Mormon folklore comprises that part of the Church's cultural heritage which Latter-day Saints pass on from person to person and from generation to generation, not through written documents or formal instruction but through the spoken word or customary example. That is, someone will listen to tales told at home or at a Church meeting about the sufferings of the Mormon pioneers and then will repeat these accounts to others; or a young girl will watch and then assist her grandmother make "temple quilts" (quilts on which the form of the Mormon temple is stitched) for the marriages of each grandchild, and in the process will eventually learn to make her own quilts; or each evening children will be gathered by their parents into family prayer and then one day will continue the practice in their own families.

The materials of Mormon folklore fall roughly into three broad categories. First are things people make with words (from songs and stories of grandparents struggling to establish a New Zion in the harsh Great Basin Kingdom, to contemporary accounts of God's providential hand guiding "the affairs of the saints" and directing the efforts of missionaries in an ever-expanding church, to humorous tales that caricature Mormon foibles and ease the pressures of "being in the world but not of it"). Second are things people make with their hands (from traditional implements, such as the Mormon hay derrick, to homemade "quiet books" designed to keep small children constructively occupied during church meetings, to home preserves and special holiday foods, to a decorative family Book of Remembrance [see Material Culture]). And third are things people make with their actions (from "creative dating" practices of youth, to special family celebrations of birth and baptismal dates, to family genealogical meetings, to church and community celebrations of traditional holidays from Thanksgiving to Pioneer Day).

This listing of examples focuses very consciously on the word "make," because the categories of Mormon folklore are dynamic rather than static. Each recounting of a miraculous healing, each quilting of a familiar log-cabin pattern, each performance of a family birthday game is in every instance a new act of creation that speaks from both the past and the present. They speak from the past because the forms are traditional and recurring, having been developed by the LDS community over decades. They speak from the present because the forms are constantly reshaped to fit the needs of contemporary Latter-day Saints and to reflect contemporary values and concerns.

Because of this constant regeneration and reshaping of older forms, Mormon folklore lies not at the periphery but at the center of LDS culture. It is not, as is sometimes thought, simply a survival from the past kept alive primarily by older, less educated, and agrarian Church members; rather, it is a vital, functioning force in the lives of all Latter-day Saints. Further, as the Church continues to grow and change, new forms of folklore that speak more directly to present needs will sometimes replace the old. For just as Latter-day Saints in the pioneer era generated and transmitted folklore in response to the circumstances of their lives, so, too, contemporary Latter-day Saints will create and pass along folklore as they react to the strains and stresses, the joys and the sorrows of their lives. For example, converts to the Church living in the mission fields, away from church centers in the mountain West, may be little moved by tales of pioneer suffering and may know little of earlier stories of the providential saving of the pioneers' crops from swarms of locusts or of the legends of the three Nephites; but they will know and tell stories of their own miraculous conversions and of the ridicule and suffering they endure, with the help of God, as they struggle to survive as the only Latter-day Saints in sometimes unfriendly and often hostile communities.

Properly to understand the Latter-day Saints, one must know their folklore—must see how it bolsters their faith, builds a sense of community, ties them to the past, and provides them an escape through humor from pressures that might otherwise be their undoing. Especially, one must understand Mormon folklore in order to understand the Mormon ethos. This is so because people tell stories about those events that interest them most or participate in customary practices that are most important to them. Because these stories and practices depend on the spoken word or on voluntary participation for their survival, those that fail to appeal broadly to a Mormon value center, a common body of LDS attitudes and beliefs, will simply cease to exist. Those that persist, therefore, serve as an excellent barometer for prevailing Mormon cultural and religious values.

In a number of Utah and western towns a Mormon temple, usually built on a hill or in the center of the valley, dominates the landscape, symbolizing for all who pass by the religious values that originally brought LDS settlers to the region. In towns and valleys surrounding the temples, in Sunday School classes, in family gatherings, among friends, the descendants and converts of these settlers relate stories that tell of the price paid for blessings now enjoyed, that give evidence of the providential hand of God in the lives of the faithful, that lift sagging spirits, bolster courage, promote obedience and give hope for the eventual and ultimate victory of Zion. The stories give a glimpse of this rich and ever-growing body of narratives, the lore of faith.

The question remains whether narratives embodying these values are really "true"—and, concomitantly, if they are not true, what is their ultimate value? Although the stories frequently are based on actual events, their details clearly change as they are passed along by word of mouth. These changes, however, do not occur randomly; they are dictated by cultural determinants. As stories are transmitted from person to person, they are often changed, usually unconsciously, to express the new tellers' beliefs and to meet their needs. Because folk narratives mirror and reinforce these beliefs, and because the beliefs are themselves historical facts, moving people to action more handily than the realities on which they are based, they can yield valuable historical data. But it is more profitable to turn to other reasons, to view them not as history but as literature, and to discover in them not the ledger-book truths of actual events but expression of the people's heart and mind. To a greater or lesser degree, Mormon folk stories may or may not be factually accurate. But as keys to understanding the Latter-day Saints and their church, they are always true.

See Daily Living home page; The Arts home page)

Bibliography


Mormon folklore is a body of expressive culture unique to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and other sects of Mormonism. Mormon folklore includes tales, oral history, popular beliefs, customs, music, jokes, and material culture traditions. In folklore studies, Mormons can be seen as a regional group, since the core group of Mormon settlers in Utah had a common religion and had to modify their surroundings for survival.\textsuperscript{115} This historical regional area includes Mormon Folklore,\textsuperscript{1} Brigham Young University Studies 17 (1976):44-45. 1. Representing the spectrum, there is, on the one hand, the apologetic point of view of John J. Stewart’s Mormonism and the Negro (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1978), and, on the other hand, the anti-Mormon diatribe of Jerald and Sandra Tanner, Mormons and Negroes (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm Co., 1970).
Mormon folklore is a body of expressive culture unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and its members. Mormon folklore includes tales, oral history, popular beliefs, customs, music, jokes, and material culture traditions. Mormon folklore is a body of expressive culture unique to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) and other sects of Mormonism. Mormon folklore includes tales, oral history, popular beliefs, customs, music, jokes, and material culture traditions. This article is about Mormon folklore, such as verbal and material culture. For other aspects of Mormon culture, see Culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Resin grapes, a popular Relief Society craft in the 1960s.