

Why I REALLY Never Became a Mormon...

The 17 Verses.

Jim Stiles

NOTE & CAUTION! This story was previously published in the San Juan Record in Monticello, Utah, where the population is about 90% Mormon. My tale of woe was taken in good humor by almost everyone I heard from, including my LDS friends. However, a couple saints took the time to write me and complain about some factual errors, specifically the name of the hymn I quote from and the number of verses. They suggest I have the name wrong and that I exaggerated the number of verses. The events in this story occurred more than 30 years ago and I freely admit I may have got the name and numbers wrong. I can say honestly, on behalf of the congregation that morning, that it FELT like 17 verses. But I wanted to tell the story in dialogue and I wanted it to be a light-hearted story, not a factoid account. So please forgive me in advance if you can't find 17 verses of "Marching on to Zion" in your hymnals...JS

I grew up in Kentucky and as a kid, the only thing I knew about Mormons was that they all had beards, never smiled, dressed in black and rode horse-drawn buggies. Later I realized that I was confusing Mormons for the Amish and that I knew absolutely nothing about the Latter Day Saints.

When I was 15 my family took a summer vacation out West and we stopped briefly to float in the Great Salt Lake and to visit Temple Square. We learned about Brigham Young and the long trek west to flee persecution and the Miracle of the Gulls. I enjoyed the stories and thought Utah was beautiful. And I admired the way they'd walked away from the "civilized world" to this remote desert valley and made it bloom and prosper.

A few years later, I was finally old enough to escape my family and I started coming West at the end of college spring semesters. At 20, I was too broke to just wander about, so I spent the summer in Jackson, Wyoming, pumping gas at Harold's Standard on Broadway, next to the Elks Club. Just north of town, on the road to the Tetons, was a Fort Apache-style, ramshackle tourist trap called "Bill Bailey's Frontierland." I think they offered trail rides and a campground and at the north end of the complex Bill had built a burger joint where you could order carry-out/to go food from a group of young girls who worked behind the window.

Through that take-out window, I fell in hopelessly in love with a young Mormon girl named Noreen. She was from Ogden and one of several Mormon girls from northern Utah who had been hired by Bill for the summer. Almost every day, for three months, I'd drive up the north highway at lunchtime and buy a cheeseburger and tator tots. Hope springs eternal in 20 year old boys. On the afternoons Noreen was behind the counter, she had the good sense to barely give me the time of day (though she smiled so damn sweetly through her casual scorn!) And when she wasn't there, I was devastated.

At the end of the summer, as my time to head east approached, I astounded myself when I summoned the courage to ask for her address. I can still remember her skeptical glare. Noreen even explained that as a Mormon, she would never become involved with someone outside her faith. But she thought a moment and finally scribbled her home address on the back of my last Frontierland receipt.

I was persistent. Throughout the fall and winter that followed, I sent Noreen one heartfelt, lonely guy love letter after another. Eventually she either softened or pitied me and invited me to visit her family the following summer. But she warned me, "You're going to get the full treatment." What does that mean, I asked. "You'll see," she replied.

It was a 1600 mile drive from Kentucky to Ogden, Utah. I arrived mid-afternoon on a Sunday. I thought I was being clever by showing up too late for church, preserving my heathen-ness for at least another week, but it didn't matter. After meeting the family—her mother could not have been sweeter and her father could not have glared at me more warily, as if I were the devil

incarnate—Noreen took me down to the local Mormon visitor center. We met a sweet and gentle older man that I came to call Brother Barlow. He sat us down on a couple of folding chairs and we watched about 300 short films and documentaries about the history of the Mormon Church and the people and events that made the church what it is today. Decades later, I can still rattle off names like Brigham Young and Joseph Smith, of course, but also the likes of Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris and David Whitmer and places like Palmyra and Hill Cumorah and Nauvoo. And mysterious artifacts like the urim and thumim and the golden plates.

Later I talked to some missionaries, who were about the same age as me, but who kept calling themselves "elders." I was always told to respect my elders but even I had more chin hair than these fresh-faced boys. I admired their passion and their faith but we got into a debate about the church's unwillingness to let African-American men join the Mormon "priesthood." (This was prior to the LDS Church's subsequent shift on the subject.). The discussion ended in a stalemate and we all left feeling frustrated.

I also agreed to attend church services each Sunday during my visit to Ogden and this proved to be my undoing. I had grown up a Methodist and had gone to church almost every Sunday for the first 16 years of my life. We were good church-goers but our enthusiasm paled beside my newfound Mormon friends. A Protestant service lasts about an hour, give or take. The sermon comes at the end, the minister has the good sense to keep it under 15 min-

utes and when the last hymn is sung, he'd usually look out at the beleaguered congregation and take pity—"Let's just sing the first and last verses today," he'd offer with a smile, "and let you get home for dinner."

And then I went to a Sacrament Meeting at the local LDS ward. In the Mormon Church, there are no assigned, full-time ministers. The congregation IS the church and the service. It's been so long since this event occurred in my life, some of the details, I confess, are fuzzy. I remember members rising to "give their testimony" and was again struck by the depth of their passion and enthusiasm, even if I could not find the same passion myself. But the hour passed and we moved into a second hour. It was August and about 104 outside and the building had no air conditioning. I was afraid to look at my watch but I also wasn't sure if I had the strength to lift my arm and check anyway. I started to feel a bit wobbly.

Finally, the spoken words ended and we moved to the final hymn of the day. Thank God! I thought. A small wiry woman of about 70 rose to lead us in song. Her name was Olive...Sister Olive. She had the crinkled, severe countenance of what one of the early Mormon pioneer women must have looked like. Olive stood straight as tall timber, adjusted her wire rim glasses and opened her hymn book. I could see she relished her role. Her voice boomed across the room and its power shocked me, coming from this tiny albeit spry elderly woman.

"Alright everyone. Turn to page 171. We are going to sing 'Marching on to Zion' and I want you to give this blessed hymn all the enthusiasm you can find within you. Sing with your hearts people!"

Sister Olive smiled triumphantly at the congregation. "And we are going to sing ALL seventeen verses!"

Wha—what? I turned to Noreen. "What did she say about verses? She said first and last, right?"

"No," she smiled happily. "We are singing all 17 verses today."

My knees began to buckle and I thought my head would explode. This just wasn't right and thought maybe these people could learn something from the gentiles after all. I wondered if I would get out of there alive. Could a young man in relative good health drop dead during a Mormon Sacrament Meeting from over-hymning? I tried to focus but I could tell I was muttering my words. I was not enunciating and I certainly wasn't showing unbridled enthusiasm. Would Sister Olive notice? And while Noreen seemed as fresh and happy and



enthusiastic as ever (Was this pretty young woman INSANE?), a glance around me suggested that I wasn't the only person in that room struggling to maintain consciousness. There was a weariness that became more noticeable as the hymn moved excruciatingly forward, one belabored verse after another.

We reached verse 14. Three more verses. The end was in sight. I started to breathe easier, knowing that in just a few more moments, my self-induced agony would be over. I mustered a weak but grateful smile to my lovely girlfriend. In that dreamy hopeful state, I imagined the world outside. Green trees, the call of the mountains. A cool breeze. Silence. And then...

"Wait! Stop! Stop! STOP!....Everybody stop."

It was like finger nails on a chalk board. The world has ended, I thought. And it had. It was the choir director again. She was not pleased.

Sister Olive stood silently for a long few moments...."I am very, very disappointed in all of you," she admonished us. "This is a wonderful hymn that deserves far more from you than you are giving to it. Think of the pain and sacrifice that our forefathers endured to give us this wonderful oasis in the desert. We must sing His praise for these gifts."

I thought about my own 'pain and sacrifice.' I looked around me...there was a lot of suffering going on in that room. I must have looked like I had an attitude because Olive gave me a withering glare.

Our song leader continued. "No...No you are not going to disgrace this song of God...and yourselves, I might add...by singing it in such a lackluster manner. So.....we are going back to the beginning and we are going to sing the entire hymn again. And THIS time, you will sing it with the enthusiasm it deserves!"

The congregation shuddered. It was almost palpable. You could feel the ripple of disbelief. And yet, if the truth be known, we were all terrified of this 70 year old, 96 pound woman who now threatened to keep us in that sanctuary until the end of time. In order to get out of here, we finally realized that just enduring 17 verses wouldn't be enough. We also had to act like we were enjoying ourselves. I've never seen a more terrified captured audience in my life. Or better actors. Somehow, with our last shreds of strength and sanity, the brothers and sisters performed again, this time with a great joy and passion. I think it almost killed some of us but we could see she was pleased. Finally, almost a half hour after we began, we bellowed the last word of the last verse.

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We all staggered out the door and into the blinding sun. I was dying of thirst and what I really wanted was a beer but that was out of the question. I asked Noreen if this was normal and she laughed. "Oh yes," she exclaimed, "We often need to be reminded to show more enthusiasm and we're just grateful that we have people like Sister Olive to guide us!" We went back to her parents' place and I drank about a gallon of cherry Kool-Aid.

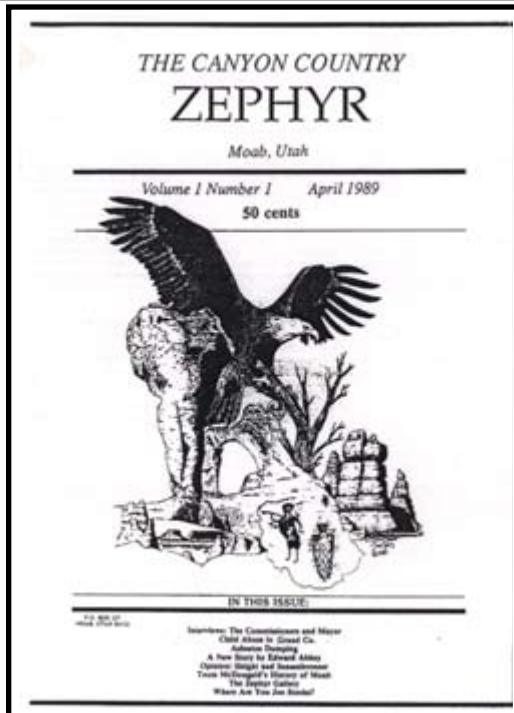
Things didn't work out with Noreen. I never have been much of a 'joiner' anyway and wouldn't have made a very good Mormon. At the time I was troubled by their stance on Blacks, had a hard time with the golden plates story and while I wasn't a big alcohol drinker, I was by no means ready to give up a cold beer, Dr. Pepper and a strong cup of coffee. But it was the 17 Verses that broke me.

But I was still vacillating a bit and went to see my friend Brother Barlow one day, just before I left town. "Well," he said. "I don't think we're gonna get you." He smiled. "It's okay. Getting a young fella to convert for Love has never been a really great way to recruit new members. But we sure have pretty girls!"

I agreed and thanked him for all of his help and he shook my hand. "You're a good boy," he said. "You'll be alright," and he winked, "even if you don't get all the way to the Celestial Kingdom."

I stayed in touch with Noreen and her family for a few years. She married a nice Mormon boy from Ogden and, last I heard, they had three kids, all of them now grown. I ended up in Southern Utah, 350 miles south, but never went to another Mormon church for Sunday services. I guess I always feared that somewhere, out there, Sister Olive was out there waiting for me.

Waiting with those 17 Verses.



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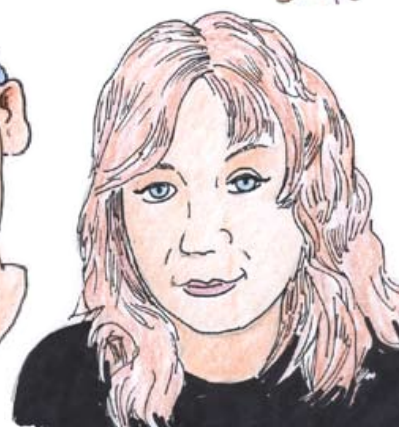
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