

What Mitt Romney Faces From the Press

July 2007, In Cold Blog

By Steven Long,

GOP presidential wannabe Mitt Romney is a daring man. He is running for the Oval Office with full knowledge that his beliefs and the beliefs of millions like him will be put under the glare of media scrutiny. That is a place where many of his Mormon faith find distinct discomfort. I know, because I plunged headlong into that world writing about a tragic event in Utah, the heartland of the LDS Church.

Romney has just won the Iowa GOP straw poll. That fact alone will intensify the media scrutiny on a candidate uncomfortable with it. He has already flared on a conservative radio talk show in the state when asked about his Mormon religion. That is only the beginning, and as the media asks more and more probing questions about his faith, I predict he will flame out as a candidate for the Oval office.

Why? Because I have personal experience with the very thin skins of many who are practicing members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. When Mormon beliefs and practice are illuminated by the media spotlight, many in the church cringe. Others strike out, as I found out when I found my book on a Utah murder case the brunt of a relentless attack of bad reviews on Amazon.

Every Woman's Nightmare, (St. Martin's Press) is the story of the tragic and disgusting murder of Lori Hacking by her husband Mark, after discovering he had been lying to her about his acceptance into the medical school of the University of North Carolina. She was shot in the head as she slept, her body thrown in a dumpster and later buried with garbage in the Salt Lake City dump. The search for her remains gripped the nation.

Woven into the book is the story of a deeply religious Mormon family. During my research, and after the book's publication, I learned that some members of the faith regard its inner workings and rituals as secret, only available to the initiated. Yet I had a story to tell, and revealing those secrets was a part of giving my reader the full picture of the world in with Lori and Mark Hacking grew to adulthood and embraced.

As a journalist, I have always believed that few secrets are off limits to members of my profession, none the least of which, those of a church which goes out of its ways to hide its core beliefs from outsiders.

Had I not written about the Mormon Church, *Every Woman's Nightmare*, would have been just another boring scribble about domestic violence. I don't waste my time, or my readers either, by writing about such droll soap opera upheavals in a marriage gone bad.

Lori and her brother Paul were adopted children of Portuguese descent. Their parents ultimately divorced and the children were split between their father and mother. Lori was raised in Orem, about 45 miles from Salt Lake's Temple Square, the two were regular attendees at the Ward House at the end of their street. Mark was an enthusiastic elder, an active participant in a church which dominated the couple's lives, as does the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the lives of the majority of residents of the Beehive State.

So when I traveled to Salt Lake City, I naively expected to find members of a church community willing to talk about the tragedy that had happened in their midst. I wanted, and expected, full cooperation from the Mormon Church when I went to Temple Square, walked into a visitor's center situated at the epicenter of Mormonism, and asked for directions to the sect's public information office. In a lifetime of journalism, I have never encountered anything but openness and cooperation from church administrators and clerics.

A very nice elderly man quickly got on the phone and quickly connected me with the church flacks. I informed them of my mission, to write a book for a major New York publisher on the tragic death and heroic hunt for the body of Lori Hacking.

First, there was silence as cold as Brigham Young's tombstone for a time, and then came the inevitable "We'll get back to you" moment. I instantly knew it was circle the wagons time as the Mormons closed ranks around their own. Later that evening, I got a call from the big guy, an uptight fellow named Dale Bills, the official spokesman for the fastest growing religion in America, if not the world. I was informed that "We will not be taking part in this."

I was polite, yet I don't take doors slammed in my face gracefully by an ice clod flack or anybody else. No good journalist does. Yet the church had shunned me and I had been shunned by none other than the chief Mormon flack at that. I suppose deep down I felt flattered. They were taking my presence seriously.

Shunned though I was, I had done the ethical thing. I had offered the church the opportunity to refute everything I would eventually present about it in my yet and they had rebuffed the opportunity

I had halfway expected this sort of treatment. I didn't know much Mormon history at the time, but I darned sure knew that its Prophet, Joseph Smith, had been brutally murdered by an angry mob after he had been outrageous one too many times on June 27, 1844. The loss of Smith was just the beginning of horrendous self inflicted bad luck that would visit the Mormons and their leadership. It was of little wonder to me that they wouldn't want a "gentile" like myself poking around their innermost secrets, and reporting beliefs that most believers would consider alien, if now downright goofy. Who could blame them for closing ranks around their own? I certainly didn't.

Yet to the average Mormon, beliefs cherished since childhood were anything but goofy, alien, or strange. However, deep down, most know that the Mormon Church is out of the American mainstream of denominations. And while it sends legions of missionaries worldwide to make converts, the church is not open to outsiders in many ways.

Rather than embracing their history, the writings of their forbearers, and fundamental beliefs, when public scrutiny by outsiders happens, the Mormons often run from it, hide it, and when confronted directly about it, speak in vague generalities. Theirs is a colorful and truly heroic past, but all too often only a sanitized story is told by church spin doctors..

The Lori Hacking case was a media circus that brought the glare of publicity to Salt Lake City, and at the center of it was her mother. Like the tender hearted across America, my heart gushed rivers for Thelma Soares. But it was around her that the wagons circled their tightest. It was a circle that would not be unbroken, and I tried to breach the tight Mormon web around her and eventually made contact with her

spokesman through her bishop who was momentarily accommodating. Eventually, I was told she would talk to me, however, Thelma and her handlers had determined she deserved a return for the investment of time it would take to sit down with and author to discuss her relationship with her daughter Lori.

“You are doing this book for money, aren’t you?” her spokesman said matter of fact, his voice a monotone. “She will talk to you, but she needs something in return.”

I have never paid for an interview in my life, and never will. I briefly put up a fight saying that doing so would be a violation of journalistic ethics. In the end though I knew I would have to get firsthand information as best I could. Fortunately, Lori’s brother Paul was more than willing to help out on my project and we became good friends.

Thelma Soares wanted to profit from her adopted daughter’s death. I would later learn that the gentle grieving mother portrayed on television would write a scathing review on Amazon of my book for which she was receiving nothing. When it came out, I had to wonder if the review would have been positive had I played ball with her handlers and offered to pay Thelma.

Without cooperation from Thelma, I determined to hit the books, cram as much Mormon history as I could into my mind, and spend shoe leather on the pavement retracing the steps of Mark Hacking the night he killed his wife. And like any investigative journalist, I determined to talk to as many insiders as possible.

Learning of the inner workings and practice of the religion was easy. My wife is of pioneer Mormon stock – some of whom have lapsed. And one of the lapsed ones is a cleric, an Episcopal priest, in fact. It was through him and his first person accounts that I learned of how everyday Mormons practice their religions. It was also through him that I got a insider’s look at the lives of the Mormon faithful. It was also through him that I learned the intimate details of the wedding ceremony that causes so many faithful young Mormons to become disillusioned enough to leave the church.

I like to say I write books about lawyers, not about murders. After all, a murder is a pretty boring event. Taken to its lowest common denominator, living flesh is turned into dead flesh in an instant. What makes a case interesting is the skill of the lawyer before a jury as they practice their ancient craft. And sometimes the skill is never seen as lawyers work behind the scenes for their clients.

Over a career that is becoming increasingly long, I’ve seen many of the best. I’ve written books about them, and hundreds, if not thousands, of stories about their cases. Two veteran lawyers, Gilbert Athay and Bob Stott would face each other should the case ever come to trial. Both knew it never would. Yet their machinations and the charade played by both were interesting.

I couldn’t have written about Athay and Stott without talking with their contemporaries. Athay, for the defense, is a longtime liberal crusader against the death penalty. Stott, is a career prosecutor, a Mormon, and already the controversial subject of a book, *The Mormon Murders*, in which it is alleged he protected the interests of the church over justice in a particularly bizarre case.

And then there is Utah itself. Nature looks down upon that state and smiles. While the desert of the Great Basin is a wasteland of truly biblical proportions, the grandeur of the Wasatch and High Uinta Mountains is unsurpassed. All that being said, it is without a doubt the most backward state in the union, making Alabama look almost progressive.

Why? Because the wagons have been circled so long by the conservative Mormon hierarchy against gentiles and their influence many institutions harken back to the 1950s. What's more, many Utahans would have it no other way..

I don't know of any other state today in which to get a drink in a public place you have to "join" a private club, or where alcohol is sold only in state owned and run stores. And that is just one item on a long list of quirks about the state I found interesting, and delightful in a perverse sort of way. Another is its politics. The legislature is dominated by Mormon elected officials who are among the most conservative politicians anywhere. Members of the LDS Church largely vote as a block, at least in much of Utah. I recall seeing a chilling poster of a man running for Congress once on a country road in the southern part of the state. It showed a well dressed, beefy, white male. On it were written two messages, his name, and the caption, "He's one of us."

Not a week goes by without a major story in a major daily newspaper about polygamy. Tell me one other state in which that happens?

Yet all of Utah is not a throwback to a long vanished America. Salt Lake City tries. It has even elected liberal Mayor Rocky Anderson to head its government, much to the consternation of the conservatives who must deal with him. And worse still, gentiles have surpassed the faithful within the city in the census. And the crowning blow – an openly gay Democrat represents the district housing Temple Square in the state senate.

So in writing *Every Woman's Nightmare* I had two primary elements to deal with, the domestic tragedy of a young couple's marriage, and the incredibly interesting atmosphere in which they grew up. It is an atmosphere that has evolved an "Us Against the World" attitude which has even resulted in violence against innocent people simply because they weren't Mormon. In September, 1857, a wagon train crossing Utah was attacked and more than 100 innocent pioneers were massacred at Mountain Meadows west of Cedar City. While the modern church has long denounced the killings, outsiders are still decidedly -- well, outsiders.

As I delved into Mormon history I learned that the flock has a convenient habit of forgetting the foibles of their pioneer ancestors, including Joseph Smith himself.

Mormons are an abstemious lot. They don't drink, smoke, or take coffee into their bodies. Yet the Prophet himself, Joseph Smith, ran a bar for a time until his first of many wives, Emma, threatened to throw him out of the house. And Brigham Young once thundered in speech in the Mormon Tabernacle itself that the faithful men of the church must absolutely stop spitting tobacco juice on the building's floor.

And even today, some, no many, Mormons have difficulty leaving the past behind. Old habits die hard, and for Fundamentalist Mormons, the habit of polygamy hasn't died at all.

The Mormon Church is a faith of prophecy and revelation. Its leader communes directly with God – and more importantly, the faithful believe God talks back. Such was the case in 1890 when Utah desperately wanted to join the Union. Yet Washington made it clear that its populace would have to give up plural marriage before the prospect would even be considered. In a revelation of convenience, the Prophet of the moment ordered scores of Mormon men to choose a single wife and Utah became a state in 1896.

While plural marriage is officially a thing of the past in the mainstream LDS Church, the institution of a man with one wife is embraced with reverence and is an integral part of the faith. Lori's husband, Mark Hacking (as incompetent killer as ever

walked the earth) was destined upon his own death to become a God of his own planet. Yep, you read it right. Had he not killed his wife, Mormon orthodoxy holds that Mark, if he remained a righteous man to the end of his days, would get his own world, surrounded by his happy family. And since Mormon marriage stipulates a bond for "Time and all Eternity," then if the marriage hadn't worked out and had not ended in murder, too bad for the wife. At her own death, she was stuck with the man she had married long ago but couldn't stomach after living with him. It is a pesky detail the prophets haven't quite worked out yet.

Such beliefs are definitely different from those of mainstream Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims. Many fundamentalist Christians such as Baptists find Mormonism so obnoxious to their preconceptions of faith that they brand the church's practitioners a cult.

And much of the Republican base which will decide if Mitt Romney should receive the nomination is Baptist or a part of another similar sect.. The former Massachusetts governor has a hill a difficult to climb as any slope at Snowbird.

When *Every Woman's Nightmare* was released in April, 2006, it was met with a firestorm of Mormon indignation in online reviews posted with Amazon. Even Lori Hacking's mother took her pound of my flesh saying, "I'm Lori's mother, so I have a pretty good understanding of what happened. If Mr. Long wanted to find accurate information about us "Mormons" and the religious doctrines in which we believe, he should have asked Church Public Relations, not an excommunicated member who carries a grudge. As a lifetime member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I barely recognize the religion Mr. Long describes. And, this book is full of errors, errors, errors! Where are St. Martins "fact checkers"? I think Lori is having a pretty good laugh, barely recognizing herself in this book. Readers beware!"

I suppose I should have paid her after all. And yes, the church PR flacks were the first to get a call from me. Hmmm. What's more, I treated Thelma Soares gently, reverently in the book.

While Thelma berated me and my work online, Lori brother Paul came to my defense on Amazon saying that "Lori was every brothers dream and this book portrays who and what Lori really was. I feel the book was well written and provides a good basis for this case."

Paul continued, saying "This book is not anti-Mormon nor is the author anti-Mormon. The people who write that this book is anti-Mormon are portraying their own opinion. I know in my opinion that this book is nothing to do with the LDS Church, except for the fact, that this story occurred in Utah where so much of daily life is intertwined with the LDS Church."

Paul ended his Amazon review saying, "This story is a tragedy that has affected not only the families involved but everyone who become in contact with this story. This book, in general, captures the feelings, emotions, and facts that occurred over the search for Lori, Mark's trial, and all points in between."

In researching and writing *Every Woman's Nightmare* I learned several indisputable facts. Many Mormons aren't familiar their historical past. Others, because they grew up with Mormon doctrine don't understand why those of other faiths find their beliefs and practices strange, alien, bizarre, and frankly balderdash.

The Mormon faith will find itself increasingly under media scrutiny as GOP presidential hopeful Mitt Romney makes his quest for the White House. The candidate has thus far finessed soft ball questions from a timid press unwilling to offend. That likely will not last. Some snotty reporter will eventually have the gumption to ask the man who would be the leader of the free world if he truly believes in the Mormon doctrine of Blood Atonement as postulated by Brigham Young (look it up).

The questions will be hard, and an entire state will likely cringe, wanting to withdraw tortoise like into its protective hard shell. Yet this time there will be no Amazon web site to provide an easy and unchallenged platform for those in denial to vent.

Suggested Reading:

No Man Knows My History, Fawn M. Brodie

The Mormon Murders, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith

Let's Let Common Sense Prevail

August 2007, *Texas Horse Talk Magazine*

By Steven Long

HOUSTON – In 1983 I wrote a cover story for *Houston City Magazine* that has become a footnote to Gulf Coast history. It was fiction based on fact, very well researched fact. The story followed a fictional hurricane as it spawned off the African continent, slowly made its way across the Atlantic, entered the Carribean, then the Gulf of Mexico, and finally slammed into Galveston Island with a 25 foot tidal surge breaching the island city's 17 foot seawall. The storm's 150 mile per hour winds caused significant damage to the city, and then the eye crossed the narrow spit of sand and was again over the waters of the bay.

I learned a great deal from that research. One thing is that we need to use a lot of common sense, and take what we see reported on television with a grain of salt. Moreover, we should be very reluctant to move our horses out of harms way, if they aren't in harms way in the first place.

In my fictional story, the eye of the hurricane I called Opal hit Downtown Houston with full Category Five force after drowning 30,000 in the low lying Bay Area communities around Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Pasadena.

All of that is possible, my research revealed. I had interviewed then National Hurricane Center Director. Dr. Neil Frank, and soon its soon to be director, Dr. Bob Sheets. Everything I wrote then was possible, they said. However, I didn't tell it all. I cautiously used the number of 30,000 dead. The experts had actually predicted 60,000, based on a reluctance of residents to evacuate.

The magazine was on the press when Hurricane Alicia struck Galveston head on, then traveled across West Bay to move over land and strike Houston, almost due north from its landfall.

The magazine hit the stands a week after Alicia struck and had resulted in \$600 million in damage. I was hailed by the my colleagues media as a seer, a prophet, a sage. I was none of these things, of course. I had just gotten lucky in the timing of the publishing of a well researched magazine story. It was, however, my first brush with fame as a journalist.

Alicia was a Category Three storm, yet it was terribly destructive.

And then there was Rita. When the storm was churning in the Gulf not that far off Galveston, news reports told us that it too was a Cat V monster. Hundreds of thousands took to the freeways to evacuate – the largest exodus of refugees in United States history. People were stranded for hours on the road, trapped in their cars in sweltering August heat. A few years earlier, almost the same thing happened when another storm named Allen was touted as a Cat V heading our way.

In both cases, the storms lost strength before hitting land – Allen in deep South Texas, and Rita along the Texas/Louisiana border. The massive evacuations were for naught.

The discomfort of spending an eternity in gridlock could have been avoided if many of the residents had utilized a few facts before hitting the highway.

Fact One – Most people are killed in a hurricane by rising water.

Fact Two – Even the worst storm here is only going to produce a tidal surge of 25 feet.

Fact Three – The overwhelming majority of people along the coast live at an elevation above 25 feet.

What does this tell us?

In Rita, almost all of Houston itself didn't need to evacuate and could have spent the run-up to the storm in the comfort of their homes. Even if the storm had actually hit, only the low lying coastal communities would have been devastated by tidal surge. The bottom line – there was absolutely no reason for most of the evacuation.

Now here's the tragic rub. The Houston media knew this, but in their war for ratings, the lucrative basis for advertising dollars coming into radio and television stations – they outdid themselves to cause panic.

What is more, they are still doing the same thing today.

Right now, Hurricane Dean, far out in the Atlantic, is being reported as an eminent risk to the Texas Gulf Coast. The fact is, even if it hits us, we need to use common sense. If the elevation of your home is less than 25 feet, evacuate, and start making plans to do it now. However, if you live above that level, sit tight and don't cram the freeways trying to get away from a threat to you that simply doesn't exist, that is not even possible.

Buy some bottled water, some canned goods, a Coleman stove, and a bucket or two, and stay home.

If you have a well built barn with a good roof, keep your horses buttoned up. If not, put them out to pasture and let them turn their butts into the wind and rain until the storm passes. Horses have been doing this since time immemorial. They are much better off than they would be stranded on a freeway in a hot trailer.

Death in the Brazos Bottom

August 2007, *In Cold Blog*

By Steven Long

The Brazos Valley is lush and green almost year round except in early spring when much of the land turns cyan, covered with Texas' signature flower the bluebonnet. The land is so rich that 136 years ago the state chose to build its agricultural college there in this fertile river bottom land. Since that time, Texas A&M has drawn students from far and wide to turn them into some of the best military officers, football players, engineers, farmers, and ranchers, the world has ever seen. To become a student at this storied school is to become a part of a tradition as rich as Texas itself.

And the land around the campus for miles and miles is horse country. College Station is home to the famed Catalena Cowgirls equine drill team, and its sister city Bryan, a horse chip's throw to the north, is home to the national champion precision horse team, Texas Women Astride.

And that is not to mention the rodeo cowboys, hunter/jumpers, reining horse riders, and dressage equestrians who make this land their home.

Texas A&M is a magnet for students from other nearby colleges and universities where undergraduates cross pollinate with frequent visits to the campus.

One such college kid, Kenneth Ryan Peterson, 21, of nearby Blinn College came to visit friends in Aggieland. On September 4, he will go on trial for the brutal murder of a young girl. However it won't be treated as a homicide under Texas law. Peterson will face judge and jury who will determine whether he violated the state's weak animal cruelty law.

You see, Peterson is alleged to have killed a horse.

Cowboy Chic was a 14-month old filly (a female equine under four-years-old) owned by 40-year-old Darla McCrady. The Palomino was her owner' dream, a dream she shared thousands of older women. The majority of horse owners in the United States today are middle aged women. They ride. They groom. They show. McCrady had just entered the horse in her first show. Chic came home with a blue ribbon.

The palomino filly was pastured near the A&M campus close to an apartment complex largely filled with students. The complex, like many near the campus was known for lively parties with plenty of drinking.

On October 13, 2006, Peterson and his buddy Walter Raymond Williams Jr, a Texasn A&M student, were partying with friends at the nearby apartment complex when Peterson told the group that he wanted to go on an "adventure" and kill a horse.

Nobody believed him, yet they egged the 6'2" student on.

Later his friends told police Peterson wanted to kill the filly because she had chased him across a pasture. The cops learned that they left the apartment and all went in search for the horse, armed with a knife, a polo mallet and a golf club with the head cut off. The students then climbed two fences to get into the pasture when Peterson and

Williams chased the filly and another horse into a corral. The others dropped back as Peterson proceeded to execute his adventure by attempting to kill Chic.

Williams later told the cops that his pal hit the horse in the head with the mallet and then jumped on top of her slashing her throat. He said that Peterson then fled back to the apartment.

Chick was bleeding profusely as Williams and another student stood looking at the gravely wounded animal. The A&M student told police that he performed a mercy killing to hasten Peterson's victim's death. He stabbed the filly twice in the chest with the golf club shaft killing her.

Darla McCrady came to her pasture to feed the next morning and instantly knew something was amiss. Her young palomino filly didn't come to greet her as usual. Her plans for the future were crushed when she found her horse lying dead in a pool of blood.

Meanwhile, police had been called by the manager of the Reveille Ranch apartments after maintenance workers changing air conditioning filters saw and reported a large amount of blood in one of the apartments.

Both Peterson and Williams were quickly arrested. Williams soon implicated his pal from Blinn College relating the entire bloody story.

The two were charged with one count each of animal cruelty and a count each of criminal mischief. Williams was also charged with lying to a cop.

Prosecutors view the case as strong, and a plea bargain by Williams is likely. In order to secure a conviction, Assistant District Attorney Shane Phelps will have to prove that the horse was tortured, a notoriously difficult allegation to prove. However, the prosecutor is confident of securing a conviction and views his greatest challenge in the punishment phase of the trial.

Why is Texas' law so weak that such a dreadful crime is only punishable as a state jail felony in which the maximum sentence Peterson can receive is two years locked up, and a fine of \$10,000 per charge.

You see, in Texas horses are considered livestock, and as such just about anything can be done to them as long as it isn't willful torture. As a food animal, or beast of burden, a horse isn't protected by laws that shield companion animals. In fact, penalties for harming a pet gerbil or even a goldfish are more stringent in Texas than animal cruelty laws that relate to horses.

Texas farmers and ranchers, aided by the libertarian wing of the Texas GOP fiercely protect this coveted exemption. In this year's session of the state legislature, the law was strengthened, but too late for Chic. And despite a determined effort by activists attempting to remove horses from the livestock exemption, their efforts fell on deaf ears. Lawmakers feared angering agricultural interests in the nation's largest state.

So Kenneth Ray Peterson is accused of killing a horse, nothing more.

Since the killing of Chic, *Texas Horse Talk Magazine*, which I edit (www.texashorsetalk.com), reported strangely similar horse murders in Fort Worth and the small town of Willis near Houston. The killers in those cases have not been apprehended.

And despite the fact that one of the horses had its eye gouged out and was left to die, well, after all, it was only a horse.

