



TO BEARD OR NOT TO BEARD

RICHARD S. VAN WAGONER

IN days of old, when nights were cold, Mom sent us to bed with a hot water bottle at our feet. But why warm only the feet? Though the feet rest on the sole, the face is the home of our chinny-chin-chin. Since the beginning of time, beards have known and understood that we should pamper the face, keeping it warm in the winteriest weather.

And beards are more than chin warmers. Throughout history beards have served as a symbol of manhood. A clean-shaven Adam or a smooth-cheeked Abraham would lack biblical macho. Who can forget the powerfully bearded Moses with Cecil B. DeMille staff raised to the heavens challenging the Red Sea? The mere thought of that scene makes your hair want to part.

Beards have always been a sign of social distinction. As long ago as 3,000 B.C., Egyptian kings and even queens (and this in a day when *queen* meant more than it does now) wore false beards called *postiche* to symbolize their royalty. The kings were clean shaven to prevent beard-bugs; the queens simply preferred falsies. Greek heroes, too, were distinguished by their flowing beards.

The origin of shaving is disputed by two ancient Greek legends. One has Aristotle Gillette discovering a razor so improved over the previous flint instrument that nine out of ten Greek males claimed you could "feel the difference." In the other, more dubious account, Alexander the Great reportedly ordered his soldiers to shave so their beards could not be grasped in combat.

The Semites appear in ancient graffiti with wild, ungroomed beards which not only reflected the desert's glare but also camouflaged overbites. Babylonians and Persians, too, are usually depicted with not only curly beards but also shady women. Early Romans wore their beards uncut until approximately 300 B.C., at which time their lengths were legion. The first Roman known to have shaved every day was the noted general Scipio Africanus. The custom quickly spread. Young Roman men were so pleased to achieve a showing of facial hair that they dedicated the cuttings to the Roman goddess of barbershop, Fortuna Barbata.

Jewish men wore full beards to be considered kosher. Leviticus 19:27 and 21:5 even forbid the destruction of

the "corners" of the beard. In the Bible, shaving of the beard is a sign of mourning and/or degradation. Shaving was identified with the spontaneous plucking of the beard, an expression of great sorrow, to say nothing of pain. Forced removal of even half a beard, as shown in 2 Samuel 10:4, was severe humiliation.

With the rise of Hasidism, a man without a beard was often compared to a eunuch. The Talmud goes so far as to regard a beard "the adornment of a man's face." Only men already disgraced by the disreputable business of dealing with Roman authorities were allowed to defile themselves by clipping their beards. The general Jewish objection to removal of the beard was that facial hair was God-given to distinguish man from woman. To refuse such a gift by shaving was therefore considered an offense against both God and nature.

Jewish history recounts the dastardly efforts of several rulers, including Nicholas I of Russia, to break Jewish spirit by forcing males to remove their beards and earlocks. Maria Theresa of Austria even ordered Jews to cut their beards so as to be singled out as a foreign element by their Christian neighbors—a foreshadowing of the yellow stars of David which would serve similar purpose during World War II. In perhaps the ultimate humiliation of European Jews, Hitler's death camp supervisors marched Jewish men to their deaths clean-shaven.

Like most Teutonic peoples, the original Saxons were bearded. It was the effete Norman French clergy who introduced the vice of shaving among the English. Wisdom again prevailed during the reign of Edward III, and hirsute faces reappeared. Francis I of France and Henry VIII of England were champions of the full beard, admiring its capacity for shielding bad teeth, embarrassing skin conditions, and such social improprieties as blushing.

Beards went through successive periods of favor and disfavor during the eighteenth century. When they again became stylish in the early part of the nineteenth century, they were unfortunately associated with revolutionary politics and Bohemian lifestyles: Ragged whiskers became a cartoonist's symbol for Bolsheviks

and anarchists. But by midcentury whiskers took a turn for the better as a mark of the free spirit of western pioneers and desert prospectors. Though no signer of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution had a beard or mustache, Abraham Lincoln made an honest man out of the bearded face. During the Civil War men were too busy killing each other to shave, so beards became as fashionable as killing.

My own culture seems to have forgotten the historical importance of Mormon beards. Whiskers sifted the hardtack and bean soup of Missouri jails. Fuzzy faces marched through spring rains and summer sun on that famous pioneer trek. Early Mormon missionaries, though they traveled without purse or scrip, usually took a beard along. Who can imagine an unbearded Brigham Young, Lorenzo Snow, Joseph F. Smith, or Heber J. Grant? Who but a heretic could envision prayers ascending to a shaven God?

As a student of beardlore, I find evidence in Mormon history to support what I have always believed: Beards are as certain harbingers of good health as chicken soup. When frail seventy-two-year-old Lorenzo Snow and his snowy white beard were whisked away to Sugarhouse Penitentiary in 1886 for having more wives than the law allowed, two Ogden physicians averted the usual prison shearing by their plea that "in consideration of the advanced age of the bearer, Lorenzo Snow, and also of his usually delicate condition, we the undersigned, take the liberty of stating that we fear his health would be seriously jeopardized by depriving him of his hair and beard, as he has worn the latter 16 years on this account."

And Bishop Hiram B. Clawson, about to be shorn of his much-loved mustache, approached the prison doctor with a five-dollar gold piece hidden under this thumb. "Doctor, I'm afraid that if my moustache is shaved off it will be detrimental to my health," the aging polygamist pleaded. "Why?" the good doctor asked as the gold piece was deftly slipped into his palm. "There is a weakness in my throat." "Mr. Clawson," the doctor replied, "I'm sure your health would be much impaired if your moustache were removed. I shall, therefore, give strict instructions that you be not shaved."

J. M. Paxton, a less delicate or deft polygamist, captured the feeling of a prison barber stealing his mustache right out from under his nose:

Then on your upper lip
The mower makes a dash,
And you are fired out
Without a bit of 'tache'. . . .

Oh give me back my moustache,
It makes me feel so queer,
I often try to curl it,
But find it is not here.

It 'minds me of a story,
I hardly like to tell,
My darling used to curl it,
And she always did it well.

And then with arms about my neck,
She took a kiss for pay
And other lips besides my own
Had moustache on that day.

Elderly patriarchs were joshed that their improved looks would allow them to attract younger wives when they returned home. But in fact returning "cohabs" were met by skittering children who ran into their mothers' homes yelling, "Ma, there is a stranger out in the yard and he says he is Pa."

Most Mormons viewed the loss of their beards as a forced compromise of their beliefs, a personal loss of freedom. No wonder, given that kind of full-bearded integrity, that so many of my favorite people have been bearded: Jesus, Santa Claus, Uncle Remus, Mr. Whiskers—even my Aunt Alma with the seven whiskers curling out from her black mole.

For a while we bearded Utahns had a champion to cheer for, our own Governor Scott Matheson. The governor, recuperating from a minor heart attack earlier this year, decided to grow his beard to "reprioritize" his thinking, to restructure his personal goals. When rumors spread that the Matheson cheeks were being invaded by a growing salt-and-pepper menace, insults began. *Scroungy, motorcycle gang leader, cheap tin-horn gambler, bum* were among the buzz words spread by anonymous verbal assassins (no doubt ambitious Republicans). But when it appeared uncertain the beard would stay, the *Salt Lake Tribune* urged, "Grow It, Gov." Debate mounted. Opinions as to whether the razor should be given its day were spouted in every barbershop in the state.

For a while I thought there was hope. When the governor left the hospital, papers announced "Matheson, Beard, sent home." Anxiously, I watched the news each night to catch a moment's glimpse of my bearded hero cutting ribbons and inspecting earthen dams. Matheson looked splendid—a surprising winner in the Heber J. Grant look-alike contest. But a news bulletin of 3 June brought the stunning news that Mrs. Matheson had cast an override veto.

Henceforth we members of the United Beardgrowers Association will remember exactly what we were doing the moment we first heard that Governor Scott Matheson shaved his beard. In the final dark moments before the official razor struck, the governor issued a clemency order for the mustache, declaring, "I'm going to need something to break up that sea of skin." Thank heaven something was salvaged.

I did receive some consolation from the auctioning off of the dead beard for the Utah Heart Association. I didn't hear of it in time, so did not make the affair, but a tall, dark stranger in a beige overcoat sold me a small packet of the "gov's whiskers" on the banks of State Street River. Rushing home to examine my treasure, I found I had been bilked out of my fifty cents. The purported whiskers were either seagull droppings or sugarbeet pulp. They tasted like the latter.

Beards are a lonely lot. Facial hair, fallen into disrepute everywhere, gets no respect at all among the Mormons. Bearded men are as rare as women speakers in General Conference. But much as I lament the monotony of the clean-shaven masses, I do not despair. It is never too late to repent and allow our faces to return to their natural, God-given, bearded condition.

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