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Saints and Sinners: Utah's Past and Present

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A look back at Utah’s Seven Deadly Sins of 1998

(IF NOT PRETTY DARNED EMBARRASSING)
Saints and Sinners: Utah's Past and Present

S in is a funny thing—not funny "ha, ha," but funny relative. As a historian, I'm fascinated by each generation's public search for sin. Its inevitable discovery leads people to bemoan the declining state of nearly everything and to prophesy imminent crisis. Each generation looks at the next and sees the world going to hell. The past—their past, or the past their parents told them about, or the past they imagine their ancestors lived—is somehow always more moral, right, just, and "traditional" than the present they inhabit or the future they fear. The phenomenon is easily observable in the writings of Cicero, Virgil, and Horace; in Livy's History of Rome and Plato's Republic; in the millennialism of the Middle Ages and the confusion of the Reformation; in Rousseau's Confessions and Henry Adam's Education; in Joseph Wood Krutch's lament of the Modern Temper, and in Bob Dole's 1996 presidential campaign.

It's observable in that phrase you just used on your own child or grandchild: "I remember when . . . the good ole days . . . standards back then . . . but today's youth . . . no sense of tradition . . . disrespect . . . goin' to hell in a handbasket!" We idealize the past and define what we see today as evidence of an increase in evil and the wages of sin because it's easier than facing our fears of the future and of change.

My friend and colleague Norm Jones teaches the history of Christianity. He points out that "we often confuse change with evil, that our fears are often created by the friction between our system of virtue and the changes we are experiencing." He observes that "most people walk backward into change," and that those "who place the locus of the 'virtuous life' somewhere in the past are constantly looking back towards it, instead of watching out for what is coming." Unable to clearly see or grapple with change, their causative explanations stumble into the realm of judgements based on moral disgust with their own humanity and modernity. Sin is the present, virtue the past.

Utah is a particularly interesting case study because sin has been a Utah constant, despite what the pundits, politicians, and preachers say. In fact, sin used to be a lot more fun and acceptable in the past than it is now. Take, for example, polygamy.

Yes, indeed, the old "twin relic of barbarism" has reared its ugly head again in the Beehive State, or more accurately, has attracted media attention because of (1) the outrageous actions of some of its estimated twenty to forty thousand practitioners and (2) our puerile yet puritanical preoccupation with sex, in public and private lives. We've got polygamists in Bountiful, Draper, and central Utah building giant homes, complexes for their domestic multitudes. We had Alex Joseph, that "proud heretic," who died recently. From his "Kingdom of God" in Big Water, surrounded by seven wives, he denounced a world that tolerated adultery but hounded him for his conjugal solution. There are the polygamous communities of Hildale, Utah and Colorado.
City, Arizona where members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints resist both federal and Mormon church control, yet dip deeply into the welfare system. And who can forget Jim Harmston and his True and Living Church of Jesus Christ of Saints of the Last Days in Manti? He has reportedly called Mormons “morons” and acknowledged that one of his wives (a sixteen-year-old) was not a good lover, but “she’s the most cuddling little thing you ever saw in all your life.”

And then there are the descendants and followers of John Ortell Kingston, sitting on a $150 million polygamous empire in Box Elder County. The Kingstons are accused of a host of sins including arranged polygamous marriages, incest, and child abuse. Revelations about the belt-whipping of a minor girl for refusing to marry her polygamous uncle started things, but stories about fifteen-year-old Andrea Johnson broke the camel’s back. Married to her half-brother, she died shortly after delivering their son. The son, now six years old and suffering from cerebral palsy, is being raised by his father who has since married his own niece. It’s a close family, and the state isn’t prepared to do anything about it. Even Owen Allred, eighty-four-year-old polygamous leader of the Apostolic United Brethren in Bluffdale, is trying to distance himself from them, fearful of the public backlash: “Just because we believe in the teachings of Joseph Smith doesn’t make us like the Kingstons.” No, it doesn’t, but then Allred is still trying to regroup from a 1977 bloodbath when Ervil LeBaron and his Church of the Lamb of God tried to horn in on the Allred polygamous empire. I guess that’s why Gov. Mike Leavitt refused Allred’s offer to help the state clean up these “polygamous abusers” who are giving “good” polygamists a bad name.

In some ways the headlines and stories are familiar. Take away the entries had been plagiarized. “It’s a tragedy,” said Geraldine Felt, a member of the Utah State Poetry Society and director of the organization’s student contest. “I don’t know what to do. We try hard” to catch imitations and plagiarisms. “If anyone has any suggestions, I’d love to hear them.”

**Sin No. 1**

**Thievery!**

(hic) Has anybody seen my car? (hic)
I think it has a bunch of lights and a ladder on it. A woman who took a $350,000, two-ton fire truck out on a 2:30 a.m. spin faced up to five years in prison after pleading guilty to joy riding with the intent to temporarily deprive the owner, a third-degree felony. According to a Salt Lake City police report, officers were responding to a domestic violence call when the woman approached saying she was intoxicated and requested help locating her car. After agreeing to wait for a cab, she tried to drive away in the fire truck. The woman, whose ride was cut short when an officer jumped onto the truck and ordered her to stop, said she tried to take the truck because she thought the emergency workers were laughing at her.

The giveaway was that no line ended with “Nantucket.”

Organizers of an annual competition for young poets realized after awards had been handed out that two of the forty-one winning...
owned KFNZ 1320-AM, were critical of Malone for missing shots and passing them up during the finals. "Either they shake up that situation at KFAN with the two experts they've got on that or they've got to do something with me," Malone groused.

**What's that squeaking noise?** After losing most of the races in the 1998 elections by lopsided margins, Utah Democrats, who gained three seats in the state Legislature, proclaimed their resurgence. "It serves notice that Democrats are here," said party chairwoman Meghan Holbrook. "It means we're coming back. It's a slow process, but we're definitely moving there." Republicans control the state Senate 18-11 and the House by a margin of 54-21.

**Millie Vanilla.** Unable to attract a national distributor, Sen. Orrin Hatch took a personal approach to plugging his four CDs of religious, patriotic, and romantic songs—appearing at malls and on the Home Shopping Network. "I'm sick and tired of people ignoring talented Utahns," Hatch told The Salt Lake Tribune. "That prejudice is there, but I'm going to break through that." At least one Salt Lake shopper was unimpressed with Hatch's pre-Valentine's Day appearance at South Towne Mall. "It's a little cheesy for a U.S. senator to be hawking records in the mall," he sniffed.

**Second-hand News**
The Salt Lake Observer, a fortnightly alternative newspaper, debuted in June, targeting "a well-educated and upscale audience of thirty thousand readers with "smart, local news." The paper specializes in charging $1.00 for information available elsewhere in a more timely, interesting, and better-written fashion.

**Sin No. 4**
**Smut!**

**Is that what they mean when they say "going down on the Titanic?"**
Towne Cinema in American Fork earned the ire of Paramount Studios for its practice of editing *Titanic.* In an attempt to attract family audiences, the theater edited out a back-seat love scene and a scene in which teen heartthrob Leonardo DiCaprio sketches a topless Kate Winslet. Towne's owner, Carol Allred, expressed disappointment at the studio's decision to pull the print and insisted her booking agent had told her the studio wouldn't object to editing a few scenes from the film. A Paramount spokesman responded, "We never authorize anybody to edit a picture." Earlier in the year, Towne had edited Helen Hunt's brief nude scene from *As Good As It Gets.*

**All outtakes were ordered sent to the Oval Office for review.** Meanwhile, an American Fork video rental store was inundated with customers willing to pay $5.00 to have the same two scenes snipped from their home video copies of *Titanic.* In the first two weeks of offering the service, Sunrise Family Video received twenty-four hundred copies of the video. Carol and Don Biesinger, owners of the store, believe they are at the forefront of a movement that might make blockbuster movies more friendly to families by removing offensive material from them. Attorneys for Paramount Pictures asked Biesinger to halt the practice, but so far have not taken legal action.

**But how do you capture the human form through all that gingham and polyester?** A group of Springville residents were opposed to the use of nude models in classes at the Art Shop. "There's no excuse for nude models," one commented. "We should hold ourselves to a higher standard." Others were concerned that the art classes were held in a public building. The Art Shop is owned by the Nebo School District and leased to the Arts

dates and delete the names from the newspaper accounts and you wouldn't know whether you were reading about Joseph Smith or Alex Joseph, Brigham Young or Paul Elden Kingston, Parley Pratt or Owen Allred. The same charges, the same crimes, the same moral outrage, the same justifications seem timeless reminders that the past and the present are not so far removed; that the virtuous "good ole days" had their share of sin too. Moral critics charged Brigham Young and his "roaring rams" with all sorts of sexual crimes—white slavery, fornication, incest, child abuse, cohabitation, adultery. Illinois senator and Democratic presidential hopeful Stephen A. Douglas railed against polygamy in 1857, proclaiming that "to protect [the Mormons] further in their treasonable, disgusting and bestial practices would be a disgrace to the country, a disgrace to humanity, a disgrace to civilization, and a disgrace to the spirit of the age." This "disgusting cancer" must be cut out, Douglas argued, and "seared over the red-hot iron of stern and unflinching law."

Ann Eliza Webb Young laid the institution bare in her "Starr-esque" report, *Wife Number 19; or, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Expose of Mormonism, Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy* (1876). Mark Twain was "feverish to plunge headlong and achieve a great reform" in Utah by "calling the attention of the nation at large once more" to polygamy, but chose instead to skewer the institution publicly with humor.

Proponents of the "peculiar institution," chief among them Orson Pratt argued its divine ordination, its universality, its virtues. Polygamy would raise up a large and righteous generation; monogamy was unnatural among the world's cultures; polygamy would protect female virtue by obviating the need for prostitution. Young recounted how diffi-
cult he found the revelation initially: "I was not desirous of shrinking from any duty, nor of failing in the lack to do as I was commanded, but it was the first time in my life that I desired the grave, and I could hardly get over it for a long time." But he did.

So what is it—sin or virtue? The problem is that Utahns really aren't sure. While polygamy is condemned as crime or sin today, Mormons interpret it as virtue yesterday. So are we supposed to look to our past for those moral standards and "family values" the governor, state Republicans, Gayle Ruzicka, and LDS church apostles keep talking about? Polygamy? Divorce? Cohabitation? The breakup of the nuclear family, single-parent households, and financial insecurity? Brigham Young himself had at least nine divorces, and late-nineteenth-century Mormon divorce rates have been estimated at 0.9% (9/1,000) for monogamists and 2.5% (25/1,000) for polygamists, both well above the 0.1% (1/1,000) national average. Men in hiding, women on the run, children caught in the legal crossfire. Are these the "family values" we're pining for or condemning? Were these "good ole days" so good after all?

I must confess, the situation seems to have confused the neat backward vision of those who mourn the loss of a more moral historical past, written like a book of virtues to be thumbed through at bedtime. We seem to be working at cross-purposes with our most cherished rhetorical lament that change equals declension, decline, decay. God is unchanging, yet modern revelation offers the possibility of continuous change. God ordained polygamy then rescinded it, not by revelation but by manifesto, Woodruff's advice if you will. No wonder Utahns are confused.

It's clear that Gov. Leavitt is confused. The great-great-grandson of a polygamist, Leavitt was caught speaking his mind, praising polygamists and sug-

Commission of Springville, which is under city jurisdiction. However, after all but one of thirty speakers at an August public hearing expressed their support for the classes, the practice was allowed to continue.

Sin No. 5

WRATH!

Yielding the floor to the pottymouth from Utah. Only days after unleashing a torrent of profanity in Republican Party headquarters, Congressman Merrill Cook forced two of his top staffers to quit. On October 30, a few days before the election, Cook, upset about not being mentioned in a get-out-the-vote telephone message promoting Sen. Bob Bennett, reportedly said, "F--k the Republican Party," and "F--k Sen. Bennett." His outburst cost him a week-long banishment from GOP headquarters. Cook's aides attributed his tantrum to pre-election stress, but after his victory, he forced out his two top staffers, District Director Robert Jeppsen and Chief of Staff Janet Jenson. Jeppsen, who described Cook as depressed, said, "At this point, I'm thinking the guy has got a hand grenade in his mouth and he's going to pull the pin."

Maybe Barney Fife would entrust him with his bullet. In the wake of a shooting at the Capitol that left two officers dead, Rep. Jim Hansen told the Logan Lion's Club "I wouldn't mind having a .357 in my desk. It amazes me how many things we take for granted in America, [such as] peace and safety." Hansen also described Washington, D.C. as "a zoo."

Gee, Mrs. Cleaver! The Beav's sure getting persnickety! Some members of the Republican party's far-right wing were infuriated after Gov. Mike Leavitt weighed in with a series of radio ads, generic get-out-the-vote phone calls and phone banks supporting moderate candidates for the state Republican primary. Twelve of the sixteen candidates endorsed by the ultraconservative Utah Republican Assembly lost their bids, and many were angry. One of the losers, state House candidate Janalee Tobias, told The Tribune: "The governor steps in with his little finger and squeaks me. The governor is abusing his title and his power of office." But Leavitt defended the action, saying, "The people I supported represented rational, clear-thinking policies."

Hey Barney could you speed it up? A Cedar City radio station reported that Rep. Hansen joked publicly about people wanting President Clinton "impeached, resigned, or assassinated." In a subsequent Salt Lake Tribune interview, Hansen said, "This guy called me at the cabin"—Hansen's Farmington campaign headquarters—"some old gentleman, and he was all bent out of shape" and suggested assassinating Clinton. Although Hansen characterized the remarks as "tongue in cheek," many weren't amused. "This is shameful and it's nonsensical," said Utah Democratic Party Chairwoman Meghan Holbrook. Steve Berthold, Secret Service senior special agent, said, "Do we take things like that seriously? We absolutely do."

With friends like her, who needs enemas? After losing to Democrat Jackie Biskupski, Utah's first openly gay legislator, Republican Bryan Irving said efforts on his behalf by Gayle Ruzicka and the ultraconservative Eagle Forum helped cost him the race. Irving said Ruzicka never paid him the courtesy of a phone call, but did raise $3,000 to pay for a homophobic flier mailed to six thousand residents in the district. "With people like Gayle Ruzicka involved, it almost makes me want to be a Democrat," Irving told The Tribune. "I
Cannon misfires. In an apparent attempt to appease ultraconservatives in Utah County, Rep. Chris Cannon told The Tribune he favored impeaching both President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. Cannon believed such a move might repair the "moral vacuum" threatening to severely damage the country in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. "I don't know if it's an idea that will go anywhere, but it's an idea that has legs. What I'm saying is fairly well thought out," State Democratic Director Todd Taylor characterized Cannon's suggestions as "odd" and "implausible."

Sin No. 6

Merriment!

I'm Mandy and we'll be your servers.

In marked contrast to the rest of the year's hand-wringing, Utah's first Hooters restaurant opened in Midvale with almost no public contention.

Don't drink and drive. The Draper City Council unanimously rejected South Mountain Golf Club's request to extend its beer license from the clubhouse to mobile beer carts, citing the course's proximity to nearby parks, schools, and churches. A petition drive against the license produced more than twelve hundred signatures in three weeks. Scott Howell, an organizer of the drive, was pleased with the outcome: "The people have probably spoken more clearly than at any time in the history of Draper. Give us another three weeks, I'm certain we could have doubled or tripled that." Less than two weeks later, the course was granted a clubhouse-only license to serve liquor.

In heaven there is no beer. A nineteen-year-old BYU student initiated a petition drive condemning the $50 million sponsorship of the 2002 Winter Games by Anheuser-Busch, the largest beer producer in the world. "We realize the chances of them repealing the agreement is unlikely," the student told The Tribune, "but there are a lot of people who think the sponsorship is wrong." Shelley Thomas, spokeswoman for SLOC replied that the sponsorship was already a done deal. "The company is aware of sensitivities in our community to beer sponsorship and will act accordingly," she said.

Now cut that out. After informally editing sex, profanity, and graphic violence out of Hollywood movies for years, BYU opted to stop showing R- and PG-13-rated films in its Varsity Theater after the school was unable to obtain formal permission to continue the practice from the studios. "I'm disappointed," one student commented. "It means either missing good movies or putting up with all the cussing" at an off-campus theater.

Sin No. 7

PIETY!

Goodbye, Ruby Tuesday. The North Logan City Council rejected a proposal to allow a liquor-serving Ruby Tuesday's restaurant to open in the town. "Our decision reflects the community and its values," North Logan Mayor Jack Draxler said. "There is a very solid majority of our community that feel we don't need a restaurant that has a liquor license. We don't feel we must apologize for the community's values." Currently, the only liquor gesting their practices were protected religious freedoms. Informed that the state Constitution he has sworn to uphold forbids polygamy, Leavitt has had to admit he was shooting from the cultural hip, letting his desires get ahead of his knowledge. I'm not surprised. We once had a governor who envisioned polygamy and now we have one who envisions virtual educations based on "competencies." Perhaps a real education in a real Utah history class in a real university with a real professor is needed by the governor as he tries to establish his "competencies." It certainly would be cheaper and save us all a lot of grief.

Unfortunately, Leavitt isn't alone. Take, for example, our state legislature ducking enforcement issues, and Gayle Ruzicka and the Eagle Forum, unable to specifically denounce the institution from which so many of its members proudly hail (either genealogically or immediately). Then there is Sen. Orrin Hatch. While he couldn't fully condemn the practice, his speculation that a future Supreme Court might reinterpret the Constitution to protect polygamy as religious freedom has some real merit, especially if Hatch is ever named to the court.

Unfortunately, Utahns would have to accept the fact that first, the Constitution is an interpreted framework for government rather than a static edifice, and second, that this future Hatch suggests actually might be better than the past or present and that we're not going to hell in that handbasket so fast.

That daydream aside, imagine another: Bill Clinton announcing that Monica Lewinsky was his divinely ordained plural wife. Now picture Hatch. Instead of saying, "Wasn't that pathetic? I'm offended by that. Boy, I'll tell you, what a jerk," Hatch would have to say, "My bottom line is that polygamy is against the law. It is against the beliefs of my church and I agree that it is wrong. I wish nobody would practice plural marriage but I don't condemn those that
practice it.” Wow, wake me up!

It’s interesting that it has taken LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley and Larry King (himself a virtual polygamist with seven marriages under his belt) to clarify the situation for the world. Even then, Hinckley’s interpretation of the Woodruff Manifesto as “revelation” isn’t unanimously shared by church members or Mormon scholars. So I guess, even at the highest levels, revelation—like history and sin itself—is all about temporal interpretation; that on some level it is relative to the time, place, and people; that as Jean Poullon pointed out, “Plus c’est la meme chose, plus ça change”—the more things stay the same, the more they change.

There always have been and will be moral critics pointing out society’s decline and sin. It just happens that right now they’re massing in the rarified air of Utah County, covering Rodin busts and excising Titanic bosoms, keeping abreast of lesbians in the public schools and busting video shops, beating their chests to get the Starr Report online (but not reading it) and giving President Clinton the booby prize, all in the name of protecting the public morality. Sounds rather fixated.

What’s to be learned from all this? Polygamy in the nineteenth century is really no different than today—just a different majority deciding on a different morality and interpretation of God’s will. Change is inevitable, not evil, while unexamined virtue itself leads to real evil—ignorance over understanding. Sin is better pointed out in someone else than recognized up close and personal—it makes it easier to cast that first stone. On some level, we all want to believe in something, to ignore the inherent contradictions in those beliefs, to be reassured by simple answers. Sin should be an easy one, but in the end it’s all relative I guess, and kind of sad, not funny. SL

license in town is a convenience store.

Whooo is it? It’s the Baptists. We’ve come to save your soul. Tens of thousands of Southern Baptists descended on Salt Lake in June, conducting door-to-door evangelical campaigns, block parties near Baptist churches, and sports clinics in which Christian athletes shared their experiences. The denomination’s “Crossover Salt Lake City” project resulted in more than twenty-five hundred “professions of faith.”

With this Teletubby, I thee wed. After seeing a number of cases in which young girls were marrying men old enough to be their grandfathers, Salt Lake County Clerk Sherrie Swenson asked the state Legislature to raise the minimum marriage age in Utah from fourteen to sixteen, but the bill failed by a single vote. Senators worried that it might encourage teen-age girls who get pregnant to seek abortions or resort to cohabitation. “A lot of us felt it took away freedoms,” Sen. Robert Montgomery, R-Ogden, told The Tribune. “It took away a basic right for young people to have families.” In 1997, nearly one thousand teenagers between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were married in Utah, and more than a third of the girls married men at least four years their senior.

Let he who is without sin throw out the first ball. In order to accommodate Mormon church-related family activities, Centerville Mayor Frank Hirschi wanted to put the brakes on baseball and other sports on Monday nights at public parks. “As Latter-day Saints, probably all of us would follow the admonition of our prophet’s declaration that Monday evenings should be kept free for family home evenings,” the mayor, who is retired from the LDS education system, wrote on city letterhead to a non-LDS baseball league official. Hirschi told The Tribune, “There’s no issue—no issue at all. We’re discussing ways to improve our programs. There’s no issue, there’s no entanglement [of church and government].” But a Salt Lake City civil rights attorney countered, “The poor mayor seems to have blinders on. He doesn’t seem to see that there are other people in the community, people who do not have to have an LDS belief forced upon them by government.”

He never writes! He never calls! In the wake of the developing Monica Lewinsky scandal, many Utah Democrats rushed to distance themselves from President Bill Clinton. “I’m disgusted, hurt and embarrassed by these revelations,” Salt Lake County Democratic Party Chairman Joe Hatch told The Tribune. And Second District Democratic congressional candidate Lily Eskelsen said she was “personally outraged” by the president’s behavior and called on him to resign.

Maybe they should have ordered another of those nice covered-wagon paintings. A two-story, $80,000 mural installed in the Supreme Court room of the new Scott M. Matheson Courthouse inspired controversy when the majority of Utah’s Supreme Court justices criticized the choice of art. Noted Utah artist Doug Snow’s painting, titled “Capitol Reef,” was intended to depict conflict and resolution. But it sparked unexpected conflict when three of the five justices issued a statement that read: “While we recognize the talent and reputation of the artist, it is our opinion that the painting is not appropriate for a backdrop to the bench in the courtroom. It is not meant to be an art gallery.” The issue was further complicated when an unscientific poll revealed that 65% of visitors approved of the work and found it appropriate in the courtroom.

Are watermelon and lettuce two of the food groups? Christopher and Kyndra Fink led authorities on a multi-state chase after taking their twenty-one-month-old son from Primary Children’s Medical Center. Authorities contend that the couple had restricted their son’s diet to select fruits and vegetables as a condition of their religious beliefs. The child, David Fink, was far underweight for his age when relatives admitted him to the hospital. Just hours before he was to be placed in a foster home, the Finks allegedly snatched David and fled. They were captured sixteen days later in Montana. Both David and his infant brother, Elijah, were placed in foster homes.