonment of

many Mormon leaders. These hierarchs of the church (with two of their guards) were in the Utah State Penitentiary in the 1870's.





How did these 16,000 forlorn separatist outcasts of 1847 become the 3,500,000 prosperous, patriotic, middle-class Mormons of today? Why did the 19th-century Mormons, who were among the most striking innovators this nation has ever produced, become the 20th-century Mormons, who are dedicated supporters of traditional values?

To give a clear answer, it will be necessary to take the question in two steps. The first is to explain how the Mormons managed to survive at all during the 19th century—what held them together when they were persecuted, isolated, and ultimately attacked by the full force of the United States government? Why didn't the Mormons disintegrate into futile little splinter groups, as most nonconformist Protestant sects tended to do when fortune turned against them?

There were, I think, three principal factors that molded the Mormons into a unity capable of surviving and, what is more, capable of growing. The first of these was the unity of sharing an unusual faith, a faith that automatically set its believers apart from the general population. Most Protestant splinter groups merely reinterpreted the accepted King James Bible and rearranged some existing patterns of church government, but Mormonism went far beyond that, for it asserted that there had been modern revelations from God to an actual, known 19th-century human being, Joseph Smith of upper New York State. To accept Mormonism one had to believe *literally* that an angel revealed to Joseph Smith the existence of a hitherto unknown sacred book written on gold tablets, the Book of Mormon, comparable to the Bible, and that thereafter God repeatedly communicated with Joseph Smith. Those who were capable of taking this immense step of literal belief inevitably set themselves apart from the skeptical or derisive majority and thus became what the Mormons themselves called a "peculiar people."

Becoming a "peculiar people" led to persecution and to the martyrdom of their prophet, Joseph Smith. This had a unifying effect; nothing so unites a group as the sense of standing together against a hostile world.

But their ability to hold together was facilitated by something that was as unique as the modern revelation upon which the Mormon faith was founded. I refer to the theocracy that Joseph Smith created. The dictionary defines theocracy as a "system of government by priests claiming a divine commission." In the Mormon Church there are no professional priests. Instead, every adult male of good character is a priest, and by hard work can rise to successively higher rank and responsibility in the church's very definite hierarchy.

The individual male earns his living in a regular secular job, even as you and I, and must manage to do his own work while meeting the church's very heavy demands

upon his time. The only exceptions are at the very top of the Mormon hierarchy, where the sheer weight of responsibilities makes it necessary for the individual to give up his secular job in order to devote full time to the church's demands. Save at the very top, no one gets paid for doing the church's work; on the contrary, all Mormons are expected to support this elaborate organization by paying a genuine tithe—a real 10 percent of their income.

Women and Negroes may not become priests. The women are expected to work hard as a kind of ladies' auxiliary, and this they do, all the time, but they must achieve glorification and satisfaction in the church through their husbands' contributions to the church and through bearing children. Negroes are encouraged to join the church, but they must not expect to be allowed to enter even the lowest order of priesthood. Their dark color means that they bear a lifelong curse as the descendants of one of the sons of Adam and Eve, Cain, who in a fit of jealousy slew his brother Abel. Cain thus won a curse that has caused a black skin to be imposed on his descendants.

The Mormon Church is thus a huge organization that is staffed by unpaid nonprofessionals and is supported by remarkably generous giving by all loyal Mormons. The church is organized into successively higher levels of authority, beginning at the level of the local congregation, which is called a "ward" and is presided over by a layman called a "bishop," and rising up through a larger geographical entity called a "stake," until finally you come to the central authorities of the church, who have operated out of Salt Lake City ever since the Mormons have been in Utah. Twice a year there is a huge meeting in Salt Lake City to which the faithful are earnestly urged to come. It is at those semiannual meetings that the faithful are told what their leaders have decided.

You might ask how officials are chosen for these different levels. Joseph Smith declared that his church was to be not a theocracy but rather what he termed a "theodemocracy." In practice this has meant that the leaders of the church select some promising, up-and-coming Mormon for a post, and then ask the people of the particular group he will lead to ratify the choice by show of hands in meeting. The approval so given is known as the "sustaining vote." Usually it is forthcoming.

From Joseph Smith's time to the present this elaborate church structure has provided a definite place, a definite role for every active Mormon. The energies, the enthusiasms, and money of each member are enlisted. The church has dominated not only the religious life of its members but also their social life, frequently their political life, and at times their economic activities.

After the Mormons moved to Utah, the church created



This 1852 lithograph shows Salt Lake City in about the year 1849, when it was obviously much more village than city.

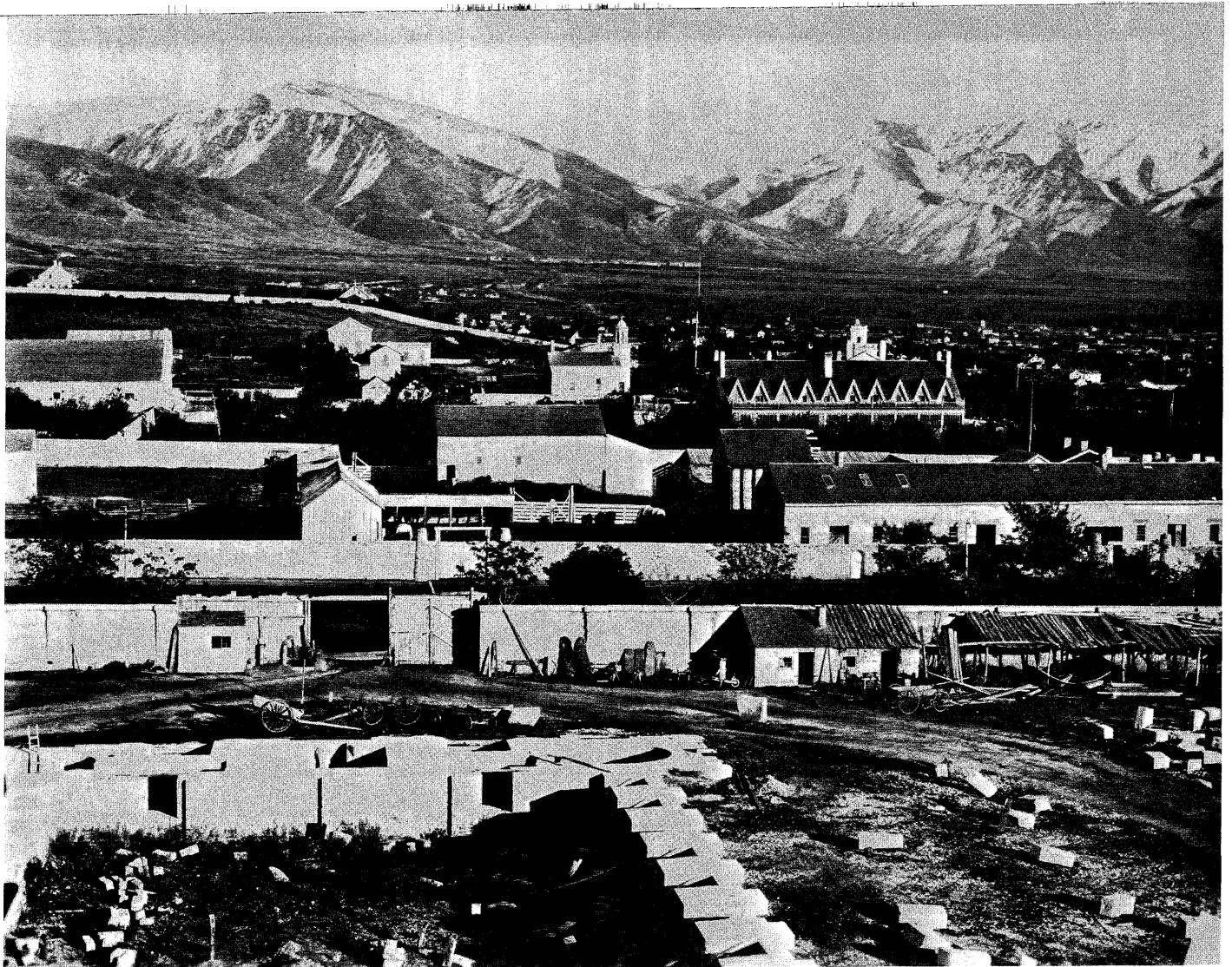
and controlled the only government Utah had until 1851. When Congress established a territorial form of government in that year, Brigham Young became the first governor, and the church remained a de facto force in government at all levels, despite Congress. Nor did the church's influence in government cease after the national government in Washington displaced Brigham Young as territorial governor in 1857.

This theocracy could operate the more easily because from the very beginning of their denomination the Mormons had shown a remarkable spirit of communitarian cooperation. Those early Mormons were too poor, too limited in education and experience to undertake big projects as individuals. Instead, they learned to work together under the leadership of their church. By pooling their labor under church direction, and with only the simplest of equipment, they planned and built towns, irrigation canals, roads, factories. They founded cooperative stores and cooperative enterprises of all kinds.

Joseph Smith initiated these arrangements and developed a cadre of effective leaders who served as his immediate subordinates. For his administrative accomplishments he deserves more credit than he has usually received. At his death he was succeeded by one of the outstanding organizers of the 19th century, Brigham Young. If the circumstances of his life had worked out differently, Brigham

Young might have become a captain of industry—an Andrew Carnegie or John D. Rockefeller or a railroad builder. Instead, this able, energetic, earthy man became the absolute ruler and the revered, genuinely loved father figure of all Mormons everywhere. He used the church hierarchy as the instrument through which he ruled, and from among the church leaders he selected the captains and lieutenants that he needed to carry out his purposes. But Young himself was a master of detail who kept in touch with everything. Whenever he traveled, which he did frequently, he always knew a great deal about not only each town he visited but also about many of the individuals who lived there. To a hard-working rural Mormon, it meant everything that the ruler of the church knew that Sister Eliza had had an unusually hard time after the birth of her sixth child, or that Brother Isaiah had been the principal carpenter in rebuilding the local church after it had suffered storm damage.

Young could be ruthless and earthy, as he frequently was, but he had many qualities more notable than his most publicized achievement, which was the admittedly impressive catalog of his wives. His most recent and most dubious biographer alleges that he had “at least 70 wives” and 65 children. More reliable statisticians credit Young with only 56 children by 16 wives. Even this somewhat reduced total seems to me an impressive achievement.



By the 1850's the Mormons had begun construction of their Temple in Salt Lake City. Its foundations appear in the foreground of this photograph taken from the top of the Tabernacle. The Temple was

finally completed in 1893. At the right center, the building with many gables is Brigham Young's famous Beehive House, in which he lived for a time with a number of wives and children.

Young's ability to keep so many wives from quarreling and so many children from overwhelming him would in itself prove that Young must have been a remarkable, not to say a master, diplomat.

Brigham Young ruled the Mormon community from shortly after Joseph Smith's death in 1844 until his own death in 1877. During the 30 years between the Mormons' arrival in Utah in 1847 and 1877, Young directed the founding of 350 towns in the Southwest. Thereby the Mormons became the most important single agency in colonizing that vast arid West between the Rockies and the Sierra Nevada. A modern historian has remarked that the two most important forces in settling the intermontane West were the Union Pacific Railroad and the Mormon Church—in other words, two large, well-organized, and centrally directed institutions. In such a harsh geographic setting, the job could not possibly have been done by exclusive reliance upon the efforts of unorganized individuals.

Most of the towns that Young caused to be founded were in arid regions that required irrigation systems and a careful use of the limited supply of water, timber, and good land. For the United States as a whole this was the

age of unrestrained *laissez faire*, which means that the primary standard of judgment was personal profit and the devil take the community's needs.

Yet under Young's leadership, and in accordance with the Mormons' well-established pattern of communitarian living, social values were placed ahead of individual desires. Towns were planned according to the old New England pattern, where the residences and their attendant kitchen gardens were clustered in the middle of the town, so that the people could have nearby neighbors, schools, and churches, while the irrigable crop lands were out in the more open country beyond the settlement, and the pasture lands were still further away. Water, which is crucial in an arid region, was declared by Brigham Young to be the property of *all* the people rather than private property, and was to be distributed through an irrigation system built under church leadership and by the labor of the people who would be using it. Use of the water was tied to the land that needed it and was regulated by the local people, so that water monopoly was impossible.

When disputes arose, the local "bishop" of the church ward usually intervened to settle the controversy quietly, without recourse to expensive and time-consuming law-



Salt Lake City today is filled with the structures that house approximately 176,000 people and their activities. The building at the extreme left contains the offices of the Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter Day Saints, which is the official name of the Mormon organization. The tallest building in Utah, it towers over the nearby Temple, which in turn overshadows the round-roofed Tabernacle.

suits. These direct, logical arrangements deprived the lawyers of the water litigation that was a principal source of income to the legal profession in most western states.

In declaring water to be the property of the whole community, and in working out this simple pattern for use, Young and the Mormons were calmly, if perhaps unconsciously, discarding several centuries of Anglo-American precedents developed under the common law, but developed for use in a humid climate. Elsewhere in the West a great deal of expensive litigation could have been avoided if lawyers and legislators had been more willing to throw away Blackstone's *Commentaries* in favor of copying the example set by these unsophisticated Mormons.

In Brigham Young's eyes, building towns and irrigation systems was not enough. The Mormons had always wanted to make themselves economically self-sufficient, so that they would not be at the mercy of the non-Mormon majority of the nation when they needed supplies. Once they were relatively isolated in Utah and had survived the difficult first years, they began a remarkable if unsuccessful drive to create all kinds of industries and services that the church could control. Factories, mills, an iron foundry,

express and teamster services, local railroads, cooperative stores, woolen mills, cotton growing, and a sugar beet industry were examples of ventures that Young persuaded the faithful to finance through drafts upon the local congregations to supply money, labor, draft animals, and the simple supplies and raw materials that the Mormon community was capable of producing. At best these subsidized ventures were high-cost enterprises producing for a limited market, and after the transcontinental railroad was complete in 1869, cheaper, more sophisticated goods from the Middle West and East wiped out most of them. The losses sustained were absorbed by Young's loyal followers.

By now I think you can begin to see how and why the Mormons were able to hold together and indeed to grow steadily in numbers and resources through the difficult years of the 1850's, 1860's, and 1870's. They were united by accepting an unusual faith; they were led by a remarkable man who headed a theocracy that penetrated every aspect of daily life; and they were addicted to cooperative, communitarian ways of meeting all challenges. But in addition to these forces from within, they were strengthened in their loyalty to their church by the

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periodic attacks made upon them by the United States government, which in turn was responding to the pressures in American public opinion as interpreted by influential office holders, reformers, and editors in many parts of the country. In 1857-58 President James Buchanan sent the United States Army into Utah under the command of the future Confederate general, Albert Sidney Johnson. In the 1860's and 1870's Congress passed laws to eliminate polygamy and to take trial of cases of alleged plural marriage out of the hands of Mormon judges and juries, which invariably failed to convict. With the Edmunds Act of 1882 and the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, Congress began a far-reaching attack on the Mormon Church and polygamy. Arrest and imprisonment of polygamous Mormon leaders, confiscation of church property, federal control of voting, and invasion by a swarm of United States marshals gradually reduced the Mormons' physical ability to resist the imposition upon them of standards of behavior that would be in harmony with the practices of the majority of the United States. When in 1890 the United States Supreme Court upheld the drastic statutes under which these actions were taken, the Mormons were beaten, although their loyalty to their faith was probably strengthened rather than diminished by these assaults.

Intense pressure upon the leaders of the church finally caused the then president of the church to announce in 1890 that there would be no more polygamous marriages. With polygamy out of the way, Congress permitted Utah to draft a constitution and become a state in 1896 — in other words, a self-governing entity that would be much freer from control by Congress and the president of the United States.

What has happened since the 1890's is extraordinarily interesting. Having once decided to surrender on the key issue of polygamy, the Mormon leadership decided to go all the way in many other aspects of life. They would eliminate distrust and dislike by deliberately conforming to the rest of the United States. This meant accepting the pat-

terns of thought of Victorian middle-class America, including the prevailing stress on laissez faire economics and hostility to anything that suggested socialism, despite the decades of Mormon church socialism. The Mormons' economic cooperatives were allowed to pass into private ownership, to be operated as profit-seeking enterprises.

In some cases this meant that the former cooperatives became the private property of some of the local and general leaders of the church. But note that while the private profit motive grew at the expense of the old zeal for communitarian enterprises, nevertheless Mormons of all levels of income continued to tithe and to devote extraordinary amounts of time to the work of the church. The church continued to be the center of their emotional and social lives. And since the church was so central to the thinking of all practicing Mormons, and since it had always given political leadership in the past, so did it continue to exercise a heavy influence in politics in the new era.

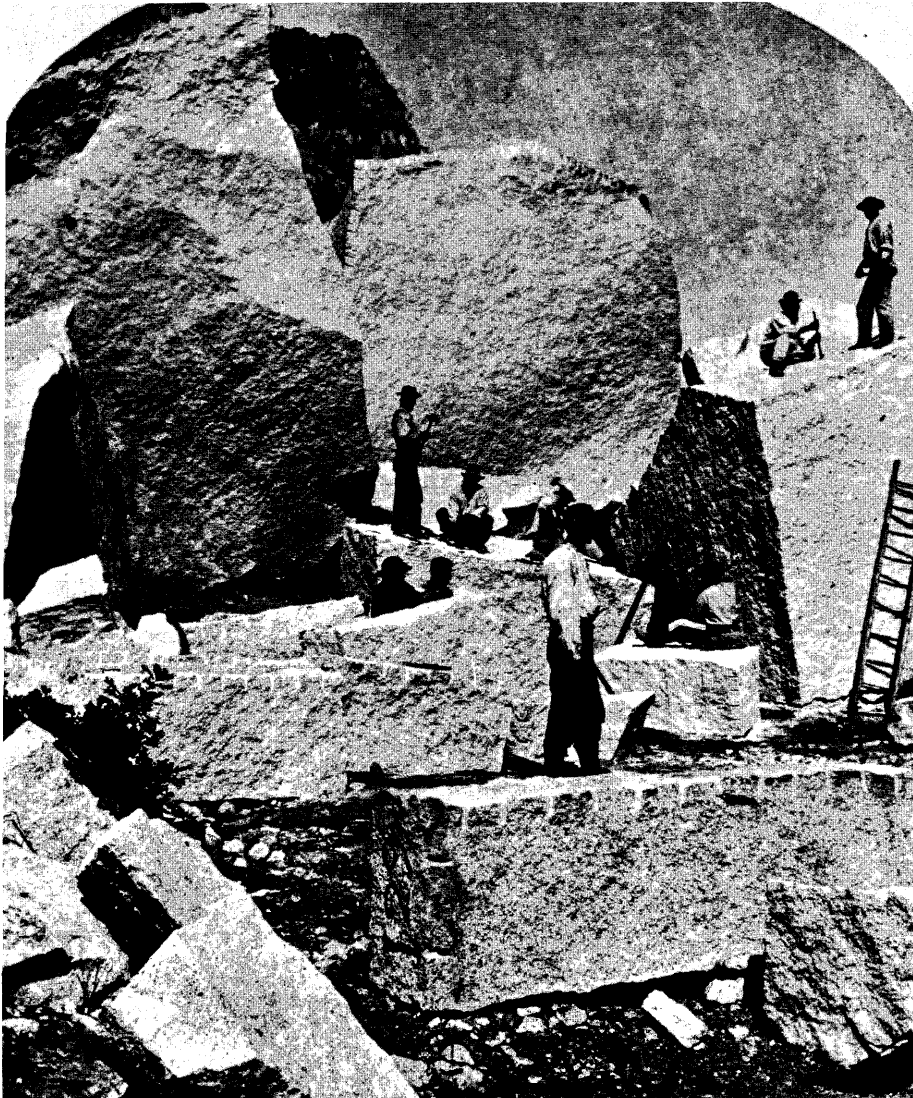
Politically the Mormons had been organized in a party of their own, the so-called Peoples' Party, prior to making peace with the national government. But now the leaders decided that the Mormons would have more influence in Washington if they joined the national parties, and since you couldn't be sure which party would be in power at any given time, they decided to have their followers divide up between the Republican and Democratic parties, so that the Mormons would have a solid bloc of votes in both camps. On a given day the faithful were solemnly instructed so to do. In practice the leadership of the church has tended to find the atmosphere of the Republican party more congenial than that of the Democrats.

The reason is that by the time of making their peace with the nation, an important group of well-to-do, successful men had emerged at the head of the Mormon Church. Such men found little difficulty in conforming to the general attitudes of Victorian America once the divisive issue of polygamy was removed. In

politics the natural allies of these men were the Old Guard Republicans in Washington and in the individual states. When the Congressional Republicans stopped persecuting the Mormons, an alliance followed easily. The same kind of affiliation with well-to-do middle-class America occurred also in labor relations. Many more of the Mormon leaders of that day belonged to the owner or manager class than to the ranks of the workers. Understandably, they joined middle western and eastern employers in denouncing labor's attempts to organize.

This tendency to affiliate with the conservative, ruling, entrepreneurial elements of American society was probably strengthened by at least two factors. One was the relatively provincial setting of most Mormon communities at the turn of the century, even after the railroads had reached them. The present-day dispersion of Mormons to big cities in non-Mormon regions is a recent phenomenon that has developed only since the Great Depression and the Second World War. Most Mormons of 70 or 80 years ago still lived in small towns and modest-sized cities that had little communication with the big national and regional centers where, in the age of Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette, liberals and progressives were arguing fiercely over new ideas about social justice and using the power of the state to curb monopoly and economic abuse.

The other factor was a practice established by Brigham Young, who preferred that at his death his successors should be chosen on the basis of seniority. By following this practice, the Mormons have acquired the most aged ruling class of any organization known to modern man. The Mormons have had presidents who were in their 90's and who were assisted by men in their late 60's or their 70's or 80's. No matter how great the goodwill of such men, it is asking too much to expect them to comprehend the points of view of the great majority of an American population that is young enough to be the children, grandchildren, or even great-grandchildren of these dignified elderly



The ancient Egyptians building the pyramids probably looked somewhat like these Mormons quarrying granite in the 1860's to build their Temple. The huge blocks were hauled to the construction site by ox teams.

leaders of the Mormon church.

It is almost unnecessary to add that in this general drive to make peace with middle-class America, the old tendency to Mormon separatism has dwindled and has been replaced by an earnest patriotism. Does this mean that the modern Mormons have been fully absorbed into American society? That basic question has deeply concerned a new group of Mormon intellectuals that has become increasingly significant during the past decade. In 1966 this group decided to found a serious journal in which they could thrash out the difficult problems that they faced when they tried to discover a harmony between the faith, the teachings, and the church organization that Joseph Smith had revealed to their forefathers in the

1830's and 1840's, and the harshly insistent conditions of the 1960's and 1970's. The very first issue of this new journal started with an admirable editorial preface that said:

Today . . . most Mormons live outside Utah . . . Today it is not unusual to see Mormon Congressmen in Washington, Mormon business executives in Chicago, Mormon professors at Harvard, or Mormon space scientists at Houston. Mormons are participating freely in the social, economic, and cultural currents of change sweeping twentieth century America.

Then, with no transition, the editorial suddenly added this assertion:

But Mormons do remain apart from greater American society. Their experience, heritage, and tradition of years in isolation remain an integral part of Mormon belief; Mormon doctrine reinforces individual withdrawal and defiance of conformity in the face of

modern convention. This new era of life in the secular world, far from the cloisters of a Rocky Mountain Zion, has created a host of dilemmas for the individual who seeks to reconcile faith and reason.

All of us face in some degree this problem of reconciling ancestral faith with contemporary thought and practice. But for the Mormons the reconciliation is the more difficult because Mormonism is such a complete way of life. Even though Mormons participate vigorously in the PTA, the Chamber of Commerce, local politics, business, and the professions, nevertheless they are still spending a high percentage of their lives in self-contained Mormon groups. From childhood until old age they meet, talk, play, and pray in their own groups. They have their own charities, projects, entertainments. I suspect that they feel more comfortable among their own kind. They have elaborate youth programs at high schools and colleges, in order to hold their young people in the church during the years when most denominations lose a high percentage of their young men and women.

Where most of us must find our individual and often lonely ways through this confusing modern era, the Mormons can live in a warmly supportive group atmosphere, if they wish. To break with so all-embracing a pattern is a wrenching, distorting experience. For just that reason independent thinking and modern doubts have come only slowly to most Mormons. It is far easier to conform to the church's omnipresent guidance than to challenge it. Meantime change is of course coming to the world with extraordinary speed. Will our Mormon neighbors be able to work out adjustments to contemporary pressures, without sacrificing the essence of their distinctive and close-knit culture? In this year 1974, the answer must be in doubt, but in view of the Mormons' remarkable record of meeting challenges in the past, I am by no means convinced that they will fail this time. □