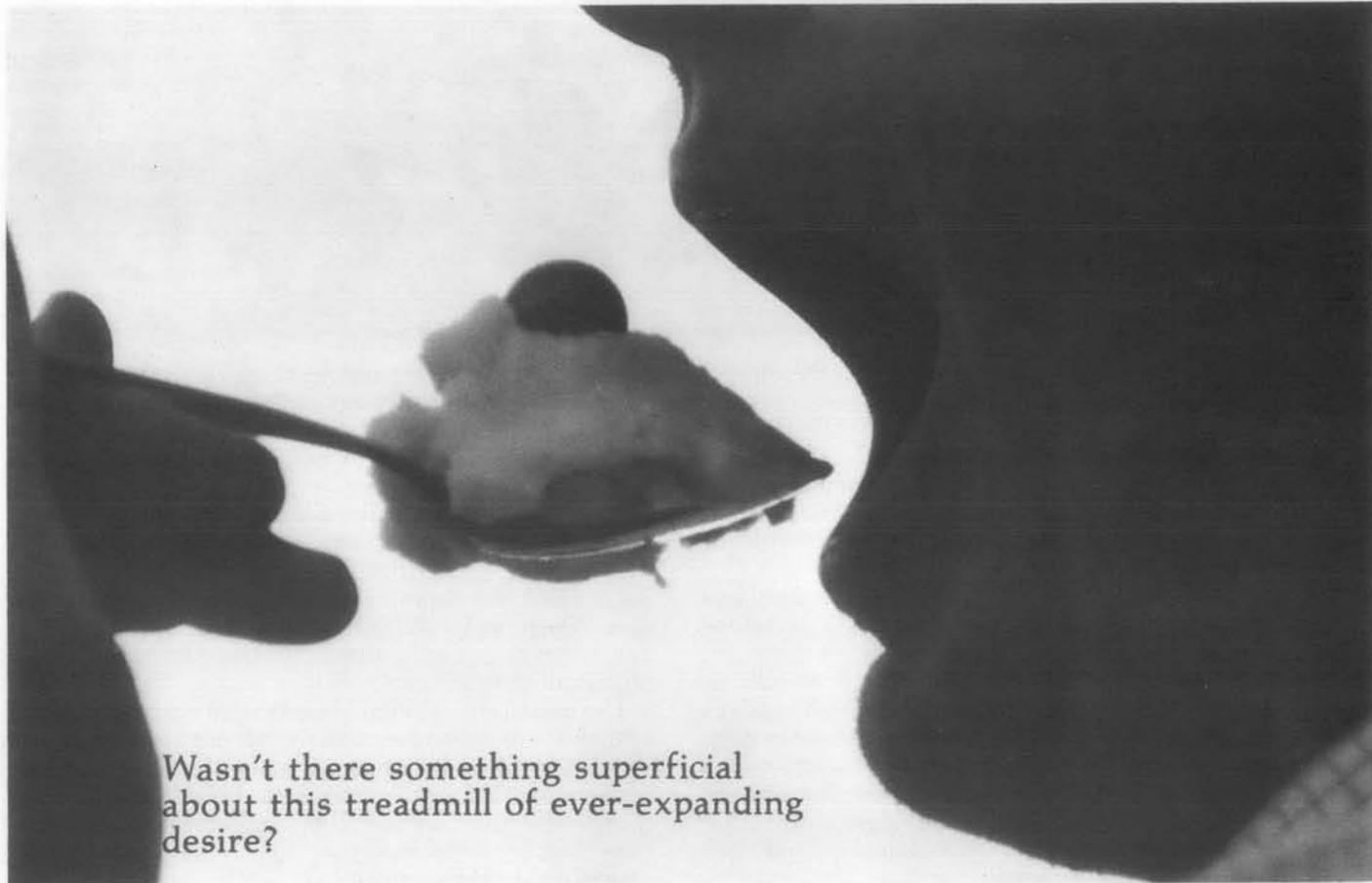


# UNDERCONSUMPTION: A Lifestyle

by Douglas and Elaine Alder



Wasn't there something superficial about this treadmill of ever-expanding desire?

**I**t seems miserly but we go around the house turning off lights! We've given up hounding our teenagers, who sprawl before TV sets oblivious to the five overhead lights that could be switched off in favor of one 25-watt dimmer. Like vain repetitions, our suggestions never seem to penetrate their cerebral cavity. So we turn off lights, reinforced by the memory of now-elderly parents doing the same thing to us years ago. It seemed so "old fashioned" then. Now, a mere three decades later, we are the light switcher-offers.

Money isn't the only issue, however. Now it seems like a civic responsibility. Continuing energy shortages have demonstrated that the over-consumptive lifestyle is gradually creating a national, even world, crisis. Despite statements from energy producers that there need be no shortage, it is apparent that we are consuming proportionately more unrenowable energy than ever before and that this spiraling behavior deserves some re-examination. Whether there is a shortage or not, we ought to consider what we are doing. Maybe we need a crisis to force reassessment of our devotion to the "more and bigger" syndrome.

Each time a severe winter arrives we check insulation, weatherstrip the doors, and put on storm windows. Obviously we agree with the fuel companies about conserving natural gas. But when the freezing weather

passes we are tempted to abandon the diligence we have cultivated. In the summer we gladly return to over-consumption which seems like necessity. We turn on the air conditioner, get out the gas mower, start planning trips, and sense an itch to buy at the summer sales. It is the time for a vacation from deferred gratification. We chuckle at the stories of old timers who remind us that they managed "just fine" carrying water from a cistern, scrubbing on washboards and sharing bath water. We are convinced that American technological achievements are basically beneficial. As we spend the last quarter in each month's salary check, we realize that we are accustomed to luxury. If we reflect on this lifestyle we have to admit that affluence is getting to us; upward mobility is beginning to tarnish. Even though we grew up in the Wasatch Front mentality where every sanction supports moving higher up on the foothills into more and more luxurious homes, we have begun to wonder.

Recently some friends took a bid on plans for their dream house. When the final figure arrived they were stunned. They paused; they reassessed. Yes, most everyone else was moving from their "starter house," but was it really necessary? Couldn't rooms added in the basement suffice? Their salary was substantial; they could have "swung the deal" but starting a new thirty-year mortgage at that point was sobering, even if it could be paid with inflating dollars.



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So they made a decision not to move up a notch. That was a year ago. Two more neighbors have copied their choice since then. They get a personal delight each time they drive up to their reconditioned home, now paid for. They feel like they exerted independence because they broke with the expected middle-class pattern.

Then there are automobiles—as essential in the Great Basin today as the horse and ox were a century ago. As long as gas was easily available Westerners didn't hesitate a moment to undertake a 1000-mile trip; it is still not uncommon to start off on such a jaunt with less than a day's notice. In western states distances are measured in days, not miles. But there's a difference between transportation and status just as there is a difference between housing and prestige. For half or one-third the price on a new car sticker one can buy adequate transportation. It just doesn't catch the glances that a new car would.

And clothes—how we abdicate style choices to some distant designers who bank on obsolescence. The far end of our closet stores sturdy outfits four years out of phase, unfrayed, unworn.

Why did it take an energy crisis for us to realize that we've oversold ourselves on long sleek automobiles, fancy homes and innumerable clothes? Why have economists who long respected growth as the leading indicator only now begun to worry that American consumption is out of balance with its production? Wasn't the problem there before we began to consider the Saudi's oil, the shrinking dollar, the resource crunch? Don't we try to package ourselves in status symbol containers because we are insecure about our own internal worth?

We recently went through the 1960's when a younger generation rebelled at the prevailing materialism of their parents. There were strident attacks and claims about hypocrisy and middle class morals. In their crusade young people often threw out propriety, styles, and possessions. As a residue we still read about flower children who have adopted the "back to nature" lifestyle. One recently told of his vow to keep his annual expenditures below \$4,000. His small family lives in a cabin without electricity or plumbing but surrounded by natural greenery. We think of him occasionally as we push our garage door opener.

Recently while flying toward the Salt Lake airport, we thumbed through the airline magazine appealingly placed

in the seat pocket. It featured enticing recreational options in the mountainwest. Those color photos were convincing. Like many others, we just live for our retreats to the nearby canyons and lakes which the magazine captured. As the jet engines droned on we began to weigh those articles. A quick glance back reaffirmed a hunch. In each there was an adult toy—a camper, a boat, a snowmobile, a summer home, a four-wheel drive vehicle, a motorcycle. Somehow we've eased into accepting the idea that big boys require big toys. Where does it all lead? Is beauty, satisfaction, health, and happiness really linked to consumption? Must relaxation be mobilized?

The underconsumption lifestyle need not be as extreme as that of our mountain-man friend, nor so ascetic that it eschews motorized machines. It is not a fetish or a fad, it is a reassessment of values. It means breaking out of the conspicuous consumption cycle. At center it is choosing to conserve for ethical rather than financial reasons. Essentially it is: think small.

All sorts of side benefits could emerge if one merely peeled off the customary habits of excessive consumption. One could abandon junk foods as well as limit meal portions, trimming off middle-age flab. In place of commercialized recreation one could choose more modest options such as strolling—an art the Europeans have long mastered but Americans usually ignore. Camping, hiking, swimming, birdwatching, reading, attending concerts and plays, competing in family games, building home crafts, conversing—these are meaningful substitutes for consumptive pleasure. Besides they are beneficial to the mind, body and human relationships. The underconsumption lifestyle means developing one's worth internally instead of disguising it with flashy packages.

The underconsumption idea even has church applications. A few weeks ago our Bishop requested that the ward members walk to Church. That isn't feasible for the whole Church or for all people. In some parts of the world members are widely scattered or must use public transportation. In neighborhood wards the request has merit. The two parking lots and extensive street parking around our chapel make it look like a shopping mall. We have found that walking takes more planning (we have to leave earlier) but it is a lot more fun. We inevitably meet other families on the way and enjoy the fellowship. From that initial challenge one could decide to avoid using the car within the ward confines—for home teaching, visiting, or

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delivering. Some people are reactivating the old bicycles that hang unused in the garage.

Recently our family lived in a Midwestern state. The energy crisis was severe that year. We discovered a whole different situation there. Each drive to the stake center was fifty miles. Each High Council visit or Leadership Meeting or Super Saturday activity or auxiliary board visit to the wards and branches caused a major traveling decision. But it wasn't traumatic. Back-to-back meetings and scaled down organizations were instituted. The chapel furnace was turned way down four days a week. There were some inconveniences but the Church program survived.

The Mormon pioneer heritage that we all revere set a precedent for sacrifice and inventiveness. But it also led to a fascination with improvement and with material things—a "get ahead" attitude. Mark Twain once suggested that Mormonism is an afterclap of Puritanism. Most of his readers likely think that he was referring to the strictness common to both Puritanism and Mormonism. There is a more subtle meaning he may see in their comparison today because both promote another idea commonly called the Puritan ethic, suggesting that wealth is a blessing given to those who deserve it. The motivation to become wealthy and the commitment to Mormonism are often found to be compatible. Certainly Mormons have a positive attitude about this life and this world. Unexamined, this idea can result in crass materialism. It need not but it can easily lead to a life of conspicuous consumption—of impressive homes, expensive clothes, excessive spending.

Now is a good time to do some reconsidering of our pioneer heritage. We might take a long look and revive some of its other dimensions—some of the conservation attitudes as well as the "get ahead" ones. There are pioneering practices that some Latter-day Saints find highly effective today—quilting, home canning, bread baking, rug weaving, furniture making or refinishing, sewing and gardening.

One now fashionable approach is to restore old pioneer buildings instead of building impressive new ones. Refurbishing old buildings has become a national movement. Some edifices are salvaged for historical purposes but most of them are becoming banks and offices and especially homes. The inner city location, the roominess and the aesthetic beauty of these structures is making them highly valued. All over the country people are discovering the desirability of restoring modest old homes.

A young Bishop in Salt Lake City's inner core told of his anguish. He said that the old homes in his ward have suddenly become prime objects for restoration but that the young couples who do this are seldom LDS. Young Mormons with limited finances still seem drawn to the new homes. To find small ones within their income they are forced to the distant suburbs where they have to commute ten to twenty miles to work daily. But the "ecotypes" have caught on to the restoration idea and are producing inexpensive beauties just a few blocks from their work.

One other practice that deserves greater revival is rebuilding clothes. Sharing unused clothes is a sensible idea even though it might be difficult to convince children who enjoy the status value of "new threads." Extended families have a great advantage because they can pass clothes on to cousins who are growing in to the sizes. But children are not the only ones who can benefit by such sharing. Recently one ward had a clothes fair where members brought unused outfits and traded them with others, both children and adults, who fit them.

Some will remember the excitement and sense of community created during World War II when we saved tin cans, planted victory gardens, bought savings bonds, cooked without sugar, and rationed gasoline. During such times of scarcity one gradually discovers that we have become unnecessarily accustomed to material things that just aren't high priority.

At least for now the underconsumption lifestyle is still a voluntary thing. The precarious state of the American economy suggests that austerity may return. If it does, we have a great tradition of sacrifice and conservation to rely upon. In some ways we may even welcome the return to simpler ways. If the retrenchment is not forced upon us, we would be well advised to move over into the credit instead of the debit column voluntarily and to act morally as consumers. There are other people coming after us—the posterity to whom we are so dedicated. They deserve some fuel. They deserve good air and water and all other resources we enjoy. The times have once again reminded us of fundamentals. Why wait for sanctions to restrict us when we could choose restraint now, for fun?

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