

WHY I NEVER BECAME AN 'ANTI-MORMON' (continued)

humor and thoughtful, sometimes introspective assessments.

On the other hand, I failed to connect with the Anti-Mormons in any significant way. Maybe I was still put off by the rhetoric. Former Monticello native, author Amy Irvine, practically created a template for Anti-Mormon vitriol

when she took extraordinary measures to explain how much she loathed the town, in her book, "Trespass: Living on the Edge of the Promised Land." Irvine found little to respect during her brief time as a resident. A self-proclaimed ex-Mormon and a 6th generation Utahn, she describes the moment when Mormon missionaries come to her door in Monticello:

"Come back and preach at me,' I bellow, 'when you've made love—to someone other than each other. When you've seen death. When you've walked—not driven—across the desert.'

It was just the first of many hurled Irvine insults that portrayed Monticello in as ugly a light as one can imagine. She mocked the people, their conservative values, their modest dress code. She even criticized the lack of a good merlot in a little Mormon town where 90 percent of its residents don't drink alcohol. Or the pitiful variety of cheeses! It should not have come as a surprise when she wasn't embraced by the community. Or that her words left bitter feelings.

Irvine departed years ago, but there remains a solid group of Anti-Mormons who share her loathing for anything LDS. Because I'm not a Mormon and because my views are more liberal, I suppose it was assumed I was "one of them." It created some awkward moments for me. For example, I was at the post office one day, talking to Postmaster Dorothy when a woman I barely knew stopped to invite me to a party.

"You never come to our parties!" she complained. "And you don't have to worry...none of 'those' people will be there."

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"Those' people?" I asked.

"You know," she laughed. "The people with the funny underwear."

I grimaced. "I like 'funny underwear.'"

She tried to figure if I was joking. Finally she backed off, looking confused. That was my last invite.

The Mormon Bashing continued and I retreated farther from my old friends. But it followed me, even to The Zephyr facebook page. Recently I had posted a history story about the uranium tailings cleanup in Monticello. Residual radiation from the old mill had caused cancer rates to soar in the 80s and 90s. A Monticello resident posted this on my page:

"I hope these Mormons get cancer from the background radiation under their houses and radon seeping up through their basements and die a slow horrible death, then burn in hell where they belong."

I removed the comment and blocked the user from ever posting on the Zephyr page again. But it still rankles.

I don't include these comments to further inflame an already volatile situation, and I have, in fact, seen the same kind of vitriol from members of the LDS community, but to remind my "progressive," Mormon loathing friends that ugly language is hardly limited to one side. If there is an epiphany to be found here, it's not that I find myself agreeing with local Mormons on a variety of issues, it's that I find a higher level of tolerance for my divergent viewpoints.

What we all seek, or at least should try to, is the 'live and let live' philosophy that many religions, including Christianity embrace. I'm not a very religious person but if there was one quote from the Bible that always resonated with me, it was, "Do not worry about the speck in your brother's eye, worry about the log in your own." I believe Jesus Christ said that.

And we all fail in trying to live by that standard.. While I resent the condescending attitudes of so many Anti-Mormons, I am troubled by judgmental behavior wherever it is found. For example, it still bothers me that the LDS Church encouraged its members to provide financial support for Proposition 8

in California a few years ago. The purpose of the vote was to ban gay marriage and it passed, but years later, the Supreme Court tossed out the restriction.

Opponents of same sex marriage, including the LDS Church, decried the court's ruling, but there is an irony here that has been lost on most members of the Mormon faith. Now that the judicial system has offered a final decision on same sex marriage, one of the next questions facing the courts will be to determine if governments have the right to prohibit citizens from having more than one spouse. Sound familiar? If a man or woman can choose to have a partner of the same gender, how can the government restrict the number of partners we choose to have? The landmark case on same sex marriage may someday be the gateway decision that leads to the reversal of the ban on bigamy/polygamy. It's a practice deemed immoral by some, but then...who's to judge?

For me, discovering that I found more tolerance in a small, conservative Mormon town than from the "progressive/liberal" pals I once regarded so highly has been a life lesson that I'll never forget.

Finally, if my modified attitudes could be traced to one moment or one event, I would once again pay tribute to one of the kindest men I have ever known. Let me offer one last story about Bennion Redd.

I have always been a proponent of decommissioning Glen Canyon dam, an idea that, at this moment, is making many of you in San Juan County and conservatives everywhere shudder with horror...

"DRAIN LAKE POWELL???" "There goes that EcoFreak Stiles showing his True Colors again!"

But I will always stand by my moral conviction that the dam should never have been built, that it submerged (but didn't 'destroy') one of God's most amazing creations, and that even from an economic standpoint, is more destructive than constructive. Whether you disagree or not is an argument for another time. The point of this story resides elsewhere.

In the Spring of 2003, the Glen Canyon Institute (GCI), which was founded by another of my favorite Mormons, Dr. Richard Ingebretsen of Salt Lake City, gave me an award for my efforts to shed light on Glen Canyon and other environmental issues affecting the West. There was a small ceremony and it was reported in the Moab "Times-Independent."

I had already found myself locking horns with my old SUWA pals over the impacts of tourism/recreation—the 'amenities economy'—on southeast Utah and though they all shared my views on the dam, I didn't hear from any of them. It wasn't unexpected, but I did feel sad that my efforts to be a more even-handed journalist had led to this kind of animosity.

But a few days later, a letter came to me from an unexpected direction—from Bennion. He wrote, in part:

"I read the complimentary article about you receiving the Glen Canyon Institute's 2003 David Brower Award...Congratulations—you certainly deserve the honor." He mentioned my friend Rich as well: "(He) was a good friend of my nephews. He was always a passionate person...and certainly has put his heart and soul into his advocacy concerning Glen Canyon. I can see similarities between you."

Bennion closed his letter, "You are very dedicated in the causes you support. Keep it up!"

I was fairly certain that Bennion and I were not on the same page when it came to the matter of Lake Powell, but he saw fit to congratulate both Rich and me for our passion, even if he thought we might have been a bit wrongheaded. That meant more to me than words can express.

What have I taken away from all this? As the country becomes more polarized and combative, just being able to express an opinion contrary to the prevailing mood of the crowd you run with has become a challenge. For me, discovering that I found more tolerance in a small, conservative Mormon town than from the "progressive/liberal" pals I once regarded so highly has been a life lesson that I'll never forget. Not all Mormons, I realize, are as gracious as Bennion. Not all non-Mormons are virulent Anti-Mormons. But, these days, few are even willing to consider getting along with their "enemies" on the other political side. We should take our friends when we find them. And anyone who can leave behind their lockstep judgment of others, Mormon or Gentile, is a friend of mine.



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