

THE SAINTS KEEP MARCHING ON

by Keith Monroe

"You can lead the Peculiar People but don't try to push them," an old Western saying goes. Peculiar is what the Mormons sometimes call themselves. They also call themselves Saints, as in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often known as the LDS Church for short. This church and the Boy Scouts of America began a formal partnership in 1913. The 80-year relationship hasn't always been smooth, however; along the way there have been some sharp collisions and cliff-hanging crises. From this octennial milestone we can look back down the bumpy trail climbed by Mormons and Scouters together. First, to see the trail's steepness, let's glance at some numbers. Next week a dozen LDS wards (local parishes or congregations) will each start a new pack, troop, or Explorer post. These will muster a total of about 177 kids. This prediction comes from a computer, not a crystal ball. And while the numbers won't be exactly right, they'll be close, because they represent the average of what happens every week. In all of 1992, the LDS took charters for 620 new groups, thus adding 9,233 youths to BSA rolls. Currently, 371,516 youngsters are registered in LDS-chartered units. Their number has grown steadily each year and has tripled in the last 30 years. This expansion is in gear with the growth of the church itself, which has doubled to more than seven million people in the past quarter-century. The LDS Church makes it easy for boys to join Scouting (church authorities estimate that 85 percent of Mormon men have been Scouts). Practically every one of its 11,000 wards has a Cub Scout pack, Scout troop, and Varsity Scout Team. Most have Explorer posts, too. How does this happen? Because religion pervades everyday life for Mormons, shaping their diet and their family budget and how they have fun. Fun for youth arises in every ward through a standard program known as the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association, MIA for short. And since 1913 every MIA has included Scouting. Eighty years ago many Mormons were startled when their church embraced Scouting, because only two years earlier the church had firmly closed the door on the BSA. And Scouting had knocked on the door firmly, too. In those years of Scouting's infancy, although the movement was run from a one-room office in New York City, troops were spontaneously springing up everywhere, even in the solitudes of Utah. Without authorization from the church, dozens of wards formed independent troops of MIA Scouts, as they called them. This disquieted the General Board of the MIA, which named a three-man committee to look into Scouting. The committee reported in essence: "We already cover the good work proposed by Scouting. To multiply organizations would be a waste of energy. It would not be to our best interests to take up the Scout movement." Nevertheless, Mormon boys kept asking to be Scouts. MIA troops kept forming. The general board decided to reconsider its decision. After cautious correspondence it invited Samuel A. Moffat, the BSA's roving organizer, to visit Salt Lake City. As the three-day train ride from New York neared its end, Moffat was awed as he topped the Wasatch Range, a mighty western wall of the Rockies, rising like a rampart over the backyards of Salt Lake City. He glimpsed a chain of blooming valleys nearly 150 miles long, dotted by towns laid out exactly as Brigham Young, the famous Mormon founder, had prescribed, half a day's wagon journey apart. Everything was up to date in Salt Lake City. Teletype, telephones, and typewriters weren't common in 1913 but Moffat saw them in countless cubicles of the multistory Church Office Building. Administrators flashed instructions to every stake (the equivalent of a Catholic diocese) and even to the tiniest wards. It was the sort of network that Moffat had seen in Standard Oil and the Union Pacific Railroad. Could this big-business-like religious organization mesh with the looser and younger BSA apparatus? His hosts took him to towns amid orchards and herds and flocks. Each community had a schoolhouse, of course, plus another structure where the town made its own entertainment: dances, social gatherings, amateur theatricals. In this little building, Mormon boys of 12 to 18 met weekly for prayer, talks, skits, debates, music. But the building seemed a bit cramped for the strenuous doings of a Scout troop. No matter. A big new annex was arising beside every ward house: a gym. The Mormons were planning to run the world's biggest amateur basketball program each winter, with 2,000 MIA teams competing to reach the final rounds in Salt Lake City. (Today the number of teams is 4,000.) Moffat wasn't sure

that Mormon-run troops would fit the BSA system of organizing districts and councils to be steered by Scouting professionals. Here the church ran almost everything and paid almost nothing to its steersmen. Even the president of Brigham Young University was paid partly in chickens and produce. But the highest-placed Mormons insisted that they wanted to put MIA troops into the BSA and wanted to speed ahead in organizing more troops wherever the church expanded. So in July 1913 the BSA program became part of the LDS program. Overnight 13,000 MIA Scouts swelled the Boy Scout registry. That autumn the LDS appointed a top-level Committee on Scouting. No other church would form a national Scouting committee until 1923 or later. Mormon parents massed behind Scouting. They cleared land for Scout camps and were astounded at the response. The first camp in Cache Valley was planned for 150 Scouts, but almost a thousand came during the summer. Soon there were 500 Mormon troops scattered through the Far West. Utah was parcelled into Scout councils which hired full-time Scout executives. These executives were good Mormons, but other church members asked why, out of many church programs, just this one should operate with salaried professionals. Council financing became a sore point. Mormon country harbored no Community Chests to provide any part of a council's funds. This left the funding to Scout-hearted individuals in each town. Few were wealthy, and many, like townspeople elsewhere, resisted raising money that would be spent in other towns. There was disquiet at the unit level, too. Often when a Scoutmaster proved able, his bishop, always in need of good men to fill approximately 275 ward jobs, was tempted to call him away as a Sunday School superintendent or Men's Club president. Worse yet, as population grew a ward might split, which meant sundering its Scout troop. And perhaps worst of all, strong-minded bishops laid various interdicts on troops. In one locally famous case, Scouts hauled in logs to build a troop cabin; the bishop ordered the logs cut up for firewood instead, and the Scoutmaster quit and was replaced. The director of the BSA's Region XII was Charles N. Miller, a former playground director who liked to assemble Scouts and put them through calisthenics. BSA people called him "Hundred and Ten Percent Charlie" because he strained to surpass all goals. In August 1922 Miller went to Utah to confer with Mormon Scouters from Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Arizona, and California. They had come to the meeting to tell Miller about problems that irked them, but the regional director wasn't interested. He was there to enhance the BSA. Miller stepped to the lectern and told his listeners what had to be done. More Scouts must be recruited. More money must be raised. Wherever Mormon troops lacked zeal for council doings, they must be pushed. Where a council office was too far from some of its towns, more councils must be formed. Prof. William Peterson of the Utah Agricultural College rose and responded: "Mr. Miller, we've come considerable distances at considerable inconvenience to meet you and discuss our problems. We've listened to you. Now we suggest you go back to Los Angeles and never come here again." The meeting was quickly adjourned. Miller went home vowing to teach the Saints who was boss. It looked as if the LDS would drop Scouting. And such a rupture could repel other large religious groups who were thinking of affiliating with the BSA. Soon Miller's deputy, Carl J. Carlson, toured the Mormon heartlands, listening to grievances. He said little more than, "You can be an enormous help to Scouting if you so desire." But people got ideas as they answered his questions, and various towns called peace parleys. Stake presidents persuaded wards to raise specified shares of Scout councils' budgets. Wards that balked soon heard how their reticence had caused keen disappointment in Salt Lake City. Councils promised to spend more time helping troops and stop urging troops to help them. Volunteer good-will ambassadors hit the road. Among them were Utah's three weighty Eccles brothers (of whom Marriner, an active council member and father of a Scout, was to become head of the Federal Reserve). Another was Ezra Taft Benson, a rising farmer and leader of older scouts, later to be U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and today president of the LDS Church. With men of such substance stumping for it, Scouting grew steadily more acceptable. The shaky partnership was preserved. In later years other crises arose but cooled more quietly. In 1928, LDS Scouters ruffled BSA headquarters by creating a separate branch for older Scouts, called Vanguardians. But the BSA was also having trouble holding older boys, and its early Exploring program was influenced by the Vanguardians. Around 1950 the BSA decided to let boys join at 11 instead of 12, which seriously skewed the way the LDS arranged its age groupings. "We can get along without Scouting," some prominent Mormons said when the change was announced. But the church agreed to a compromise proposed by Chief Scout Executive Arthur Schuck, and in Mormon troops the 11-year-olds

became a separate patrol, called Guides. For the past 40 years the BSA and LDS have teamed up more smoothly. America's fastest-growing religious group, serving about 83,000 new members a year, the Mormons have been a major factor in Scouting's growth. The Great Salt Lake Council is fourth largest in the country, and one of every 20 Scout units nationwide is now Mormon-chartered. Not bad for Peculiar People who still comprise only one-fiftieth of America's church-goers.