Jack-Mormons

Edward A. Geary

AUNT ELLA USED TO SAY that a man who doesn't live his principles is a poor specimen. This observation, like her other nuggets of conventional wisdom, was ostensibly directed at me, but she always cast a squinty glance over her sewing glasses at Uncle Jack as she said it. Uncle Jack didn't let it bother him. Usually he ignored her comments, perhaps riffling the newspaper a little or raising it higher in front of his face. Once in a while, though, he would offer a mild retort.

"Old Fairbank was saying the same thing only yesterday."

"Not that principle!" Aunt Ella snapped. "You know what I mean."

Old Fairbank was a polygamist, the leader of a community called the Order of Enoch that operated a coal mine a couple of miles farther up the canyon. To this day I do not know his given name. We called him Old Fairbank to distinguish him from Young Fairbank, a blond giant who drove one of the community's coal trucks. There were numerous other Fairbanks, of course, including an undersized boy my age named Billy, who could not possibly have shared all his parentage with Young Fairbank. The Enochites lived in a ramshackle group of tarpaper barracks huddled at the mouth of a side canyon bearing the ironically appropriate name of Cohab Hollow — so called because it had served as a hiding place for polygamists from the town of Helaman during "the Raid" by U.S. marshals in the 1880s.

None of us on the outside knew for certain how many people lived in the Enochite community. When Aunt Fran worked as a census taker in 1950, her assigned territory included Cohab Hollow. She arrived without advance warning and found a confused welter of women and children inside the first dwelling. But at the second door she was met by Young Fairbank, who conducted her from house to house, not allowing her to enter but stating at each one the names of the inhabitants.

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"Not that I believed him one bit," she would say as she recounted the experience. "But lawsie! What could I do? That man is as wide as Charlie Keller's barn."

Aunt Fran was broad in the beam herself. Aunt Ella ran more to bone and had been wound up tighter. I sometimes thought of her as resembling the gas pumps in front of the inn — the old-fashioned tall, skinny kind with round bulbs on top that still had "PEP 88" painted on them, even though, as Paul Manchester pointed out to Uncle Jack every time he delivered gas, the name had been changed years before.

Uncle Jack operated the Sagehen Inn, a combination filling station, diner, grocery, and fishing tackle shop that was most commonly referred to in Helaman as "that beer joint up the canyon." We lived next door to the business in a bungalow Uncle Jack had brought in from Mohrland when they closed the mine there. It was a rather shabby clapboard structure, but Aunt Ella had made it quite comfortable on the inside. There were two bedrooms, a kitchen that always smelled of fresh bread, and a front room where we sat around the stove in the evenings while Uncle Jack read the paper and Aunt Ella sewed and lectured. On the acre or so of ground that stretched back to the creek, Uncle Jack — true to his Mormon roots to this extent, at least — had built a chicken coop and pig pen and had planted some fruit trees.

In its upper reaches, Helaman Canyon is lush with fir and aspen groves and water meadows, but we lived near the mouth of the canyon, in the rain shadow of the high plateau. The mountains rose on either side in a series of gray cliffs and steep talus slopes sparsely covered by stunted piñon and juniper trees, with here and there an ancient ponderosa pine maintaining a precarious toehold on a ledge. Below us, the canyon floor widened to form a sheltered place for fruit farms. Above us for several miles, each side canyon had one or two coal mines, small operations with tipples clinging to the mountainside and slack piles that dribbled coal dust into the creek. The creek itself was at its fullest where it ran past the Sagehen, having gathered all its tributary streams but not yet having been diverted into irrigation canals. The roar of the water in the boulder-strewn channel used to keep me awake for the first few nights after I arrived in the spring. Then it faded into a background music I scarcely heard until I left in the fall, when the sudden silence again made it hard to sleep.

I lived with Uncle Jack and Aunt Ella from the opening of fishing season in May until the close of deer season in late October. That was the period when the Sagehen did most of its business and therefore when I theoretically could be of most use. In the winter, the only customers were coal truckers and on Saturday nights underaged boys from Helaman trying to buy beer. I spent the winter months in town with Aunt Fran, partly because it was closer to school and partly because it was assumed I might be a help to her in clearing the sidewalk of snow and filling the woodbox and coal scuttle. I now see that a more fundamental reason for this yearly cycle was the sisters' sense of sharing a burden, fulfilling a duty together. My father was their younger brother, and they felt they had spoiled him as a child and were therefore somehow respon-

sible for the way he turned out. I'm not sure exactly how he did turn out, for I saw very little of him. He used to blow into town without warning, driving a big car and announcing that things were finally falling into place and it wouldn't be long before he would be able to give me a home and all sorts of advantages. Then he would disappear again, and we would hear nothing from him for perhaps a year or more.

Aunt Ella and Aunt Fran remained surprisingly nonjudgmental about my father. At any rate they never said anything unfavorable to me. But I suspect that was partly because of their general opinion that men were inclined to go to the bad. Uncle Ed, Aunt Fran's husband, had died before I was born, but all indications were that he had been a jack-Mormon too, like Uncle Jack. The aunts went to Relief Society together every Thursday with other women whose husbands also fell short of the standard, and I have the impression that the quilts they were forever stitching were for them symbols of the fabric of society itself, rather worn but preserved, patched together in a new design and sustained by the fierce intensity of females who held fast to the principles their men were allowing to slip.

And yet they did their utmost to make sure I would turn out all right. It can't have been easy for them, taking in an awkward child long after their own families were grown, but I never heard a word of complaint. I did hear plenty of words of admonition, which I didn't much appreciate, and I remember innumerable and interminable sacrament meetings spent painfully wedged between Aunt Fran's hips and Aunt Ella's bones.

Looking back, I can see that it was a good life in many respects, though I was a rather sullen and resentful adolescent. I felt that Aunt Ella, especially, kept me on too short a leash, was always finding chores for me to do. I can still hear that shrill voice, calling me away from whatever was interesting. "P*eter! Pe*ter! Come in now!" And yet in retrospect it seems as though I had immense leisure. I used to climb the cliffs — despite Aunt Ella's apprehensions that I would fall — or hike up the side canyons to the rolling country on top of the plateau. Sometimes in the evenings I would run up the road as far as Cohab Hollow or even farther, feeling my muscles surge and drinking the chill air in great gulps. Or I would go fishing in the creek behind the Sagehen, picking rock rollers from submerged stones to bait my hook and carrying the native cutthroats straight from the water to Uncle Jack's grill. It was a good life, and they were good people, the two old women I used to refer to privately as Mutt and Jeff, and the easygoing man who gave no sign of resenting my intrusion on his domestic peace, what there was of it.

It would be wrong to suggest that the Church in Helaman was entirely carried by the women, though they were certainly more numerous than the men. I think of Sister Higgins, massively aproned, arms bulging as she slapped a dollop of mashed potatoes on each plate at a ward dinner; or nervous little Sister Sanderson, sparrowlike with her gray bun and flighty movements; or the Singing Mothers, a solid phalanx of floral fabric and quavering soprano. Many of the men who attended church seemed a little weary, as if they were there less from conviction than from lack of imagination. Some of them had re-

formed in later life, including Brother Sanderson, the second counselor in the bishopric, who never tired of retelling the story of his road to Damascus. He had been completely inactive in the Church for many years, though his wife was president of the Relief Society. They had brought up a family on the same model, the daughters pious and dutiful, the sons wild, dropping out of school as soon as they were old enough to join the Navy. Brother Sanderson had been out in the hayfield one Sunday afternoon, leaning on his pitchfork and having a smoke, when the bishop came to call him to be Sunday School superintendent. He had taken one last pull on his cigarette while he reflected that he had always figured on getting active someday. Then he snuffed the offending weed underfoot, and with no more difficulty than that, apparently, stepped across the dividing line between jack-Mormon and good Mormon.

According to Uncle Jack, Bishop Huntington was also greatly changed from what he had been as a young man, though you would never have guessed it. They had been wild kids together, and the bishop, without quite acknowledging that bond, used to work on Uncle Jack on every possible occasion, trying to get him to set his life in order. Since Uncle Jack didn't go to church and the bishop didn't patronize the Sagehen, those occasions didn't come up too often. Once in a while, though, they might meet at the post office, and the bishop was always very friendly.

"Well, Jack! How are you? We don't get to see much of you."

"Well," Uncle Jack would drawl, "you know where I'm at."

After the initial greeting, the bishop would get a serious look on his face and lower his voice to a confidential tone. "I was thinking just the other day that we could use you to work with the scouts. We need good men, Jack."

"That lets me out. You know me, Charlie — Jack the jack-Mormon."

The bishop also gave me special attention, perhaps to encourage me in my good attendance record (as if that were my doing!) and keep me from being led astray by the bad influences in my life. He had a rather gruff heartiness that didn't quite seem sincere to me at the time, though it probably was. He was fond of showing off the strength of his grip, and you had to brace yourself to keep from flinching when you shook hands with him.

I don't believe Uncle Jack ever thought of himself as an outcast. Indeed, the jack-Mormon was virtually an established role in a town like Helaman, altogether different from the situation of the non-Mormon families who moved into town from time to time and usually moved out again within a year or two. To be a jack-Mormon was in part a personal choice and in part, it seems to me, a function of one's occupation. It was obvious that no one in Uncle Jack's business could be a pillar of the Church, but it went further than that. I remember three different county sheriffs during my growing-up years, all of them nominal Mormons but none of them active in the Church. I doubt whether a zealous church-goer could have been elected, even though the county must have been nine-tenths Mormon. I also have the impression people trusted an irreligious physician more than a church-going one. Perhaps this preference rested on the unstated view that science was alien to religion, and if you put yourself in the hands of a scientific healer you wanted one who was committed

all the way. You could always supplement his treatments, if you wanted to, by calling on the elders for a blessing.

This may be an unwarranted generalization. The only physician in Helaman was old Doc Clifford, and he was a thoroughgoing jack-Mormon yet at the same time the object of immense respect and affection. Even the most pious eagerly opened their homes to his odorous cigars, and his funeral — which as far as I know was the only time he ever passed through the church-house doors — drew the biggest crowd in Helaman memory.

This tolerance of different ways did not, however, extend as far as Cohab Hollow, whose inhabitants were regarded as having cut themselves off from respectable society. It is both inevitable and ironic that a Mormon community should oppose polygamous marriage practices — inevitable because to enter polygamy is to challenge the Church's authority, and ironic because Mormons are in the position of defending polygamy in the past while opposing it in the present. Almost every family in Helaman had forebears they honored for clinging faithfully to "the principle" during the nineteenth-century persecutions. Bishop Huntington himself was descended from polygamous grandfathers on both sides and was known to boast of having more than two hundred first cousins. Then in almost the same breath he would insist that something had to be done about "them cultists up in Cohab Holler." Except for periodic efforts to identify and excommunicate Mormons who had joined the Order of Enoch, however, this opposition was most often manifest in a determined silence, as if the problem would go away if it were ignored assiduously enough. Since the Enochites preferred to keep to themselves, there were few instances of open conflict.

The most visible members of the Order were the children who attended school in Helaman. Riding the canyon bus for the first two months of school each fall, I got to know the Cohab Hollow kids pretty well. I even developed a loose friendship with Billy Fairbank, who saved me a seat each morning. We chatted easily enough on the journey to and from town, but I don't recall playing with him at recess. I do remember his inviting me up to his place to play one Saturday when we were in about the third grade. Without telling Aunt Ella where I was going — for she would surely have prohibited it if she had known — I walked up to Cohab Hollow and found Billy waiting for me on the outskirts of the community. We played beside the creek for several hours, cutting stick horses from the willows that grew along the banks. I remember it as a pleasant enough day, but it was never repeated.

Most of the Enochite kids dropped out of school by the eighth grade, though I'm not sure whether from ostracism or from the view that that was enough education. It was never entirely clear what happened to them at this point. Neither Billy Fairbank nor any of the others ever talked about their home life or the workings of the Order. We assumed, however, that the boys went to work around the mine. Sometimes they would show up several years later in the more visible role of truck drivers. The girls did not reappear in public, and there were dark rumors of their being married off at fourteen and

immured within the walls of Cohab Hollow or some other community in the broad fundamentalist underground.

Uncle Jack did not share the good Mormons' reluctance to discuss the merits of polygamy. He loved to argue on any topic, and since most of the people who came into the Sagehen were inclined to complain about something or other in the dominant religion Uncle Jack frequently found himself defending Church policies. He was even ready to stand up for the Word of Wisdom. He stoutly maintained — puffing vigorously at his pipe all the while — that the world would be a better place if tobacco and alcohol had never been discovered. These views did not, however, present any barrier to pursuing his occupation, for in this as in other things he was always ready to acknowledge the weakness of the flesh.

Whenever he had the chance, Uncle Jack tried to draw Old Fairbank into discussions of polygamy. We didn't see many Enochites at the Sagehen, but Old Fairbank sometimes stopped in on his way back from Salt Lake (where we assumed he had gone to visit his other families) in order to play the punchboards. It was best for him if he failed to win anything. Then he would simply punch out a couple of dollars' worth of holes and go on his way. But if he happened to win a box of chocolates, he was in trouble. Though he never admitted it, it was obvious he didn't dare go home with a present for one wife if he didn't have something for the other. He might end up spending ten or twelve dollars before he won a second box of candy and went grumbling on his way.

On these occasions, Uncle Jack loved to rag him about polygamy. The discussions put Old Fairbank in a difficult position because he felt compelled to defend the continuing validity of the principle of plural marriage without admitting that either he or his people actually engaged in the practice. Old Fairbank not only denied having more than one wife but would scarcely admit even to one, insisting that he had no real interest in women at all and that if it were not for the obligation to protect and provide for them he would have been much happier living exclusively in the company of men. At the same time, however, he could not keep silent in the face of any challenge to his fundamentalism.

"Seems to me," Uncle Jack would say, as casually as though he were making an observation about the weather, "that one wife ought to be enough for any man."

"Wasn't enough for Brigham Young," Old Fairbank would retort. "Wasn't enough for Joseph Smith. Wasn't enough for your own great-grandpa."

"Those were different times."

Old Fairbank shook his head. "Eternal principles don't change. If it was true in Brigham's time, it's true today."

Uncle Jack would then slip into his role as defender of the Church. "But the authorities have told us to give it up."

"Yessir — and the minute they did that they ceased to be the Lord's anointed. But the Lord knew there would be a falling away in the last days, and he prepared a remnant of the faithful." You could hear a change come

into Old Fairbank's voice as he slipped into the rhetoric the Order used among themselves. And then Uncle Jack would close in for the kill.

"You must be part of that remnant, I suppose," he would say mildly.

"I never said that," Old Fairbank growled. "I don't know nothing about it — no man in creation knows less about womenfolk than I do." These words would take on a special edge if he had just spent more money than he intended on the punchboard.

During the summers, Aunt Ella always brought me to town with her on Thursdays when she went to Relief Society. I would have preferred to stay home, since it was more peaceful when she was gone, but she insisted on the theory that it must be lonely for me to live so far away from other boys my age. When I met her at Aunt Fran's place in the late afternoon, she invariably inquired whether I had had a good time playing with my friends. I always said yes, though in fact I usually spent the day by myself, thumbing through magazines in the drugstore, wandering up and down Main Street, or maybe, if it wasn't too hot, running on the dirt lanes that divided the fields outside of town.

Though there were boys I got along with in school or priesthood meeting, I didn't have any close friends. For the most part, I preferred being alone, but I could sometimes work up a pretty good dose of adolescent self-pity by thinking of myself as a misfit. It wasn't as though I didn't belong in Helaman. There had been Ansons among the first settlers. It wasn't simply that I lacked a regular family. There were other kids who lived with relatives. Nor was it just because Uncle Jack was somewhat disreputable, though that probably had a part in it. In grade school I can remember being picked on by the other boys because I lived in a beer joint. However, I wasn't a very inviting target for bullies, partly because I was always big for my age and partly because Uncle Jack, who claimed he had once wrestled with the Swedish Angel, taught me a very effective headlock.

By the teenage years, Helaman boys had generally aligned themselves with one of two crowds, the straight-arrows and the cowboys. Not that they called themselves by those names; they were pejorative epithets applied by one group to the other. The cowboys wore western shirts and boots with their Levi's, had long hair (long, at least, by the standards of the 1950s), and walked with a certain swagger. They often got drunk at school dances and engaged in fist fights outside the gym. They were the boys who hung around the Sagehen on Saturday nights, and I doubt whether Uncle Jack any more than the aunts would have permitted me to hang around with them. The straight-arrows, on the other hand, cultivated an ethic of "coolness," which was inseparable from Jantzen sweaters and spit-shined loafers. In warm weather, they rolled up the sleeves of their already short-sleeved shirts, and some of them went so far as to press a crease into their Levi's. The straight-arrows were more likely than the cowboys to be seen at church, but that doesn't mean they were especially pious. I used to watch enviously, from my place between the aunts, as they slipped out of sacrament meeting early to catch the last picture show. When they wanted to party, they did so less openly than the cowboys, driving over to Orangeville and filching bottles out of unlocked cars at the Canyon Club.

I don't recall that I ever felt any desire to be a cowboy. I did at times aspire to straight-arrow status, but it seemed that I lacked the essential qualifications. Aunt Ella bought all of my clothes out of mail-order catalogs, selecting on the basis of her notions of practicality rather than fashion. Even my hair refused to conform. If I had it cut short, no amount of Butch Wax was sufficient to make it stand up in the sculptured perfection the other boys seemed to achieve so effortlessly. And if I let it grow out a little, no amount of Wildroot Creme Oil would keep it properly slicked down.

My social stock rose somewhat when, in the tenth grade, I made the high school track team. The team wasn't very hard to make in our small school, but even so athletes were in a special category. Actually, my athletic skills were extremely limited. Basketball was the big sport in Helaman, as it was throughout rural Utah, but although the coach tried me out a couple of times because of my size, I was hopelessly slow and awkward. For the most part, I lacked the skills for track and field too, the speed for the sprints, the spring for the jumps, the muscular coordination for the pole vault. But the coach discovered I could run the distance races. My form, I'm sure, left a great deal to be desired. My one asset was that I didn't get tired. I could run a mile or more at almost full speed without really feeling it, and even though my full speed wasn't very fast it was faster than anybody else in the school could go for that distance. I won the mile at the county and regional track meets that spring. At the state meet, I came up against boys who had both speed and endurance and who had received better coaching. I finished fourth, but that was enough. It was so rare for our little high school to make any kind of a showing against the big schools from upstate that my performance made me a hero for a week or so and secured for me, during my remaining two years of school, a place among the athletes.

That was the spring of 1953. During the summer of that year, on July 24th, Arizona law officers staged a massive raid on the polygamous community of Short Creek, just south of the Utah border. The event received widespread media coverage, with *Time* calling it "The Great Love-Nest Raid." Utah officials joined in the campaign with well-publicized arrests of several polygamists in the Salt Lake area. Old Fairbank, who had already served prison time in 1938 and 1944, dropped out of sight. Bishop Huntington held Church courts for several Enochite women, none of whom appeared, and pressed Sheriff Jones to take legal action against the community. I can remember the sheriff bemoaning the pressure over a beer at the Sagehen.

"What the hell harm are they doing? They keep to theirselves."

"Maybe they're a danger to innocent women," Uncle Jack said.

"Hah! Not if they saw those rabbit hutches they live in!"

As far as I can tell, there was no direct connection between the Order of Enoch and the group that controlled Short Creek. The fundamentalist subculture has always been fragmented and given to power struggles, but at the same time there is a kind of network, and with the temporary scattering of the Short Creek community Cohab Hollow received an influx of new residents. The already crowded housing was stretched beyond its capacity, and some people were forced to live through the winter in tents.

I followed these events in the newspaper and the Sagehen gossip but didn't think they had any direct bearing on my own life. But when school opened that fall, I found on the canyon bus — in addition to an increased number of grimy and sad-eyed children and my old friend Billy Fairbank (who had not dropped out of school at the usual age, and who was on the way to becoming the first Cohab Hollow kid in memory to graduate from high school) — two sixteen-year-old girls. Mary and Annabel Jacobson were sisters but obviously not full sisters. Annabel was big and slow, with heavy features and a downcast look. Mary was slim, fresh-faced, and naturally outgoing. Somehow she managed to wear clean clothing and took advantage of the gym showers at school to wash her hair. She was unlike any other girl who had ever lived in Cohab Hollow.

Her presence on the canyon bus seemed almost miraculous, and for the first couple of weeks I was madly in love. I waited with sweaty palms in front of the Sagehen each morning for the bus to arrive, filled with dread lest Mary should vanish as suddenly as she had appeared. With time, the daily association tempered my romantic passion into the first genuine friendship I had ever experienced with a girl. I admired her pluck and the way she asserted a claim to a normal life in spite of the disadvantages of her situation. We didn't date. No Enochite girl would have been permitted to go with an outsider. But we usually had lunch together then sat talking on the lawn until time for afternoon classes. Although she departed from the Cohab Hollow norm in many ways, Mary shared with the others the code of absolute silence about her home life. I had come to take that for granted and so thought little about it until later, when I learned more of the difficulties she actually existed under.

Part of the bond between us was our marginality, but this was changing even as I grew conscious of it. Within the first few weeks of school, Mary had gained an unprecedented measure of acceptance for someone from Cohab Hollow. The teachers liked her because she was bright and curious, and as a lively and attractive new girl at school she even captured the attention of the straight-arrow boys, though they never forgot where she came from. I remember overhearing Duke Rollins (adapting a line from a Tennyson poem everybody had to study in Mrs. Dale's senior English class) refer to Mary as "the flower in the cranny wall." The town girls were slower to accept her, partly, I suspect, because Annabel was always hovering in the background, an everpresent reminder of all the Cohab Hollow stereotypes.

I too was less marginal than I had been before. I was not exactly popular — my personality would hardly have allowed that — but I was now somebody, an athlete. Although I would not have admitted to valuing this new status, it did in fact mean a lot to me, probably more than I realized at the time. That is how I account to myself for my actions — or inaction — in the incident I am going to relate.

After deer season, I moved back into town with Aunt Fran, and without the daily bus trips I saw less of Mary, though we still spoke when we met in the halls and often had lunch together. Autumns in our valley were usually mild and pleasant, but deer season typically marked a seasonal change to colder

weather. So it happened that year, with early snow and cold, the kind of weather that sends all creatures in search of shelter.

It was a Monday morning, I remember, probably toward the end of November, and I was a little late, hurrying down the hall when I ran into a loud cluster of students outside a classroom. I stopped out of curiosity to see what they were doing, and a boy grinned up at me and made a fanning gesture across his face. Looking over the top of the crowd, I saw that the room was empty except for two forms. Annabel Jacobson sat seemingly oblivious to the commotion, inscrutable Indian eyes fixed upon the blackboard as if she were trying to decipher some invisible message written there. In the next seat sat Mary, face aflame, hands tightly folded on the desk in front of her.

While I stared, the boy beside me filled me in with sketchy details that I later pieced together into a more coherent account. Evidently, a skunk had found its way into the Jacobsons' tent during the weekend. After living with the odor for some time, they had grown sufficiently accustomed to it that they failed to realize how thoroughly it had permeated their clothing, and so they had come to school as usual, only to be met, as they walked into class, by a wild scramble to escape from the room. Unfortunately, the teacher, a young woman just out of college, caught by surprise had joined in the flight instead of attempting to control it.

The sight of the normally resilient Mary so entirely overcome by shame put me completely at a loss. All at once, she seemed like a stranger, a typical Cohab Hollow girl after all, outside the bounds of human sympathy. While I was struggling with these impressions, Miss Jenkins, the teacher, pushed past me, accompanied by Mrs. Nixon, the girls' phys-ed teacher and the one everybody turned to in an emergency. Mary looked up as the women entered the room, and our glances met for a painful instant. Then she dropped her eyes again to her folded hands.

Mrs. Nixon hustled the girls over to the gym where they could shower while she went in search of clothing for them to put on. The halls and classrooms were alive throughout the day with crude jokes about the skunky Cohab Hollow kids, and I found myself living in terror of the moment when someone would remember my connection with them. Still struggling with my own first reaction, I looked for Mary in the lunch room, but she was nowhere to be seen, though Annabel was there as usual, impassively shoveling down her food. I learned later that Mary had stayed in the shower room all day, refusing to go to class or to see anyone except Mrs. Nixon.

After school, I went to the place where the canyon bus loaded, and Mary was there, looking very small in a borrowed dress too big for her. She had pulled her hair severely back in a braid that made her look like the Eastern European refugee women in the newsreels. Just before she stepped through the doors, she shot me one glance — of pain, accusation, desperation — I didn't know how to read it then, and I still don't know what, if anything, she might have been trying to communicate. Nor do I know whether she went back to Short Creek, or hid herself in Cohab Hollow, or perhaps eventually escaped the fundamentalist subculture. I never saw her again.