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Preface

This book flows from a lifelong fascination with Mormondom. I don't share the church's beliefs and even my political inclinations are out of step with much of my Mormon neighbors' secular style. Their down-home brand of Republican-type civic boosterism--locker-room camaraderie for the men and sewing-circle sweetness for the women--is overseen by fifteen stern-faced but loving elders at their magnificent Salt Lake City Temple.

I do, however, have an intense appreciation for the people living in that world of clean-scrubbed white children at play behind immaculate picket fences, of mommy in the kitchen clattering pots and pans, and daddy off to earn the bacon from 9 to 5. I admire how, after supper, Mormon families trot out the church-supplied materials for Family Home Evening, during which the kids put on skits telling *Book of Mormon* stories, sing hymns, or play "pretend missionary" games in which each child imagines ringing a door bell in a far-away land to offer to whomever answers the restored Gospel of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Family Home Evening is just one of many Mormon activities that pepper each Saint's weekly calendar assuring repeated contact with a church that is far more than just a Sunday-only affair. Mormonism is a day-in and day-out proposition. Dating men and women are provided social activities with groups called Young Men and Young Women--dances, ice cream socials, Bible readings, just plain gabfests. The two groups often join adults working on "welfare farms" where food is grown and canned for needy members, or on volunteer projects such as mowing lawns and making home repairs for elderly or disabled members.

Fathers are summoned to Priesthood meetings where they are required to perform duties like visiting Mormon families in the neighborhood. Married women have similar meetings and visitation duties as members of Women's Relief, that peculiarly Mormon sorority that insures that no family will ever taste death without a covered-dish meal to accompany it. Mormons sometimes joke that the "ladies" Relief starts baking the chicken and making the potato salad even before tragedy strikes.

By the same token, teens attend "seminaries" and "LDS institutes" near their high schools and college campuses where intermediate instruction is given in Mormon theology. For the very young, each Sunday includes Primary, an hour and a half of Catechism in which these youngest of Mormons learn a most peculiar set of rules, traditions, and legends. A treasured moment for Mormon parents is the day their children receive their patriarchal blessing, a one-page prophecy written by an elder designated by each congregation as its patriarch. He gives a revelation ("Thus saith the Lord....") from God about each child's coming church life and salvation. Most Latter-day Saints (LDS) members can quote their personal blessing verbatim even decades later.

Thus, day in and day out, Mormons participate in what they like to call "faith-promoting" activities that leave precious little time for dabbling in the affairs of the Gentiles who surround Saintly circles.

Despite their church's demand for clannishness, the Mormons who live around me have been my good friends ever since

childhood, and today they are fine neighbors. Observing the Mormon way of life makes me want to be a better family member, a more worthwhile citizen, or simply a friendlier person. But to be a Mormon is also to be an enigma.

Behind the friendly Sainly facade is a strict and regimented social order where unquestioning obedience to the church's elders is demanded. Above all, Mormon tradition demands that those inside church circles see to the needs and interests of their brethren before dealing with outsiders. And much of what goes on inside those circles is rarely, if ever, glimpsed by outsiders. While Catholic and Protestant missionaries invite prospective converts to attend services, the most important Mormon ceremonies, called Temple Endowments and Ordinances, are considered so secret that even discussing their content with an outsider carries substantial risk of excommunication.

This book is intended as a glimpse inside Mormon circles to reveal the people and the institution who together make up America's fastest growing religion. Mormonism today is a movement that enjoys social and political power far greater than its substantial membership might be expected to wield. Much of this power is a direct result of Mormons' robust tithing, an all- but-ironclad requirement that every family plow back at least 10 percent of its earnings to support the church treasury.

Amazingly enough, that tithing seems only to make LDS numbers grow. There now are more Mormons than Episcopalians, Lutherans, or Methodists in this country. The church counts its assets in the many billions of dollars and holds stock portfolios so large that they are managed by computer trading techniques like those favored by America's major brokerage houses. Mormons have been cabinet members, titans of commerce, writers, poets, ranking White House officials; Mormons make up a substantial portion of the middle management of the United States government.

Despite its robust growth and institutional strengths, however, Mormonism today is beset by crisis. To understand that crisis is to understand something important about Mormondom. It is a crisis of turmoil among the church's mainstream brought on by bloodletting at the fringes, outbreaks of violence that have received national media attention and have caused many rank- and-file members to agonize over their beliefs if not their very way of life.

As a child I grew up happily surrounded by Mormons. I mowed their lawns, played sports with their sons, and went to school dances with their daughters. Now as a journalist I have reported much of their trauma, the polygamy killings, the ritual "blood atonement," the armed standoffs with police, and other headline grabbers. Some of their trauma I have shared as I have seen it hurt friends; some of it I respect but cannot share. All of it has fascinated me. But always, mine has been the fascination of an outsider looking in, peeking through the cracks in the walls thrown up between initiates within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and outsiders like me, non-Mormons who are identified as "Gentiles" by the Mormon world.

Calling themselves "God's chosen people" and the rest of the world, including the Jews, "Gentiles," is emblematic of the Mormons. In Mormondom, it is always "us" versus "them." A legacy of the long and bloody persecution that the seminal Mormons experienced was the lesson that one way to keep your neighbors from harassing you was to convert them to your way of life. No religion works harder or more lovingly to bring outsiders within the fold. But those who refuse to come inside ultimately are all but shunned. Close childhood friendships between Mormons and Gentiles often become polite but cool acquaintanceships in adulthood. Outsiders living among Mormons often are simply left alone or ignored once they reject efforts to convert them. In areas of Utah, Idaho, and parts of California, where members of the church wield influence over such matters as who gets jobs, who gets bank loans, even who qualifies for auto insurance and food stamps, being left alone means far more than just loneliness for any Gentile.

Incredibly enough, even within the ranks of practicing Mormons there are degrees of inclusion and exclusion, degrees of us versus them. On one side within the church there are the apathetic church members whom LDS slang calls "Jack Mormons." On the other side are the ardent fundamentalists or "polygs," oftentimes believers in polygamy, "blood atonement," and other now-outlawed practices that are remnants from a past when Mormons fought to survive in a world of unfriendly Gentiles. In the middle is a growing congregation of mainstream Mormons that now approaches seven million members.

The Jack Mormons reveal what holds these tightly knit people together and what makes them special. Just as a jackrabbit looks like a rabbit but isn't truly a hare, a Jack Mormon is a man or woman whose ardor has waned. A Jack Mormon is a Mormon by birth or conversion, but a backslider by nature. Smoke a cigarette, start the morning with a

strong cup of coffee, or sleep in on Sunday and you're a Jack Mormon. A Jack Mormon is not unlike an Easter Catholic or a bacon-lettuce-and-tomato Jew. More so than most theological strays, however, Jack Mormons are the object of much discussion by fellow Mormons who stream into the neighborhood churches or ward houses for the three hours of prescribed Sunday worship and community planning. At these meetings plans are laid to have members of the ward's Women's Relief Society visit the "lady of the house" in hopes of straightening things out. Or a priest is selected--all male church members are priests--to drop by on a church-required "Home Teaching Visit" to urge a return to the "Word of Wisdom," as the church calls its strict codes regarding everything from caffeine intake to underwear. Although their church never forgets them, Jack Mormons are at the low end of the pecking order among non-Gentiles.

At the opposite end of the Jack Mormons are the fundamentalists. An estimated fifty thousand Mormons living in Utah, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and California practice polygamy and adhere to other fundamentalist beliefs which mainstream Mormons long ago abandoned. Church dogma requires that polygamists be excommunicated. Many of the people interviewed for this book describe how they were "disfellowshipped" after ward meetings and other church gatherings where they raised questions about taboo topics, such as whether the ban on polygamy was more political compromise by the pioneer church than genuine divine revelation. Mormons who raise such questions face stern admonitions from the elderly leaders to adhere to the inflexible words of the prophet, seer, and revelator in Salt Lake. "Follow the Living Prophet," Mormons urge one another.

Addam Swapp, the polygamist who was arrested in a bloody shootout after he barricaded himself, his wives and children, complained that he was excommunicated merely for asking questions about polygamy long before he actually engaged in "The Principle," as the practice was called by founder Joseph Smith.

Such confrontations with authority demonstrate that Mormons are great builders of hierarchy. While all Mormon men are priests, the best-connected soon become bishops. Bishops from several wards (parishes) convene at stake houses (dioceses) where they spend much time deliberating on the devotion of individual priests and their wives to the "United Effort," Brigham Young's term for the uniquely Mormon approach to community affairs. Priests tend to be blue-collar workers, clerks, farmers, computer programmers, or school teachers, while bishops tend to be auto dealers, chiropractors, store owners, plant managers, school principals, and, of course, doctors and lawyers. Priests are Jaycees, while bishops belong to the Chamber of Commerce. Priests work for people who belong to the Chamber of Commerce.

Bishops move up by aspiring to a place on the Quorum of Seventy, the body of elders who manage the Mormon empire's assets, handle its massive stock trading, administer its vast news and entertainment media assets, oversee its many agribusiness operations, real estate holdings, and other ventures. Within the Quorum, seventy aging men vie for openings on the Council of Twelve Apostles, the dozen old men who move according to strict seniority onto the three-member First Presidency--patterned after the Holy Trinity--and, ultimately, to the Presidency itself, the role of Mormondom's "prophet, seer, and revelator." The church teaches that the President receives direct revelations from God and is not to be questioned on matters of belief.

The Mormon hierarchy is patterned after that of the early settlers in the Salt Lake Valley. They were led by Brigham Young, one of Joseph Smith's "Twelve Apostles" who maintained tight-fisted control over the Saints well into his seventies, all the while keeping a harem of dozens of wives. Young was aided by seventy of the valley's most powerful ranchers and businessmen. These geriatric Mormon hierarchial systems have been oppressive and intolerant of those who raise only the mildest of questions. In politics rule by seniority is dangerous enough, but in religion it can become disastrous.

A common belief among Mormons, both within the mainstream and without, is that ordinary Mormon men can seek revelations on important family matters, such as whether to approve a son's or daughter's marriage, which college a child should attend, whether to change jobs.

As the teachings on personal direct revelation from God make clear, even mainstream Mormon beliefs differ significantly from those held by other adherents of Judeo-Christian religions. Mormons use the nomenclature of other Christian denominations, but oftentimes these terms mean something quite different in Mormon circles. The Mormon Trinity, for example, consists of two "exalted" physical men and a third individual who is "pure spirit." Our Father in Heaven lives with Heavenly Mother. The best Mormons will be elevated in the next world until they too are Gods.

Beliefs such as these brought to early church members persecution and scorn that hasn't abated despite substantial Mormon efforts to co-exist. These efforts have included the decision in 1890 to outlaw polygamy and the decision in 1978 to allow black males to join the church as priests. Both changes were announced as direct revelations by the prophet of the time.

Today one must wonder whether the excommunicated fundamentalists and their bizarre crimes threaten mainstream Mormons with a return of the rejection and persecution that the church has worked so hard to overcome. Temple-going Mormons reject the "polygs" but it is a distinction often lost on those outside the church. Worse still, mainstream Mormons cannot help but question themselves about whether all the bloodletting on the fringes, as outsiders so often suggest, is indeed a symptom that something is wrong at the core. As the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues to grow both in political power and in numbers, the questions the Saints wrestle with become important for non-Mormons as well as for those within the fold.
