Public Perceptions

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Joseph F. Smith's Beard and the Public Image of the Latter-day Saints

Following the Civil War, it became common for American men to sport a "natural, dignified beard." These men's whiskers were rarely muttonchops or mustaches but rather long, bushy chin fur. Apparently this type of facial hair grew so popular during the American Gilded Age (1877–1893) that it became known as "the American beard." Yet, by the early 1900s—seemingly overnight—this trend turned old-fashioned and out of style. In fact, by the time Joseph F. Smith became President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1901, shaggy beards graced only the "cheeks and chins of rustic sages."[1]

At this time in early twentieth-century America, Latter-day Saints were already experiencing negative public opinion. Outsiders believed that the Mormon headmen unlawfully practiced plural marriage, swore themselves to secret allegiances, and unethically used their ecclesiastical influence over other members. Thus, to non-Mormons, long beards, which were noticeably outdated and unpopular in American culture, could be seen as another subtle expression of nonconformity with the rest of the United States and as a reflection of the Latter-day Saints' isolation in the Great Basin.

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This chapter is not intended to criticize, tease, or lampoon any former Latter-day Saint leaders. Rather, this chapter is an attempt to understand the rise and fall of bushy beards in American fashion during the latter half of the nineteenth century and to provide context to the negative public perception of Joseph F. Smith and other seasoned Latter-day Saint leaders' long beards when such facial hair was noticeably outmoded in the rest of the United States at the turn of the century. This chapter will also explore ways in which Reed Smoot and his clean-cut countenance helped improve the public image of the Latter-day Saints when the Church stood trial for the practice of plural marriage from 1903 to 1907.

Background

Between the tenures of Joseph Smith and Joseph F. Smith, the Latter-day Saints struggled to assimilate into the American mainstream. Like other religious movements, according to Armand L. Mauss, Mormons had to grapple over a predicament: maintaining their peculiarity while also adopting cultural traits in order to be acceptable to society.[2] Sometimes, however, the Latter-day Saints' uniqueness—whether it was culture, doctrine, or population—led to unintentional contention with their neighbors, and conflict followed them from upstate New York to Jackson County to the Salt Lake Valley.[3]

The Latter-day Saints' contested struggle for acceptability intensified toward the end of the nineteenth century. Non-Mormons across the country would hear outrageous rumors of the polygamous marriages in Utah and wonder how a people could uphold such a doctrine. The marriage system among the Latter-day Saints was only one of a number of distinguishing aspects of the Utah-based faith. Their dress and physical appearance were also depicted differently from mainstream Americans as well. A typical rank-and-file Mormon male, for example, was often portrayed in print culture as old, overweight, and out of style, wearing tattered clothing and surrounded by numberless women in ragged dresses or pantalets. There was an intentional look of otherness about them. Joseph F. Smith was similarly satirized in the press with frayed clothing and a long, exaggerated beard during his seventeen-year tenure as President of the Church.

Measuring Public Perception

Jan Shipps, one of the most noted scholars of Mormon studies, wrote about the difficulty historians have in determining "what the public said, thought, and felt

about particular individuals." The remarkable rise of media and public opinion polls will facilitate future studies of historical figures, yet there still persist thorny problems with studying nonverbal messages from the early twentieth century. Consequently, many historians agree that the best way to reconstruct the public perception of a person who lived before radio and television is through the press and printed word.[4]

Newspapers, journals, and magazines were the most "important vehicles of information and opinion" in the early twentieth century, largely due to muckrakers and watchdog journalism. In fact, Americans probably learned more about Joseph F. Smith and the Latter-day Saints from nationally circulated newspapers than from any other information outlet. The LDS Church received coverage in scores of broadsheets and gazettes, but some of the printed publications most closely tied to Mormons were *Collier's*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, *McClure's*, *Harper's*, and *Saturday Evening Post*.[5]

These media sources covered not only news but also American society, heritage, culture, tradition, lifestyle, and even fashion trends. There were often special-interest sections in newspapers and magazines with inserts and advertisements indicating what styles were in vogue, making public print perhaps the greatest influence over the life and thought of the nation in terms of fashion and image. Thus, what columnists wrote about beards and facial hair could quickly elevate, or just as easily tarnish, a man's reputation depending on what graced his face at the time.

Beards in the United States

Prior to the Civil War, beards were uncommon in American culture. In fact, the first fifteen presidents of the United States remained clean-shaven while in office. According to Allan Peterkin, a "facial-hair historian," late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans seemed to follow the pattern of their trendsetting presidents. Beards were worn "only in isolated cases by the old, mad, or clueless."[6] Even Abraham Lincoln had never worn any facial hair until a young girl wrote him saying that he "would look better if he wore a beard,"[7] because his face was so thin.[8] Lincoln grew out his iconic beard, became the president of the United States, and ushered in what some have called the Golden Age of Beards.

Beards proved so popular throughout the country that American men began allowing their razors to "rust in disuse . . . in obedience to the prevalent fashion."[9] Beards became a sign of manliness and respectability. Of the next ten United States

presidents after Lincoln, only two remained clean-shaven—Andrew Johnson and William McKinley. Some men became so desperate for a bushy beard that they would buy compositions and formulas claiming to produce "a luxuriant beard in from 5 to 8 weeks."[10] Many tried to shape the woolly shag into points, forks, and squares, but according to the newspapers, these men only robbed it of the "dignity which the full beard imparted." In fact, writers hoped that "if any form of beard survives the all-threatening razor, it will be the full beard."[11]

But by the 1890s, society began again to frown upon bewhiskered men. Although facial hair was once known for having "purified the air that entered the respiratory tracts," new progressive thought caused Americans to associate full beards with poor hygiene and disease. For example, newspapers spread the word that the full beard was "infected with the germs of tuberculosis, and is one of the deadliest agents for transmitting the disease to the lungs." Bristly whiskers even became known as "the Creator's mistake."[12] They were so unpopular at one point that men began buying new ointments and formulas, such as Modene, which "quickly dissolved and removed" hair on the face. Just a few drops of some of these mixtures destroyed men's facial hair forever.[13]

Like much of the rising generation of Americans at the time, many young Latter-day Saints expressed their displeasure with full beards, particularly in sacrament services. At this time in the 1890s, the sacramental water or wine was still distributed in a common cup, from which every member sipped regardless of age, health, gender, or social standing. Thus, many members detested partaking after "some of the full-bearded old men" whose whiskers would float atop the water after they drank from the cup.[14] After years of complaints and petitions to the General Authorities, the time-honored method of administering the sacramental water in a common goblet changed to a small, individual cup service.[15] Interestingly, this transition came under the direction of President Joseph F. Smith, who kept his beard despite outside opinions of fashion, hygiene, and grooming.

Religious Beards

Joseph F. Smith's beard meant something entirely different to him and other Latter-day Saints than it did to critical non-Mormons. Rather than an expression of defiance against outside American ideas, President Smith's patriarchal beard symbolically reflected a prophetic hue—something he shared with each of his post-Nauvoo predecessors, if we include John Taylor's chin curtain. Even Hugh B. Brown, a

former member of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, believed that "Joseph F. Smith looked like a prophet" because "he had a long beard."[16]

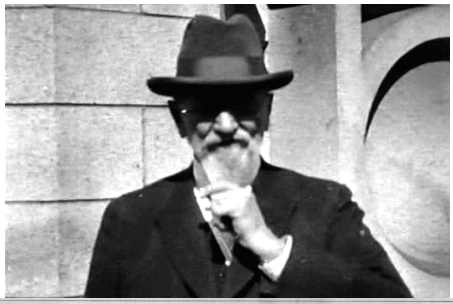
Particularly during this time period, full, tufty beards were considered "a primary sign of masculinity, wisdom, and patriarchal authority and honor," but they had long held meaning within religious circles.[17] This idea was especially emphasized among ancient Israel, when priests were commanded to "not make baldness upon their head" nor "shave off the corner of their beard" (Leviticus 21:5). This was even the case during New Testament times. Tradition holds, for example, that Jesus' executioners pulled out the hair from his cheeks as a form of humiliation.[18] Having one's beard shaved was an utmost insult, not only in ancient times, but in nineteenth-century America as well. Lorenzo Snow's experience in the Utah Territorial Penitentiary illustrates this idea.

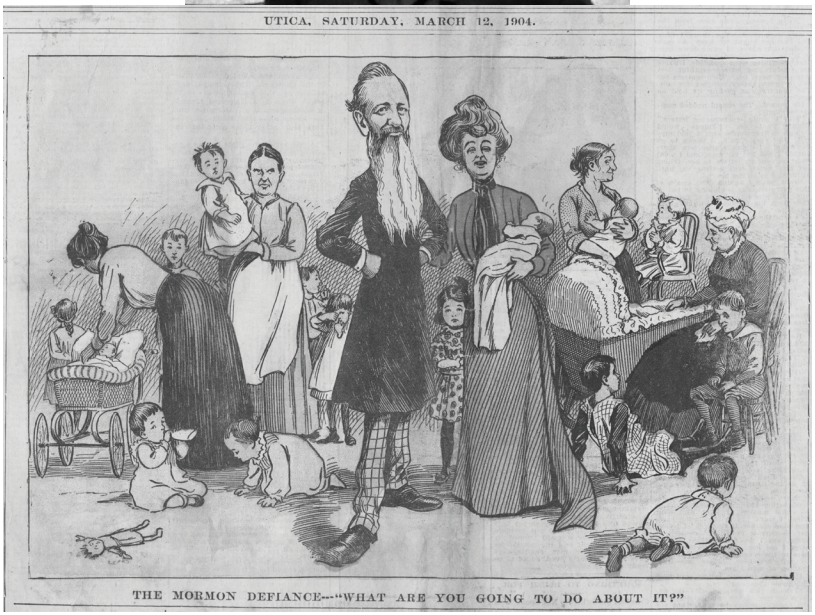
Snow, then a senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was incarcerated in early 1886 for unlawful cohabitation. Jailhouse rules required male prisoners' hair to be cut once a month and facial hair shaved once a week. This policy, according to historians Andrew H. Hedges and Richard NeitzelHolzapfel, "was considered a degrading personal affront." Facial hair was important among the Latter-day Saints and the repercussions of shaving the beards of the Church's highest authorities would be significant. It could very well have demeaned the Mormon leader in the eyes of the rank-and-file members. Fortunately for Snow, however, the warden was "often lenient with the 'brethren,'" and he approved doctors' recommendations to allow Lorenzo Snow "to retain his beard" over health concerns.[19]

Joseph F. Smith's Beard

The press that would give President Smith a hard time about his beard had already railed against several Latter-day Saint leaders in the past. For example, Daniel H. Wells, whose sight was impaired, was called the "one-eyed pirate of the Wasatch."[20] Other members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles were not as fortunate in their offensive nicknames.[21] Joseph F. Smith similarly received a number of insulting epithets, but his were centered around his long facial hair, not only because of its length, but also because he was known for frequently stroking his hand through it and even perfuming it.[22] He was called "graybeard," "scraggly," and "the man with the beard."[23]

President Smith attracted even more attention after being summoned to Washington, DC, to take part in the Reed Smoot hearings. These highly publicized





Top: Joseph F. Smith was known to frequently stroke his long beard. Photo by Clawson Film Co., circa 1915, courtesy of Church History Library. Bottom: Cartoonists were not afraid to exaggerate Joseph F. Smith's long beard. Political cartoon from the Saturday Globe*, March 12, 1904. Courtesy of L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.*

court cases against Mormon leaders for practicing plural marriage placed the Latter-day Saints on a platform to be widely judged and surveyed. The proceedings were so popular among the public that "spectators lined the halls, waiting for limited seats in the committee room, and filled the galleries to hear floor debates." And "for those who could not see for themselves, journalists and cartoonists depicted each day's admission and outrage."[24]

One of many political cartoons exaggerating Church leaders' long beards. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

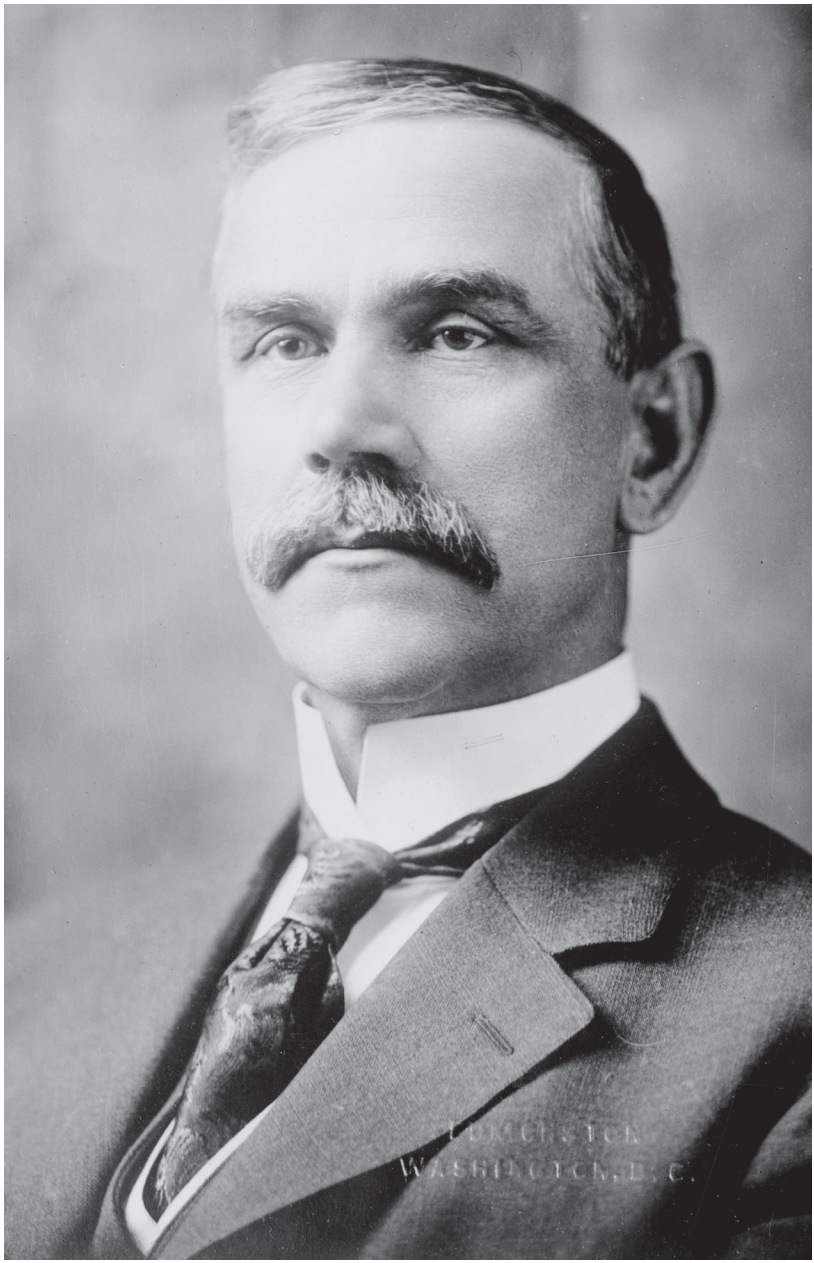
These cartoonists generally exaggerated Joseph F. Smith's beard, his most distinguishable characteristic, drawing it so low that it reached "almost to his waist."[25] As a result, according to a member of the Senate committee, many Americans with little knowledge of the Utah-based faith began to "commonly associate an overgrown beard" with the general male population of Latter-day Saints.[26] Some cartoonists purposefully portrayed Mormons as physically different from typical American men, often sketching them as overweight and bearded in tattered garb. These caricatures, printed in newspapers and magazines across the country, were not so different from cartoon depictions of other segregated classes of society at the time, such as Asian and Irish immigrants, American Indians, and African Americans. The beards were a central part of this particular social stigma.

Many of these cartoons surfaced during the Reed Smoot hearings, including 600 in the *Salt Lake Tribune* alone between 1905 and 1909—three hundred of them depicting Joseph F. Smith and his beard.[27] The long beard was not the most highly discussed censure of President Smith or the Latter-day Saints, but critics identified the seemingly trivial trademark whiskers with what they believed to be a Mormon counterculture. A long beard, so noticeably untrendy in early twentieth-century America, signified in the public eye not only a fashion statement but also a social statement.[28]

Yet President Smith's beard, as mentioned above, was not necessarily a symbol of subversion. Instead, it typified the traditional profile of his predecessors—the Presidents of the Church since Brigham Young. Smith was a historically minded individual during a time of transition for the Church. Edward H. Andersen, an early-nineteenth-century editor of the *Improvement Era*, even called President Smith "the last of the old school of veteran leaders," a statement, as researcher Jonathan Stapley points out, that relates to a number of aspects of Smith's tenure as President of the Church.[29] A case can thus be made that Smith was "old-school" not only about Latter-day Saint procedures and doctrines but also about his physical appearance, and despite prevalent fashions and even pointed criticisms regarding his beard, he never shaved it off.[30]

Reed Smoot's Mustache

At the center of the extensive court cases in Washington, DC, sat Reed Smoot, a junior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He was elected to the United States Senate only two and a half years after his ordination, and in many



Reed Smoot with a nicely trimmed mustache. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

ways he represented a younger generation of Latter-day Saints and members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Not only was Smoot the second-youngest member of the Twelve, but he also did not practice plural marriage and looked noticeably different from his fellow brethren. Non-Mormons, particularly members of the press, showed an interest in Smoot.

Several gazettes described Elder Smoot as "a normal character" and "decidedly human," a far cry from the bearded, behindhand, polygamist image that many of his contemporaries received in the news. Smoot's keenness, diplomacy, and earnest belief in Latter-day Saint teachings reflected a "likable and sincere" personality that "impresses an unprejudiced person on first meeting."[31] Furthermore, Elder Smoot's physical appearance seemed to appeal to average Americans and members of Congress alike, since "his prototype is found in cities and villages all over the United States."[32] He was "tall, well-knit, erect, with brown hair" and "steady blue eyes." Perhaps most importantly, however, he wore a "drooping brown mustache" and exhibited "clean-cut features," which may have helped him associate to a greater degree with the Senate committee.[33] Of the fifteen committee members at the hearings, eight wore mustaches similar to Elder Smoot's, six were bald-faced, while only one had a beard, which was almost incomparable to President Joseph F. Smith's lifelong, full-grown facial hair.[34]

This isn't to say that Elder Smoot's mustache was the primary factor in upholding his seat in the Senate, or that it alone helped the Latter-day Saints shed their obscure image. The clean-cut countenance and well-groomed mustache were, however, his most distinguishable characteristics and clarified misconceptions that all Mormons wore full beards. In a way, Smoot normalized the Latter-day Saints, as he became the *ex officio* poster child for the Utah-based faith, receiving unprecedented national spotlight as a "good, clean, progressive chap." One *Saturday Evening Post* article from January 1907 demonstrates how Smoot's appearance helped the Latter-day Saints' image.[35]

The author begins the article by describing the appearance of the New Testament Apostles, including their full beards as depicted in paintings, stained glass, and statues. He then compares the appearance of the ancient disciples of Jesus Christ with that of Joseph F. Smith, "head of the Mormon Church, with his rambling, gray hair, and his patriarchal beard." Smith could easily "be framed into a hazy picture of such a person [like the Apostles]; but not Smoot. He looks like a country merchant, which is what he is." The author continues, "Smoot is an

undemonstrative, placid sort of a man. . . . He wears a mustache and plasters his hair down on his forehead in that semi-circular style the country barber gets."[36]

The article continues to praise Smoot for the way he weathered the storm and retained his seat in the United States Senate, but perhaps most importantly, the article—like many other contemporary newspaper articles—describes Smoot as a normal-looking American male. In fact, "there [was] nothing in Smoot's appearance to suggest the Mormon apostle, with whom [outsiders] commonly associate[d] an overgrown beard and the linen-duster habit."[37] Smoot's mustache was even noticeable enough among the public for it to make national headlines when he shaved it off in 1925.[38]

Conclusion

Beards began to disappear among the Church's highest authorities after President Smith and his contemporaries passed away. However, it was not until Richard L. Evans, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, shaved his neatly trimmed mustache in the mid-1960s that facial hair finally faded away definitively among members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. There is much more to be said of beards and their place in Latter-day Saint culture; however, the purpose of this paper was to understand the rise and fall of facial hair in America and to examine Joseph F. Smith's patriarchal beard, its portrayal in the media, and the public's perception. President Smith never did shave his beard, despite outside public opinion, while newer members of the Twelve, including Apostle Reed Smoot, preferred a more clean-cut look, which began to slowly set a new standard for the Latter-day Saint leaders.

Notes

1. "The Passing of the Beard," *Harper's Weekly*, January 17, 1903, 102.
2. See Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 3–6.
3. See James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard, *The Story of the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976).
4. Jan Shipps, "The Public Image of Senator Reed Smoot, 1902–1932," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 383–84.
5. Shipps, "The Public Image of Senator Reed Smoot, 1902–1932," 385.
6. Allan Peterkin, *One Thousand Beards: A Cultural History of Facial Hair* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001), 34.

7. As cited in Charles W. Moores, ed., *Lincoln Addresses and Letters* (New York: American Book, 1914), 136–37.
8. Grace Bedell to Abraham Lincoln, October 15, 1860, holograph letter, Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection; http://myloc.gov/exhibitions/lincoln/vignettes/candidatelincoln/pages/objectlist.aspx.
9. "The Passing of the Beard," 102.
10. "Beard! Beard!" advertisement in *Harper's Weekly*, April 8, 1865, 223.
11. "The Passing of the Beard," 102.
12. "The Passing of the Beard," 102.
13. "Modene," advertisement in *Harper's Weekly*, June 27, 1891, 3.
14. James L. Jacobs, "Sacrament at Conference," *Saga of the Sanpitch* 15 (1983): 8.
15. Justin R. Bray, "The Lord's Supper During the Progressive Era," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 88–104.
16. As cited in Edward Brown Firmage, ed., *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 10.
17. Andrew H. Hedges and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *Within These Prison Walls: Lorenzo Snow's Record Book, 1886–1897* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), xxxvii.
18. A number of nineteenth-century biblical scholars wrote that Jesus had his beard shaved prior to the crucifixion. See, for example, *The Works of the Reverend John Newton* (New York: Williams and Whiting, 1810), 164.
19. Hedges and Holzapfel, *Within These Prison Walls*, xxxvii. See also Richard S. Van Wagoner, "To Beard or Not to Beard," *Sunstone* 8, no. 6 (November–December 1983), 10.
20. As quoted in Will Bagley, *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 302.
21. See Richard E. Turley, "Recent Mountain Meadows Publications: A Sampling," *Journal of Mormon History* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 223.
22. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and R. Q. Shupe, *Joseph F. Smith: A Portrait of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 2000), 206. See also "Some Recollections of Grandfather Joseph F. Smith"; http://www.josephfsmith.org/sites/default/files/recollections.pdf.
23. Philip Loring Allen, "The Mormon Church on Trial," *Harper's Weekly*, March 26, 1904, 469–71. Michael Paulos, ed., *The Mormon Church on Trial: Transcripts of the Reed Smoot Hearings* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 177n. Nelson B. Wadsworth, *Through Camera Eyes* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 167.
24. Kathleen Flake, *The Politics of American Religious Identity: The Seating of Senator Reed Smoot, Mormon Apostle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 5.
25. As cited in Samuel Woolley Taylor, *Rocky Mountain Empire: The Latter-day Saints Today* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 74.
26. Tattler, "Notes From the Capital: Reed Smoot," *The Nation*, August 9, 1917, 158.
27. Holzapfel and Shupe, *Joseph F. Smith: A Portrait of a Prophet*, 6.
28. Richard Barry, "The Political Menace of the Mormon Church," *Pearson's Magazine*, July 1910, 320. Philip Loring Allen, "The Mormon Church on Trial," *Harper's Weekly*, March 1904, 469–71.

29. Edward H. Anderson, "Last of the Old School of Veteran Leaders," in *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1919), 684.
30. For a progression of Joseph F. Smith's appearance, see Holzapfel and Shupe, *Joseph F. Smith: Portrait of a Prophet*.
31. "Church Is on Trial," *Daily Telegram*, March 3, 1904, 7.
32. "Church Is on Trial," 7.
33. "Church Is on Trial," 7.
34. Mustaches had become the new sign of masculinity, replacing the full beard from previous decades. A "mustache cup" was even invented to accommodate the growing trend. The cup had a half-circle ledge across its top, with a small opening that left just enough room on the rim for someone to sip the drink without wetting the fuzzy upper lip.
35. "Smooting—A New Senate Game," *Saturday Evening Post*, January 12, 1907, 20.
36. "Smooting—A New Senate Game," 20.
37. Tattler, "Notes From the Capital: Reed Smoot," *The Nation*, August 9, 1917, 158.
38. "Smoot of Utah Now Clean Shaven," *Bryan Democrat*, November 24, 1925, 8.