

# WHY I NEVER BECAME AN ANTI-MORMON

Jim Stiles

*NOTE: This is the third in a series of articles about Life in Monticello, Utah as a non-Mormon. To read the first two essays, go to the WordPress version of this story...JS*

Utah is not like any other state. Some Americans are still not sure Utah is a part of the union, and in its early history, of course, the U.S. Government refused to allow statehood for the land of Deseret. A “wicked place,” some self-righteous Christians complained.

Conversely, there are many Utahns who even today wish they’d stayed out of the USA in the first place. A few years ago, a friend of mine was chatting with a neighbor, a native born Blandingite, about the woes of the world. The man gazed east to the San Juan Mountains in Colorado and noted gravely, “Yeah, things are a mess out there in America.” For all these decades and years and centuries, Utahns and the rest of the country have maintained an uncertain truce.



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It’s easy to live in Utah if you are a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Since Brigham Young led his people west from decades of persecution back east and settled in the Great Salt Lake Valley, more than 150 years ago, the LDS Church has dominated this state as no religion controls any other. Today Mormons still represent a significant majority of the state’s residents, they control the political arena, more or less run the schools, and set the moral tone.

Mormons are known around the world for the generosity and support they show each other—in a tight spot, no saint is ever on his or her own. Somebody always has their back. Whether that same kind of support comes as easy to the down-and-out Gentile next door, however, is a point for debate. I hear stories that go both ways, though most of my own experiences have been positive. Given their history, an impartial observer might argue that the Mormons have reason enough to instinctively distrust and even dislike the Outsiders, but no one can deny the mutual hostility that sometimes exists—it’s like worlds colliding.

One thing is certain, if you are conservative and LDS and you loathe liberals, you’ve got plenty of company here.

On the other hand, and strangely enough, it’s almost as easy to reside here as a virulent ANTI -Mormon. Though their numbers are much smaller, their voices are strong and often their rhetoric is even more strident than their hated adversaries. If you ask any Anti-Mormon, almost everything that goes wrong here in Utah is the fault of the LDS Church. From social issues to environmental questions, whether the consequence is big or small, it’s the “damn Mormons” fault. And if no real sin can be attached to certain aspects of LDS Life, it nonetheless renders itself vulnerable to mockery and ridicule. From Jell-O to missionaries to sacred garments, nothing is off limits. I’ve wondered, in fact-- if the Mormons had never stopped in Utah, what would my Anti-Mormon friends have done to entertain themselves?

This has, for many years, left me in a quandary. While I know I’ll never join the Church, I’ve never felt the animosity that some of my friends express so frequently and with such intensity. Until my recent partial escape to the Plains, Utah was my home for 30 years, since I left Kentucky. I’d forgotten, for better or worse, what was really going on, “out there in America.”

When I first arrived, the anti-Mormon sentiment was something I didn’t even know existed. I’d experienced the ‘rural vs urban’ conflict, but the split had never been defined for me by a specific religious denomination. My previous experiences, going back to my crush on the Ogden Girl from a few years earlier, had been happy ones. I’d always been treated well and though I found parts of the religion difficult to understand or accept, I enjoyed my experiences and admired their conviction and depth of faith. So when I landed in Moab and walked into the middle of this debate, I was surprised. Mormon Jokes were a dime a dozen. (How many saints does it take a to screw in a light bulb?) Everyone thought the wisecracks were hilarious.

I can’t claim I was above the fray either, or that I never indulged in Mormon Bashing myself. Like other young impressionable male idiots, I often went with the crowd and passed along my share of Mormon Jokes. When I was a seasonal ranger at Arches, for example, I seemed to routinely clash with hostile Mormon housewives when I tried to explain federal rules and regulations. Surprisingly, their husbands were often more generous to me than their brides. I began to tell the occasional Mormon housewife joke, based on True Life experiences. Still, my heart wasn’t in it.

Living for years in Moab, southeast Utah’s ‘Gentile Den of Iniquity,’ it was easy to screen the members of my social circle to only include those people who laughed at my jokes. It was a pretty boring existence. Still Moab was an oddly diverse town, where the oldtimers and the newcomers clashed but co-existed. I enjoyed the mix and I appreciated the miners and the ranchers, even if I didn’t agree with them. It always felt to me that their lives had somehow been far richer and more interesting than mine was turning out to be.



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In the 1990s Moab began to change. I could see it coming and I held out the futile hope that maybe we might remain the kind of town that I once dreamed it could be. But it was hopeless. Greed--- Big Money, real estate developers, “green” carpetbaggers—they all descended on Moab like locusts, looking for the next Nouveau West town to exploit. In 2002, I faced a dramatic choice—leave Moab or go mad. I left Moab.

I considered my options, some as far away as Australia. But in the end, I decided to take the shortest path possible—55 miles south to Monticello. I would not become a Mormon. I would not join the Anti-Mormon ranks. I would simply be a Non-Mormon in the heart of San Juan County. When I shared my

plan with my closest friends, they all offered the same admonition:

“Monticello? The Mormons will eat you alive. You won’t last a week.”

Neither the idea nor the town was foreign to me. After all, I’d owned some land down in San Juan County for years. But I needed a little place in town that had electricity so I could run my computer and printers for The Zephyr. Avoiding a chip seal job on Main Street one day, I detoured to 300 East and found exactly what I was looking for. The little cottage was owned by Doyle and Marilyn Rowley and was listed by Lex Realty’s Bennion Redd., Marilyn’s brother.

Bennion Redd was the patriarch of Monticello and one of its most respected citizens. I had known him for years, since my ranger days at Arches when we were required to attend law enforcement refresher course every spring. Bennion was the federal magistrate in our neck of the woods. He was kind to a fault and always invited us to stop by his Monticello office. His wife had died recently, he explained, and he could use the company. On a couple occasions I stopped by to say hello and realized his invitations were genuine.

(For more on Bennion from Stiles: [http://www.sjrnews.com/view/full\\_story/6746909/article-Remembering-Bennion-Redd](http://www.sjrnews.com/view/full_story/6746909/article-Remembering-Bennion-Redd))



On this day, it was a business visit. I described the property and he explained that it belonged to his sister and her husband. He called Marilyn and Doyle and they came down to the office. (Everywhere in Monticello is 5 minutes away from everything else). We sat down in Bennion’s office and we haggled for about a minute. Doyle threw out a price. I counter-offered. Doyle came back again. I said okay. And that was that. We scribbled the price and terms on a piece of paper and Bennion said he’d draw up the papers. It would take about four weeks. We all shook hands.



The next day, I told a few friends in Moab about my big investment. They were skeptical. “Did you put down earnest money?” (No) “Do you have a contract yet?” (No) “Is anything notarized?” (No) “How do you know they’ll abide by the terms you scribbled on a piece of paper?” (We shook hands, I said...they thought THAT was pretty funny.) Four weeks later, I handed Marilyn and Doyle the down payment check, Bennion drew up the legal work, exactly as we’d planned, and on September 1, I became a Monticello homeowner.

Starting my Monticello Years with Bennion made all the difference.

It was true, then and now, that I did not look like the average Monticello homeowner. As I unloaded a pickup truck of furniture, my new neighbor, Todd Westcott, walked over to say hello and to welcome me to town. My cottage is tiny and as we made our introductions, he commented on the size...

“This is a pretty small place for you and your family,” he noted.  
 “Well,” I said. “Actually I don’t have a family.”  
 Todd looked bewildered. “No kids?”  
 “Nope.”  
 “You’re not married?”  
 “Uh...no,” I replied. “But I do have two cats!”

I realized I wasn’t making matters better. But he quickly adjusted to his new neighbor’s solitary lifestyle. Our homes were separated by a small field. Behind us sprawled a beautiful horse pasture. My view to the east past the horses stretched all the way to the San Juans in Colorado. It was like having Lone Cone in my “backyard.”

But I worried about that field. I’d just left Moab, where fields and pastures were vanishing faster than I could shed tears for them. And it wasn’t just the pro-growth development gang that was carving up the county. Some of the “greenest” environmentalists in Utah were busy building eco-condos and insist-

ing they weren’t doing it for the money. So I wondered how long a vacant field in my backyard would survive.

One day I heard that Todd had bought the small field between us and the big pasture to the east. Someone suggested that he planned to subdivide it. I felt sick. A few days later, I saw Todd in his yard and waved him over. I figured I’d rather get bad news straight from the source that keep grieving over rumors...

Was it true, I asked? Had he bought the land?

Todd nodded. “Yep. For better or worse.” It was a big investment, he explained.

So I asked the question: “Is it true you’re building a subdivision?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “What?” he asked. “Where’d you hear that? Nope. We bought this land so they WON’T build houses on that field. I love that view out the window in the morning. I don’t know what I’d do without it, so Amy and I decided to buy it...we’re gonna grow alfalfa.”

Growing alfalfa is no easy task and once, with a cutting planned and rain on the way, Todd was out until 4AM, trying to get the alfalfa cut and baled before the storms came. The next day, he saw me in the yard and came over to apologize...to apologize!..for making noise during the night. In Moab, his concern might have been real. New Moabites would have complained about decibel

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levels after 10 PM and the emissions from his tractor. For me, the sound of his equipment cutting and baling was music to my ears.

I was confronted with a strange paradox. Here was my neighbor, a devout LDS/church-going conservative, who owns ATVs and 4WDs and even has a motorized bike with training wheels for his youngest boy, who works in the energy industry—here’s Todd showing more resolve to keep Monticello’s open space open than my richest, most politically-correct enviro pals in Moab.

My new Life in Monticello followed that theme. Its citizens were at least tolerant, if not totally accepting. Nobody egged my car or put peanut butter on the windshield wipers. One day I stopped at the insurance office to check a premium. It was my first visit to the Monticello branch. A big serious, crew-cut, cowboy-type with a snap front shirt sat behind the computer. I handed him my papers and he punched a few keys. Finally, still looking at the screen he said flatly, “I like your paper.”

I was startled. “You do?”

“Yep.” Long pause. “A lot of my friends say I shouldn’t read The Zephyr. I tell them they should.”

I was almost speechless. “Thanks,” I finally mumbled.

“I think you’re trying to be fair at least,” he explained. “And I don’t agree with you on a lot of stuff. For instance, I got eight kids.”

That’s a lot,” I said. “But I don’t have any kids, so that knocks our average down to four.”

Bill Boyle, editor of the local newspaper, and I became good friends. Early on, he asked me if I’d be interested in sharing some of my Zephyr stories in the San Juan Record. I thought he was kidding. My rants in The San Juan Record? At first I thought it better to lay low. I can’t stand newcomers who arrive in town on Sunday and by Monday are trying to tell their new neighbors how to live their lives. So I imposed a five year moratorium on myself. No Stiles rants. But finally Boyle convinced me the time was right and so my essays, some written for The Zephyr, some exclusively for the Record began to appear. The response was gratifying. People I’d never met approached me at the market or at the post office to say hello...

“Well...I read your piece this week.”

“Yeah?”

“Some of it was pretty good. Other parts of it...I didn’t like.”

“Fair enough.”

And it was.

Bill deserved credit for daring to print my stuff in the first place. And I was grateful that even the more conservative parts of Monticello would at least give me a read. Of course they loved my essays when I was critical of SUWA or the tourist economy, but they also read (and at least tolerated) my rants on population, consumption and the near-extinction of the buffalo. Even my “Why I Never Became a Mormon...parts 1 & 2” were met, in most cases, with good

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