

“The Mormon Chronicles”
Urban Legends featuring LDS Missionaries
By Dave Olson

Different social groups develop their own separate folklore including legends. Often these legends are derivations of traditional legends with a twist to gear it to the specific groups. Other times, however, these legends deal with some entity unique to the group. An example of this is the legends that exist about Mormon missionaries. While some of these legends can be applied to other groups, once you begin to understand the cultural context around them, it is easy to make sense of them.

Some background is necessary to understand where these legends come from. When a good Mormon boy turns nineteen, he is expected to go on a proselytizing journey for two years. He turns in his application and is assigned to a place somewhere in the world and is given a big book of rules and instant structure to his life. Strict obedience is expected and to question about destination or rules is patronizingly frowned upon.

As might be expected, with tens of thousands of young men suddenly, drastically out of their environment of fun and adolescence, crazy things can and certainly will happen.

Despite of the incidents that do happen, there are definite legends that circulate throughout the worldwide network of missionaries. With group of friends from the same ward (neighborhood congregation) or high school writing back and forth, these legends travel fast throughout the world and are quickly localized, embellished and retold like all good legends.

Non-Mormons enjoying telling these stories thinking they expose some shortcomings about these young preachers and they're good for a laugh thinking of frustrated young men having to make such an effort to have fun.

They also benefit the Mormons themselves giving the impression to potentially subversive missionaries that if they were to deviate from the divine rules, they would get caught. No one comes right out and says that there is divine powers at work but the insinuations are often there.

In his book "Curse's Broiled Again"¹, urban legend guru and Utah resident Dr. Jan H. Brunvand gives a brief overview of different variations of these legends. For the most part the legends deal with two missionaries who get bored with the doldrums and responsibility mission life and decide to take a journey. They fill out their weekly statistics and reports in advance and give them to a friend, landlord etc. to mail at correct intervals. They get caught when the reports are mailed incorrectly, a surprise visit from a supervisor finds them missing, they are spotted on the television at a sporting event or get some other unintentional attention.

The underlying themes in the above story are obvious, stray from your duties and you'll get caught, "The Lord works in mysterious ways," a Mormon saying goes.

¹ Brunvand, Jan H. "Curses; Broiled Again," W.W. Norton, New York, N.Y. 1989

Brunvand also gives background and other variants relating to university students and others with self-inflicted guidelines. After thinking the about outlines and themes of the legends, they seem to relate just as easily to old stories of honesty and cosmic justice like "Pinocchio." Old Pinocchio agreed to behave, said he was behaving, goofed around and then lied about it and look what happened to that foolish lad.

The only difference is that these Mormon boys sheepishly go home to their ward, caught trying to catch a day at the beach, instead of becoming physically deformed.

In talking to friends who served for the Mormon church and dealing with many while they were doing their time, I've learned about the intricate system of supervision and hierarchy that would have to be circumvented in order to go out and tear in up. There are senior companions, district leaders, zone leaders, assistants to the president etc. They all report one level up very frequently and have varying levels of responsibility like any other well run corporation. The mission president and his assistants who assign the companionship also quickly learn, from frequent interviews, how committed each elder is and make a point of not putting two less-committed guys together.

Most of the instances occurred when party-boys were put together. In a couple versions, the missionaries had been sent to a remote, isolated area (a Norwegian island, Smithers B.C.) where there wasn't anything going on as a "punishment" for previous infractions. This was to "keep them out of the way." This seems to be a convenient justification to explain the how they got away with their tomfoolery and avoiding the normal reporting protocol as well of giving some character background.

Bob O. who served a mission in Okayama, Japan said that he heard other stories of

what missionaries would do when they were getting "trunky" which is missionary slang for what one feels when he is getting ready to go home. This is like the missionary equivalent of graduation pranks. He says that many missionaries spend two years in a country but often don't get to see any of the tourist spots or big cities so they often go for a road trip when they are getting short of time and their minds aren't really on the work anyhow.

The other popular time for frivolity is at "hump day" which is the one-year mark. Bob says that the "hooters" (slang for the easy-going missionaries who bend the rules) are supposed to cover for the others when they are involved in shady activity. Sounds kind of covert to me.

Another thing to consider is why do these guys in the prime of their lives bother going if they just want to mess around? Or once they're out there and want go on a trip so bad, why don't they just go home? One reason is the disgrace of going home to the close-knit Mormon community embarrassing your family by not being able to cut it. There is also a lot of pressure to go and it's often easier to go and goof off for two years rather than deal with not going. Bob says that stories circulate about elders who went just on promise of receiving a car or similar gift upon returning home. Another reason would be that having someone else send you a check every month and not having to do any real work would be nice.

In some instances, the violators weren't caught, their stunts seem possible and probably stemmed from some truth and have just increased, been exaggerated and become less detail specific over repeated telling and evolve into legends as they are spread worldwide via the letter chain.

All the versions I collected were told as true, especially the ones told by missionaries

and ex-missionaries who probably knew others in their area who messed around or did themselves to some degree and could so how someone could be tempted to attempt a big scam.

The FOAF (friend of a friend) is once again the case in all the versions, although this could be changed to COAC (companion of a companion) or derivations of that.

Elder Dalton from Parowan, Utah told me this version while he was on his mission in British Columbia, Canada. He learned it from a returned missionary friend of his older brother at Dixie College in St. George, Utah. He told it as true after we had talked about two missionaries who had caught disconnecting the odometer in their mission car to go more miles than their allotment.

There were two missionaries who got transferred to an island off the coast of Norway. It was up north, cold and desolate. They had got caught messing around and got sent up there as a sort of punishment. There was a boat that went over to the mainland every three or four months but one left to New York, N.Y. every week to export something they made there. One of the guys had a friend who lived in the city and could get them World Series tickets and they figured in out and filled out their papers and went over, stayed for three weeks, went all over the place . . . They got back without getting busted and months later after they had been transferred again and all but forgotten about it, the president called them in and showed them a shot of them waving with a caught fly ball on a videotape his son had sent him of the games. They got sent home dishonorably and they stopped sending missionaries out there.

Elder Andrews also in B.C., Canada told about missionaries who had been in that

mission years earlier that had been misbehaving and were sent to a northern town called Smithers. This was a town of rough and tumble bars and not real receptive to the puritan Mormon preaching so a missionary from Utah went up bear hunting in Alaska on the invitation of some guys in town. He was fortunate enough to bag himself a bear so he had his hunting partners get it skinned and the meat frozen and gave him his card with the address to mail it to written on it. The hunters assumed the B.C. mission address was the correct one instead of his parents in Utah and had the large crate with the bear pelt and frozen meat mailed right to the mission office. Elder Andrews didn't know what happened to the wayward elder but he assumed he was sent home.

Bob from Japan told about missionaries who wanted to go to the grand-opening of the new Disneyland in Tokyo. They took the bullet train and were cautious enough to wear sunglasses and ball caps so as to not attract attention by being American. Everything was going fine until the missionaries were asked by a Disneyland employee (who had overheard them speak Japanese) to translate for some other Americans who were having some difficulty. Apparently, the other Americans had lost something the employee suspected and their Japanese was spotty at best. The Elders were happy to oblige and they followed the employee to a group of people, they help out, are thanked and they go home with no problem. The next Sunday they meet the man again as he is introduced as their brand-new mission president who had arrived a week early to tour the country. The mission president, grateful for their help, let the infraction slide.

Another story comes from Willis Knapp who served a mission in New Jersey. One of his companion's friends wrote that a fellow in his mission (Spokane, Washington) had been

at a rock concert that is against the rules (Metallica & The Cult) in Spokane when they ran into a nineteen-year-old guy from the ward they were stationed in. They quickly explained that they were fellowshipping an investigator. The next Sunday, the guy went to his bishop and announced that he had changed his mind and had decided that he wanted to go on a mission. The surprised bishop inquired what caused this sudden change of heart and the boy naively told about the missionaries at the concert and how he thought if he could still wear jeans and go out at night, he was into it. The mission president was informed and he called the wayward missionaries and found out they had talked another ward youth into driving them to Eugene, Oregon to see a Grateful Dead concert.

Other missionary legends tell about fellows going on missions under shady circumstances.

Another story concerning friend's brother who went in for his pre-mission interview in which one is supposed to confess his sins to his bishop. He told his bishop that he and his girlfriend had abstained for sexual relations and he was worthy to go etc. No sooner was he in the Missionary Training Center than he found he had gotten his girlfriend pregnant and had to return home red-faced. The moral to that one is pretty obvious.

Other stories talk about missionaries who complain about their call. This is understandable when you have a group of good friends who all get their calls to exotic places except for one fellow who is sent to North Dakota or somewhere.

One story told by Lauralee E. who heard it in a Mormon testimony meeting by a teary-eyed woman. One young man had always wanted to go Finland on his mission and he was just sure he would be sent there. He specially requested it on his application and said he

spoke Finnish. He received an assignment to Florida. He was disappointed and phoned the Church Headquarters to ask for it to be changed. They said no and that his call was inspired and where he was supposed to go. He obeyed and the first door he knocked on turned out to be long-lost twin brother who had been adopted by a different family at birth.

These stories can be linked up with other legends of bumbling adventures and mishaps of wayward youth. They also create an endless chapter of their own in the collection curious, odd Mormon legends.

With the widespread nature of the church's missionary effort, worldwide spread of the stories is guaranteed. With that widespread nature, localization is inevitable and with so many rules to break, there are lots of possibilities. Heck, there are probably legends about what happens to fellows whose hair grows over their collar.