

## The Angel of Western New York

August 2008

### THE INTERSECTION OF MAIN AND

Church Streets is the spiritual heart of the western New York village of Palmyra. Five houses of worship huddle around the crossroads like parishioners chatting after Sunday service. There's the First United Methodist, First Baptist, Zion Episcopal, Western Presbyterian and St. Anne's Catholic. So unique is the corner of five churches that in 1938 it appeared in *Ripley's Believe It or Not!*.

Main and Church Streets, and the medley of bells calling to parishioners on a Sunday morning, is a reflection of the spiritual heritage of the village. With a population of only 3,500 people, Palmyra's church directory lists 15 houses of worship.

One of the 15 is unique, even for this community: the Palmyra Latter-Day Saints Temple. It occupies the crest of a low hill a few miles south of the village, surrounded by immaculately manicured lawns bordered by beds of flowers. The temple is a single-story, bright-grey stone structure. From the centre of the roof of this slab of a building rises a thirty-foot column, on top of which stands the brilliant golden figure of Joseph Smith, the prophet of Mormonism.

It is not by chance that Palmyra is a hotbed of worship and that the Mormons are here. In the early 1800s, America was in the throes of the spiritual upheaval of the Second Great Awakening. Western New York was still a frontier in many ways, with a zeal for religious and social experimentation stoked by the commerce and immigration that the newly built Erie Canal carried to the region. The area became known as the Burned-Over District. It was so scorched by the flames of religious fervour that, in time, there were no converts left to fuel more fires; they had all become Millerites, Shakers, Seventh-Day Adventists, Latter-Day Saints, Spiritualists, and so on. American journalist Christopher Hitchens, author of *God Is Not Great*, wrote that its inhabitants "surrendered to one religious craze after another."

### I'M IN PALMYRA TO ATTEND THE

annual Hill Cumorah Pageant, a lavish production that has been staged by the Mormons every July since 1937. Some 700 volunteer Saints from around the country portray stories from the Bible and the Book of Mormon to nightly audiences of thousands on the Hill Cumorah, not far from the

Temple. It is the very site where, according to Mormon scripture, Joseph Smith received sacred Golden Plates from the Angel Moroni in the 1820s. Smith's translation of the writing on the plates would become the *Book of Mormon*. Not long after that, the American religion—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints—was born.

The history of the Saints may be relatively short as histories of religions go, but it rivals all faiths in terms of controversy, mystery and conflict. Armed battles followed the Mormons on their constant migration westward to avoid persecution. The 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre, during which Mormons and Paiute slaughtered non-Mormon settlers making their own way west, is a shameful episode that Saints prefer not to discuss. Joseph Smith was killed in 1884 when a mob stormed the jail in which he was being held and shot him to death. And of course—although it was renounced in 1890, and is practiced today by fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints only—the tempest of polygamy continues to rage.

And yet, despite nearly two centuries of turmoil, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has entered the mainstream, and today it is the fastest growing faith in the world. There are more Mormons—some 13 million—than there are Jews. Mitt Romney, a Mormon from Michigan, was Governor of Massachusetts and has even run for the Republican nomination for the Presidency. The chances are good that a Mormon will occupy the White House before an atheist.

### THE AFTERNOON BEFORE THE PAGEANT,

I visit the crowded Latter-Day Bookstore in downtown Palmyra. Parents have lost track their young children in the busy shop and call out their names—"Brigham!", "Elijah!", "Jonah!" Of course, you can find copies of the *Book of Mormon*. But the shelves also hold children's books like *The Book of Mormon Mystery*, a fiction series for young readers. A weighty volume titled *Define Universe and Give Two Examples: A comparison of scientific and Christian belief* comes with an explicit warning on the cover: "Teenagers are forbidden to read this book."

There is a display of t-shirts printed with logos that at first glance resemble the logos of the animated film characters *The Incredibles*, and the comic book hero Batman. But the logos feature the letters CTR—Choose The Right—a reminder to young Saints to act righteously.

A large selection of Mormon action figures hangs from a wall display. There's Moroni, the son of the prophet Mormon, as well as Lehi, the

Israelite prophet, and his sons Nephi and Laman. A figure named Abinabi is bound and shackled; he stares out from his plastic container with black, pupil-less eyes and gaping mouth, a look of pain and anguish on his face.

After my visit to the bookstore, I leaf through tourist brochures over dinner in search of points of interest to visit. My options include the replica of the log home in which Joseph Smith and his seven brothers and sisters grew up; the Grandin Print Shop in downtown Palmyra, where the first *Book of Mormon* was printed; and the house of Peter Whitmer where, in April 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was formally founded.

I decide to visit the Sacred Grove. It was in this wooded area surrounding the Smith home that 14-year old Joseph had his first vision of God and Jesus Christ. The Father and His Son appeared to the young Smith and told the boy not to join any church for “they were all wrong,” but instead, to wait for the restoration of Christ’s Church.

The grove is as meditative and peaceful as you would expect. It’s getting late, so I’m alone until I come upon a family sitting at one of the many benches along the path. I feel as if I’ve interrupted a private moment, so I nod a quiet hello and move on. With a canopy of trees over my head and with the light dimming, I begin to see constellations of small, sparkling lights floating around me. I wonder if I’m having my own vision, until I realize the points of light aren’t angels; they’re fireflies, emerging for the night.

By the time I leave the Grove, I’m all Mormon’ed out and decide to spend the rest of the evening in the place spiritually furthest removed from the Saints that I can find: a bar hidden on a side-street in the heart of the village. It’s Monday night, so there are only a handful of patrons, playing pool or sitting at the bar. Baseball is on TV, so I pick a stool, order a couple of draught and watch the game. Of the trinity of great American cultural inventions—baseball, Mormonism and jazz—only jazz is missing; instead, someone’s selected every Bob Seger song on the juke box.

A villager named Harry sits down on the stool next to me and asks if I smoke. When I say “No,” he says, “Then ya better move down” and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Both he and the woman tending bar ignore the “No Smoking” signs, and Harry lights up. We chat and, after a couple of minutes of baseball small talk, I ask him about the Mormons. He’s a property owner and says the biggest bone of contention between the villagers and the Saints is land ownership and taxation. “The church has deep pockets and they’ve

been buying up property for years,” he says. “Property they don’t pay no taxes on.”

Richard and Ruth, the owners of the bed-and-breakfast where I’m staying, would agree with Harry. According to Ruth, of all the counties in New York state, theirs has the highest percentage of property that is church-owned and, therefore, tax-exempt.

We’re in the heart of the Burned-Over District, so I suppose it’s not surprising that it is a secular issue, and not a spiritual one, that is on the minds of Harry and other non-Mormon Palmyrans. They’re used to religion; they just don’t want religion to hurt them in the pocketbook. As it has been for the past two centuries of Mormon history—living in conflict with their neighbours—so shall it be.

**ACCOMMODATIONS ARE HARD TO FIND** during pageant week, and Richard and Ruth can only take me for one night. So the next morning, I relocate to another B&B in nearby Clifton Springs, south of the Hill Cumorah. Clifton Springs is similar to Palmyra and the dozens of quaint and picturesque villages in this part of New York. American flags and red-white-and-blue bunting hang from the front of many houses, and wreaths decorate front doors and windows.

After another morning and afternoon spent exploring the area, it’s finally time for the pageant. Driving north on Route 21, the first indication that I’m approaching Hill Cumorah is a large electronic sign sitting at the side of the road. It flashes: “Prepare to stop. Pageant traffic ahead.” Then the homes, cornfields and trees that line both sides of the road recede, revealing an expansive green field dotted with bright orange traffic cones; the field will serve as a parking lot for the thousands of pageant-goers who have driven from all over North America.

Ahead of me, red and blue lights flash atop a half-dozen police cars marking the turn-off into the makeshift parking lot. Police officers lean against their cars, arms folded, chatting.

A bright-yellow, diamond-shaped sign sits on the shoulder of the road just before the turn-off. The sign and the yellow t-shirts of two men standing nearby read, “whatmormonsdonttell.com.”

Apparently, not everyone here feels that the Mormons’ only sin is to own land and not pay taxes on it. According to the website, what Mormons don’t tell is that their Christ is not the Christ of the Bible, and that their faith is different from “authentic Christianity and the Biblical gospel.” And I was worried that, as a secular humanist, I wouldn’t be welcome; the Saints are

more concerned with the presence of these non-Mormon Christians than with me.

I park my car and walk over to one of the yellow signs. A slim, dark-haired man hands me a sheet of paper and, in a quiet voice tinged with pain and anger, says with lowered eyes, "There are two people I know who have lost their lives because of this." He points to a highlighted passage on the page that reads: "There is not a man or woman, who violates the covenants made with their God, that will not be required to pay the debt. The blood of Christ will never wipe that out, your own blood must atone for it...and every man and woman will have to atone for breaking their covenants." At the top of the page he has written the words, "Blood Atonement."

American writer Jon Krakauer, in his book *Under the Banner of Heaven*, describes the dark force of blood atonement that was one of the demons of early Mormonism. Krakauer writes: "...both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young had preached about the righteousness of a sacred doctrine known as blood atonement: certain grievous acts committed against Mormons, as Brigham explained it, could be rectified only if the 'sinners have their blood spilt upon the ground'."

In the book, Krakauer tells the chilling, true story of two fundamentalist Mormon brothers who in 1984 murdered their sister-in-law and 2-year old niece. According to the brothers, they slit their victims' throats with a hunting knife because God told them to, instructing them to seek atonement for the sister's "betrayal".

Further down the road, another group of protesters stands at the fence separating the field and the road. A bullhorn hangs from the shoulder of a large, middle-aged man. He aims his tinny, amplified voice at the pageant-goers who have parked their cars and are heading to the stage area. "Mickey Mouse, Santa Claus, Angel Moroni, Phoney baloney! It's a Mickey Mouse religion! Joseph Smith was a liar! All Mormons go to hell! I'm sorry! We love you! But all Mormons go to hell!" Parents in the parking lot tug at their children's hands to lead them away from the road.

Despite the annual presence of these dissenting views, one police officer says he's never seen any serious problems. At worst, the protesters with the bullhorns try to disrupt the quieter portions of the pageant. But an officer is stationed at the stage; if he hears the protesters, he simply radios to his partners by the road and the bullhorns are turned off. In fact, as the parking lot begins to fill with hundreds of cars, I realize the police are here primarily to direct traffic.

**TO THE NORTH OF THE PARKING LOT**, the field leads to a verdant slope, gently rising into the darkening eastern sky: the Hill Cumorah. It's not what I'd envisioned; the hill is shrouded with trees so I can't see the actual summit. I would have driven right by if I hadn't known it was there. Just visible above the trees, a golden figure of the Angel Moroni stands at the top of a pillar, his right hand pointing to the heavens.

The lower part of the hill is encased in an elaborate, stone-coloured, multi-level stage that terraces its way from the field up the slope. On either side of the stage, light towers and large speakers give the scene the feel of an outdoor rock concert. I've arrived at Mormon-palooza.

The weather couldn't be better, with shirt-sleeve temperatures and wisps of clouds to catch the light of the setting sun. People throw footballs and Frisbees to pass the time. It's like the relaxed prelude before a mid-summer drive-in movie or fireworks display. Forty-five minutes before the show, many have already found a seat amongst the thousands of folding chairs facing the stage. They sit patiently and watch the nearly-full moon rising above the trees to the southeast. The sky behind the stage and hill is darkening, like a backdrop being lowered into place.

As I walk through the crowd looking for a seat, many of the performers—already in full costume—stop to welcome me. Two teenage girls greet me with broad smiles. They're dressed as Lamanites—one of the Hebraic tribes that supposedly came to the New World centuries before Christ—with long, black wigs and brightly coloured dresses. One is from nearby Newark, N.Y. and this is her eighth pageant. Nathan, Gentry and Caleb (14, 15 and 16 respectively) are dressed as Nephites, another of the tribes. They are warriors, with breast-plates and helmets made of woven straw. A middle-aged man, along with his wife and four children, are here from Idaho for the third time. He lets me know that I can talk to a missionary at any time to get a free DVD and copy of the *Book of Mormon*. That's when I first notice the missionaries wandering through the crowd. They are in "uniform": dark pants, white shirt, dark tie, and name tag.

Every young Mormon male is required to undertake a two-year mission to spread the gospel and recruit people to the faith. They travel all over the world, sometimes to isolated and even dangerous destinations. I'd met two missionaries the previous year in Toronto, Elder Taylor and Elder Whitney, both 20. They were from Utah and Arizona and had, at the time, been in the city for 16 months of their stay.

It's not easy being a missionary. While away, they're not allowed to see their family. They're only permitted one e-mail home a week, and only two phone calls home each year: one on Mother's Day and another at Christmas. They can't watch TV. Their day of scripture study and proselytizing begins at 6:30am, and doesn't end until they go to bed at 10:30pm. They do this every day of their mission.

I asked the young elders if they had girlfriends back home. Elder Taylor had one who told him she would wait for his return. But, after a year in Toronto, he received a letter in which she told him she was seeing someone else; then, a few months later, the young missionary found out his ex-girlfriend had married. "Dear-Elder-John" letters are common and there are websites dedicated to them. Elder Whitney also had a girlfriend at home; she, too, had told him she would wait.

Another two young girls—also portraying Lamanites—approach me before the pageant. (Will they break their missionaries' hearts some day, I wonder.) One asks if she can read a passage from the *Book of Mormon* for me. It's her favourite, she explains, because it makes her "feel good knowing that I have a saviour in Jesus Christ." I ask her what it feels like to be at the very spot where the Angel Moroni gave Joseph Smith the Golden Plates. She gives the same surprising answer the father of four gave me earlier in the evening: "It's not important that it happened here—it's what happens in your heart that's important."

**NOT IMPORTANT? I THOUGHT THAT** "what happened" and "where it happened" were central to the nature of Mormonism—that to be a Latter-Day Saint was to believe in the literal truth of the Book of Mormon. The stories of the scriptures, Saints believe, are not metaphors or allegories or symbolic as they are in other religions. They are factual history. As the late Gordon B. Hinckley said while president of the church, "We declare without equivocation that God the Father and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, appeared in person to the boy Joseph Smith. Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens."

This sentiment applies to everything described in Mormon scripture, including the Lamanites and Nephites, as well as the great civilization that supposedly existed in the new world centuries before Christ was born, with its

large cities, domesticated animals and crops, chariots, compasses, steel and cement.

Joseph Smith himself said that archaeology would eventually uncover evidence of the truth of the scripture, which is why Latter-Day Saints have spent millions of dollars searching for archaeological evidence of this sophisticated, Pre-Columbian, non-indigenous civilization. The Latter-Day bookstore carries a selection of titles on the subject. *Visualizing the Lands of the Book of Mormon* and *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* describe the most recent understanding of where it was all supposed to have happened. The books contain maps of Mexico, and the Yucatan Peninsula in particular, the region which Mormon scholars believe was the home of the Lamanites and Nephites.

Why then did the Mormons I talked to downplay the sacred significance of the Hill? Perhaps because, the books notwithstanding, there is no credible archaeological evidence for anything described in the Saints' scripture, despite the efforts of anthropologists and archaeologists over the decades. Michael D. Coe of Yale University, a leading authority on the Olmec and Maya, says categorically that: "There is not a whit of evidence that the Nephites ever existed. The whole enterprise is complete rot, root and branch."

It's not just archaeologists who test the veracity of Mormonism. While the origins of most religions are lost in the "mists of time," the birth of the American religion in the early 1800s is recorded in birth certificates, land deeds, diaries, letters, newspapers, and countless other documents and accounts. The historical evidence is as abundant as the archaeological evidence is scarce and both are unforgiving of Mormonism, revealing contradictions and falsehoods.

One of the most controversial aspects of the faith—polygamy—is a case in point. When I asked Elder Taylor and Whitney why the practice was no longer a doctrine of the church, they replied that plural marriage was part of God's original plan because, at the time, it ensured that women and families would not be without the protection and support of marriage, even if women outnumbered men. But, the young elders said, "times changed and it was no longer necessary, so God declared that Saints should end the practice."

In fact, there is consensus among historians that the change was an expedient decision made after years of pressure from both the U.S. government and the Saints' non-Mormon neighbours. By the late 1800s, polygamists were being thrown in jail and legislation was being passed to allow the seizure of church assets. It is

also clear that the practise of plural marriage had for decades been a major hurdle to achieving statehood for Utah. And so, in 1890, church president Wilford Woodruff reluctantly decreed an end to polygamy.

In October of that year, the New York Times reported: “With their ‘peculiar institution’ (Mormons) could no more exist permanently as part of the United States than could the Southern States with their peculiar institution. . . The Mormon leaders have shown mere worldly good sense and prudence in deciding to surrender the bone of contention.”

As I spoke to the performers before the pageant, I wondered if I was witnessing the evolution of Mormonism that had begun in 1890. The end of polygamy triggered the split of the fundamentalist Mormons, who continue to practice polygamy today, and the non-fundamentalist Mormons, who don’t. The faith diverged like a river into two streams that flowed farther apart for 120 years. One directed by “its refusal to adapt to any secular knowledge that conflicts with its version of revealed religious truth”—to use Susan Jacoby’s characterization of fundamentalism in *The Age of American Unreason*. The other greater stream taking a different path having “accommodated itself to new secular knowledge.”

In the view of many, this secularization of religions is a natural evolution that does not repudiate belief. Those of faith argue that we should concentrate, not on the vessel, but the truths inside the vessel.

And so perhaps, in two thousand years, we will view the angel, Smith and the Golden Plates, the way we view other religious prophets and myths, having long forgotten the untruths and contradictions of its fundamentalist birth. In this light, it’s understandable that what happened on the hill “isn’t so important.”

But if the vessel is cracked, how can there be anything inside? If there was no pre-Columbian New World civilization, if the gold plates didn’t exist, if Joseph Smith didn’t speak to God and Christ—what does any of it mean?

The two young girls excuse themselves with cheerful excitement to prepare for the pageant, and I wish them a good performance. They are of the generation unburdened by the literal belief that Mormonism can no longer bear—the difference between “the most important and wonderful work under the heavens” and “a fraud.”

**SHORTLY AFTER 9:15, TWILIGHT ENDS** perceptibly and a figure appears in a spotlight on the stage. He gives thanks for the weather, says a

prayer—I listen for the man with the bullhorn, but he can’t be heard—and the Hill Cumorah Pageant begins.

Against a backdrop of music, pre-recorded dialogue and narration, props, pyrotechnics, and light and water effects, the performers tell the story of the Book of Mormon in ten acts. It begins 600 years before the birth of Christ, when God commands that the prophet Lehi leave Jerusalem for a “new promised land”. Rain falls and lightning flashes as the stage is transformed into a sailing ship carrying Lehi’s family—including sons Nephi and Laman—to the New World. Once in the promised land, the prophet Abinabi warns the Nephites, the descendants of Nephi, that they have become wicked. But he is scorned and, with one of the most impressive pyrotechnic effects in the pageant, disappears behind a curtain of flame as he is burned to death.

When Christ is crucified, He “appears to His other sheep, the people in the Americas,” teaches them the gospel, and ascends to His Father. Then, we see the prophet Mormon and his son Moroni record the history of the people on metal plates, which Moroni buries in the Hill Cumorah. In the final act, we watch as Moroni returns as an angel to deliver the plates to Joseph Smith.

Confession is good for the soul and I have to admit that, as the pageant approached its climax, the practicalities of the material world distracted me. I began picturing the traffic jam caused by the exodus of thousands of Mormons through two narrow gates onto a two-lane roadway. I confess: like a baseball fan who leaves in the eighth inning with the home-team down, I left early and did not actually see the final two acts of the pageant. In my defence, I knew how it would end.

#### **THE NEXT DAY, I DRIVE UP ROUTE 21**

one last time, on my way home. There is a sudden, summer thunderstorm that slows the early traffic making its way to this night’s performance.

As I reach the Hill Cumorah, the Lord makes a last attempt to reach me. When I slow down for a final look at the green slopes of the hill, the early evening sun breaks through the dark skies and rain drifting slowly to the east. A brilliant double rainbow, intense against the background of dark clouds, arches perfectly over the hill and the gold statue of the Angel Moroni.

Then the rainbow fades and I climb back into my car. Despite the best efforts of the pageant performers, missionaries and God, I escape the Burned-Over District with my secular humanism intact.