

“UTAH TAKES A HOLIDAY”

An interview with Paul Swenson



Dialogue: How long has *Utah Holiday* been in business?

Swenson: It will be six years in November 1977. It started in the basement of Bob Coles' home. Bob is the publisher of the magazine. He had been publishing industrial magazines for several years (*Intermountain Contractor*, *Intermountain Industry*) and he had always wanted to start a city magazine—leisure and entertainment-oriented. He felt that Salt Lake could support one, so in October, 1971, the first issue went out with very little editorial content and some reviews of the arts. It included a story on the building of the Mormon tabernacle with some heretofore unpublished drawings, and so *Utah Holiday* was born!

I was a reporter on the *Deseret News* at the time. Bob knew that I had wanted to do some movie criticism, so he asked me to write a review for the first issue. By the second issue I was recruiting all my friends to write for the magazine, and without really realizing it, I was becoming the editor!

Dialogue: When did you actually take over?

Swenson: I can't remember exactly when I was put on the masthead. It was probably about five or six issues into the first year. I was still working at the *News*, and I continued to do so. *Utah Holiday* wasn't much work at first, not nearly what it later became. It was possible for a while to work full-time and still put out the magazine.

Dialogue: You say the magazine had a modest beginning. Describe what it is today.

Swenson: I think it compares both esthetically and in content with most other city magazines, such as *Los Angeles Magazine*, the *San Francisco Magazine* and the best one, in my opinion—*The Texas Monthly*. Our average size now is 84 pages. Interestingly enough, we had hoped to come out every two weeks, but after two issues it became apparent that was going to be too much work. A monthly would be the logical cutback, but because of the immediacy of some of the reviews, we decided to put it out every three weeks. It was probably the only publication in the world to come out every three weeks.

PAUL SWENSON was interviewed for *Dialogue* in Salt Lake City, September, 1977 by David Briscoe.

Dialogue: And it came out every three weeks for four or five years?

Swenson: Well, until this year, in fact (1977). We finally faced facts. Because we did go monthly, we were able to jump from 59 pages an issue to 84 pages. Strangely enough, our readers didn't seem to notice that we'd made the change!

Dialogue: What is the circulation?

Swenson: The total press run is 22,000. That is 14,000 resident issues and 8,000 visitors issues. We do two editions—one for tourists and visitors, and one for residents and general readers. The subscription rate is \$8.50. Originally it was \$4.00, and we were putting out 17 issues, so maybe it was a better bargain. But, of course we were not doing the stuff we're doing now.

Dialogue: Has the philosophy of the magazine changed at all through the years?

Swenson: I think Bob Coles and I both knew what we wanted to do from the first. We had been missionary companions, and although we had not been close for a number of years, we did know each other's interests and ideals. We have never really argued about it. Right from the first we knew we couldn't get into too many heavy issues because we were too small and did not have the necessary space for solid, in-depth reporting. We did have a commitment, however, to serious criticism of the arts. We think that set the tone for analytical positions on a whole range of issues. We noticed that when we criticized a play, the roof of the Pioneer Memorial Theatre did not fall in, so we decided we could apply the critical eye to other things.

Dialogue: You began with the name *Utah Holiday*, but the magazine seems to have gone beyond that rather official-sounding title.

Swenson: Yes, the name really is an anachronism. *Utah Holiday* does not really describe what we are doing. Stories about travel and vacations, of course, fit the title, and our visitors identify with that. But eventually, we will probably have to drop the *Holiday* and become, simply *Utah Magazine*. (A magazine using that same name went two years and then dropped out of sight, but they still have the rights to the name.)

Dialogue: Is it possible that an innocuous name like *Utah Holiday* has enabled you to do more than you might have done if you had called it *Dissent* or something a little more hard-hitting?

Swenson: That's interesting. I never thought of that. I suppose the gap between what people assumed we are going to print and what we actually do print does soften the blow—I don't know.

Dialogue: The main reason for this interview is that we would like to discuss some of the articles in *Utah Holiday* which would interest *Dialogue* readers. Could you run through some of your projects that relate to Mormonism and the Mormon culture?

Swenson: Most of these have been written in the last three years. I suppose the first in-depth reporting we did was the story on the Salt Lake City newspapers in November, 1975. Although it didn't relate directly to Mormonism, it did comment on the *Deseret News* and the Church's ownership of the paper and the part played by its Board of Trustees, the Quorum of the Twelve. It discussed the paper's policy and the interplay between church authorities and governance of the paper.

Dialogue: Was it the first story to actually analyze the local media in any depth?

Swenson: It may have been. Books and articles have been written about both papers, of course, but this was an attempt to make judgements about the job they do in reporting the news in Salt Lake City. We compared the two papers, discussed their competition or lack of it. That story brought in many letters asking us to do more.

Dialogue: Did you hear from your former colleagues at the *News*?

Swenson: I got some cold stares, but I also got some warm congratulations. As I remember, the *Deseret News* came off looking pretty good. Some people don't like anything that smacks of criticism, but, for the most part, people responded in a rewarding way.

I was asked "What qualifies you as a critic of journalism?" Well, I don't know how you become qualified. We did it because nobody else was doing it, and I had always been interested in both of the newspapers. I had always wanted to read such a piece myself.

Probably the most gratifying response was a call from the president of the *Deseret News Publishing Company*, Gordon B. Hinckley, who said, "I saw nothing particularly upsetting about your piece." I was cheered by that, and then he went on to say that he thought it was good that somebody had done it, that some of the suggestions in the article could help in planning long range improvements for the *Deseret News*.

If I remember correctly, he told me some of the points he disagreed with, and I really appreciated his open response. When you do such a story, there are always those who say, "Hey, listen, don't do it. It will make somebody mad, and you won't be able to publish anymore." So it is encouraging to see that the sky doesn't fall in just because you try to take an honest look at something. Sometimes you do a bad job of it, but that's different from being accused of striking at the roots of civilization!

Dialogue: What was your next investigative article?

Swenson: Well, let's see, I'm trying to remember what we did after that. I think we started three regular columns on politics, on city architecture and on media. Naturally some of these touched on Mormon subjects, since Mormonism does enter politics sometimes. We did another media cover story on television news which analyzed the three local commercial channels including Church-owned KSL. That same year, 1975, we did a cover story on the state legislature. It analyzed to some degree persistent rumors that the legislature is controlled by calls from the Church. The myth is that if someone in the church office building makes a call to his legislator on the floor, certain issues will be quickly settled. As far as we could tell, those

rumors are just that—rumors. Although some legislators take indirect hints from church leaders on certain issues, it is extremely rare for the Church to step in—officially or unofficially.

Dialogue: What were some of your other stories?

Swenson: In 1976 we really geared up on a number of cover stories directly or indirectly involving the Church. Earlier in the year we did a story on Judge Ritter, the controversial judge who is rumored to be antipathetic toward the Church.

In the same year we did a cover story on the power structure of the Salt Lake City government and its economics, attempting to delineate the most powerful people, how they operate and what kind of relationships they had with each other and with the Church and other Mormons. Some of the people discussed in the story were not only Mormons, but were Mormon General Authorities. In fact, the story made the point that during President McKay's presidency, he often met with government and civic leaders. President McKay, Gus Backman and John Fitzpatrick, who was then the publisher of the *Tribune*, and in some ways the very voice of Gentile Utah, were a kind of tripartite power structure. I don't think they went out of their way to exercise great power plays, but Gus Backman was the Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and so the three men were able to communicate to the Gentiles what the Mormons wanted, and vice versa. In some ways it was a good arrangement. The article traced the continuing progress from that to the power structure of today, which is more broken up and not as easily defined. We listed President Ezra Taft Benson, President N. Eldon Tanner, Gordon B. Hinckley and Wendell J. Ashton, managing director of church public communications, as powerful voices in the community. I would like to know what the General Authorities thought of it. We had excellent response to the issue but we never did hear from any General Authorities.

That same spring we published a cover story by Bill Beecham and David Briscoe of the Associated Press which analyzed LDS Church finances. It was originally an Associated Press article transmitted nationally but never carried locally. We felt it was a valuable story, so we asked Briscoe and Beecham to expand on it a bit and to update it for us. We received only one negative letter and only a few negative phone calls.

About this time some people were beginning to think that somehow *Utah Holiday* was—if not *anti-Mormon*—at least willing to print things that reflect negatively on the Church. I admit this bothered me a great deal. Both Mormons and non-Mormons seemed to think that. Some of the non-Mormon letters would say, "I'm glad to see you are doing something nobody else is, even if it reflects negatively upon the Church." Others would say "I'm glad you've seen fit to expose the evils of Mormonism."

Dialogue: So critics on both sides were misrepresenting you?

Swenson: Right. Most of it I could laugh at. Some letters were ludicrous enough to be laughable, but others would bother me. Being attacked from both sides doesn't necessarily mean you are being balanced! What it may mean is that people are finding you hard to pigeonhole, and many people are so used to thinking of articles as black-white, Mormon or anti-Mormon, that they cannot realize the possibility of

there being a broad middle ground. I think we've done articles that reflect very positively on Mormons and on the Mormon Church.

Dialogue: You haven't done any articles that could be said to come right out of the Church public relations office, have you?

Swenson: Well, no, we haven't. I think the Church public relations office is doing its job as it should. I think, however, that it is the responsibility of the local newspapers, both Mormon-owned *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune* to treat stories coming from the Mormon Church as they would stories coming from any other news organizations. They should ask the right questions, the tough questions that get at the truth, whatever that truth may be. I don't mean to imply that I think the Church is covering up. I really don't think it is. I think the responsibility is on the reporter or the journalist to ask the questions that give an in-depth picture. It isn't always the job of the public relations department to give the answers that the reporter is supposed to dig out.

Dialogue: Have you ever had a public relations office suggest a story to you?

Swenson: No, not that I can think of. We get their releases all the time.

Dialogue: You are on their mailing list, then?

Swenson: Yes. They sometimes comment on stories that we're interested in and give valuable background. Even if we were running that kind of material, we wouldn't publish a straight news release. We're not a daily operation, after all.

Dialogue: You say you try to do stories the newspapers don't do. Has this perhaps resulted in your doing more stories on Mormonism? I'm under the impression that most of the stories in the Salt Lake newspapers or in any of the Utah media, are covering events of interest to the Church rather than stories that ask probing questions.

Swenson: Yes, I think like all too many newspapers, the traditional way of doing things is to cover events by press release, or by meetings so that the crush of daily events preoccupy the staffer and use up the space. The *Deseret News*, by the way, has really done some trail-blazing in terms of serious, in-depth stories and investigative reporting in the past couple of years, unlike anything done in Salt Lake before.

Dialogue: Even involving Church issues, even the stories of the polygamist murders . . . ?

Swenson: Exactly! Yes, the *Deseret News* has been courageous in many ways, and you know, if both papers did more investigative work, I'd be glad to see it. There would be more news and more interesting things kicked up that we could use. We're never going to run out of stories to do because the fact is that there are more than we have space or time to publish. The frustrating thing is that you don't have space enough to use them all.

Dialogue: There were other articles having to do with Mormonism?

Swenson: Yes. The most recent one, and I am as proud as anything that it was done—is our story on the International Woman’s Year Conference in Salt Lake City, around which much controversy was aired in the newspapers, not only in the news columns but in the letters sections too. There developed a great polarity between the Mormon and non-Mormon community in Salt Lake and in the state as a whole. I knew that we should carry something. We thought it would be difficult to find someone to do it because the conference had already happened, and we had not realized how big it was. So we were fortunate in finding someone who had written for us in the past, Linda Sillitoe. She had attended the conference and was personally concerned about what had happened. We asked her to try to find out why there was such a cauldron of bad feeling. And I think she did a remarkable reporting job! That is the kind of story we would like to do more of. She put that story together in about 12 days—which is truly amazing—but she really got beneath the surface.

Dialogue: Hadn’t you already done a women’s issue?

Swenson: Yes, we did an issue on Utah Women in May of 1977, a series of small stories on the lives of what we called the New Utah women, women who were in one way or another breaking traditional patterns. And then we did a story called “Beyond Fascination Towards Assertion” essentially on Mormon women some would label feminist, others would not, but Mormon women who believe there are positive things about the women’s movement. It is ironic in that it painted such a rosy picture just before the women’s conference when they were virtually unheard there, although several of them—like Christine Durham, who was on the cover, did speak at the conference. It became apparent that there were many Mormon women who regarded the whole movement not only with suspicion, but with hostility and fear.

Another of our cover stories focused on the relationships between Mormons and non-Mormons. We called it “Mormons and Gentiles.” And we had six people working for a total of 35 interviews. Then we tried to make sense out of relationships between Mormons and non-Mormons and their historical development. We looked at what both groups need to do to better those relationships. I think it was a very interesting issue. I’m afraid, however, that it did not delve as deeply as it should have. Some readers thought there was too much emphasis on what Mormons should be doing to better things, and not enough on what Gentiles could do. In looking back, I think they may be right.

What I’d really like to do now is have somebody write a story from a Mormon viewpoint about how difficult it is to build a relationship with someone when they bring pre-judgments, prejudice and condescension to that relationship, never asking questions about your own feelings. I think Mormons in this community as well as elsewhere have the feeling that they are being shut out. In some departments at the University of Utah there are no Mormons teaching. There seems to be a feeling that somehow Mormons would pollute or dilute the academic mix, that somehow Mormons cannot teach in certain disciplines. Yes there are still stories to be told.

Dialogue: You won an award for an article last year that had a church connection, didn't you?

Swenson: Yes, in fact there were two articles in the same issue that received Honorable Mention from Sigma Delta Chi in 1976. The one was on the *power people* article I just discussed, and the other was a story called "Strange Harvest." It was an involved story about a fruit grower and processor down in Orem who lost his business and his home, virtually all his assets by what he claimed was collusion between high state and church officials. I can't say much more about it because it is still being adjudicated. One thing I regret is that we edited out a nasty comment made by a church authority. Even though it was terrible, I think now that we should have printed it—let the chips fall where they may. It was not an important part of the story, but I regret that we cut it out.

Dialogue: Have you ever considered publishing fiction?

Swenson: Yes, we published the chapter from Emma Lou Thayne's *Never Past the Gate*. I would like to do more of that. I would like to publish poetry too. I suppose we haven't encouraged it enough.

Dialogue: Perhaps one rather cynical way to look at some of the things you've done would be to say that there really isn't the need for the self-censorship that often occurs on Mormon-related stories. I get the impression that many subjects are just not dealt with because of the fear of criticism. Some of the stories you've done point out that you can do them, as in the case of the article on church finances.

Swenson: Right. The way you phrased that comment—"cynical reaction"—reminds me that I sense that reaction more often in non-Mormons than in Mormons. They say, "Hey, listen, how do you get away with that? When are they going to crack down on you?" A former Mormon writes to me about every two weeks hoping that I won't be censored for what I am doing, and asking if I have already been censored. I responded personally to his last letter because it represents an unfortunate point of view. People have disagreed with us and have pointed out our errors as well they should, and there have been angry letters and even angry people, but, my goodness, there just hasn't been that kind of "crack down" people seem to fear. In fact, I regard it as ludicrous that such a crack down could even be expected!

Dialogue: There hasn't even been pressure on your advertisers or through your advertisers, has there?

Swenson: Not that I know of.

Dialogue: In a nutshell, to what do you attribute the success of your magazine?

Swenson: Success is really a relative word. . . .

Dialogue: I was going to ask you if it was successful, but I think we can assume that.

Swenson: It is successful in that I think we are finally having an impact on the community. I see that people are noticing the magazine, realizing that we are going to stick around, and they are interested to see what we will do next. Financially we are still struggling, and it would be nice if *Utah Holiday* could hire some full-time writers. In that way we are far from the success we'd like.

Dialogue: Most of your writing is unpaid?

Swenson: No, everything is paid. But not paid what they are worth. We have some excellent writers who are loyal to us, but it would be nice to have some full-time investigative writers. The degree of success we have reached has to do in large degree with that fact that there are enough good writers in Utah who want an outlet for their talents. We could not have survived if we had paid people what they are worth.

Dialogue: Is there something about the character of Salt Lake City that insures survival of the magazine?

Swenson: Yes, I think that Mormons and especially Utahns, because of their low wages, are used to doing volunteer work and getting their kicks out of a job well done. I think many of the people who write for the magazine are in that category—my Mormon friends. Perhaps, too, it is the close-knit character of the society. On a college campus you can get people to work for nothing, as in the Peace Corps. And if you have people who feel close to each other and dependent upon each other, they will volunteer to put out magazines. *Dialogue*, *Exponent II*, *Sunstone* and others rely on that same spirit. It would be difficult to imagine such a magazine arising out of a city like San Francisco. It would probably be laughed out of town!

I read an article once which stated that a minimum of six million dollars is needed to start a city magazine. I think Bob Coles had 300 dollars, and he borrowed a couple of thousand from his father. During those first two years there was virtually no growth, and if we had really stopped to consider that, we might have given up in despair. But we were always too busy getting the next issue out to stop and think about it.

Dialogue: In a way it is kind of a neighborhood magazine in the spirit of a small community. People who contribute are friends, people you know. And it has grown into something that is gaining wider recognition. You were even mentioned in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, weren't you?

Swenson: Yes, little encouragements like that kept me going at first, but now we have turned enough corners to be able to stick around.

I think the city format is a lot of fun. It is a mix of serious stuff and light stuff, and it's informative. People want to know where to eat. They want to get somebody's opinion on theatre and films and music and what else is going on in the community. If, in addition we can give them good reporting, then they are hooked!