



UTAH

Living in Utah

A guide to separate reality from myths

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From myths about its physical features to stories concerning legendary pioneer Brigham Young, there are plenty of misconceptions about the state of Utah.

Numerous religious rumors, folktales, urban legends and just plain inaccuracies and confusion run rampant among the public.

We'll give Donny Osmond the first crack at dispelling one myth about Utah.

"The biggest misconception," he told "Entertainment Tonight," "is that it's not all populated by Osmonds. There are other people besides us who live in the state."

They just don't sing or smile as well.

Here's an A-to-Z look — OK, a B-to-Y look, we're still searching for the A and Z rumors — at "Utah Facts 101," in which we attempt to dismiss or substantiate various ideas and facts about the state, its history, terrain and population. (This is not, however, an all-inclusive list of the nearly endless rumors and legends about Utah. Several may have been spread since this was written.)

Bankruptcy: Utah leads the nation in personal bankruptcies.

True. An average of one in 33.6 households claim insolvency (not to be confused with claiming insanity).

Bear Lake is one of the deepest lakes in the West and has a bottomless abyss with a monster lurking in it.

Fear not the next time you go swimming, it's false. It's only 210 feet deep when full (of water, not bears) and likely below the 200-foot mark in the current drought. (Crater Lake is 1,949 feet deep, Lake Tahoe is 1,645 and Yellowstone Lake is 400 feet deep.) As for the monster, well, it hasn't been substantiated. But just in case, watch your toes while water skiing.

Bear River is the nation's longest river that doesn't empty into an ocean.

True. Some 500 miles cross through three states. It doesn't have a monster, either.

Birth rate: Utah has the highest in the nation.

True. More Utahns are born here than anywhere else. And U.S. citizens, too — 21.7 births per 1,000 in the population. In other words, the Stork gets paid a pretty penny in overtime here.

Brigham Young famous comment No. 1: Did he really say, "What a withered wasteland!" when entering the Salt Lake Valley on July 24, 1847? Of course not. How about: "This is the Place"? (Question mark for our question, not his statement.)

Sort of. The second president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints specifically said, "This is the right place. Drive on." The condensed version just fit better in headlines.

Brigham Young famous comment No. 2: Did he really say that any unmarried man older than age 25 was a "menace to society" or was he referring only to his great-great-great-grandson, Steve Young?

President Young only said he wanted every man in the land older than 18 to take a wife. It was Elder George Q. Cannon, an LDS Church apostle, who said in 1878: "I am

firmly of the opinion that a large number of unmarried men, over the age of 24 years, is a dangerous element in any community."

Brigham Young's famous hearse: It sits in front of the Haunted Mansion at California's Disneyland, right? You know, you've had your picture taken next to Goofy there, right?

Completely untrue. (The hearse, not the photo.) President Young didn't have a hearse, according to LDS historian Glen Leonard. He was carried on a slab by other church leaders from the Tabernacle to his grave site. (And, no, the slab isn't at Disneyland, either.)

Cain is really Bigfoot: Oh yeah, and he lives in the Wasatch Mountains.

Purely conjecture. This stems from a story on pages 127-128 of Spencer W. Kimball's "Miracle of Forgiveness," in which an early LDS apostle, David W. Patten, meets a strange, dark, tall and hairy man who identifies himself as the original Cain from the Book of Genesis. The Bigfoot/Cain idea originated in 1980 following apparent Bigfoot sightings in South Weber.

Cable television: Utah has the nation's lowest number of cable households.

True. The penetration rate was at 51.8 percent in 2002. (Second is Montana at 52.5 percent). That might explain why the service is so s-l-o-w.

Cola/caffeine drinks: Many are under the assumption that the consumption of cola/caffeine drinks are against the LDS Church's Word of Wisdom and that's why you can't find one of these "hard" drinks at Brigham Young University. Others believe Brother Jones saw a church leader drink a Pepsi during a talk once so it's OK.

Truth is, the church has no official cola/caffeine drink position. It simply advises against consuming drinks that contain harmful ingredients or which may be addictive (not including milk or red punch).

Department stores were invented here: Many claim ZCMI, or Zions Cooperative

Mercantile Institution, was the nation's first department store and that Brigham Young still has a suit on layaway.

Yes and no. A century before selling out to Meier & Frank in 2001, ZCMI opened in 1867 and was dedicated to giving local merchants a way to sell their stuff for low prices. President Young actually bought his suits at Mr. Mac's. (OK, not really.)

Divorces 'R Us: Because of the high amount of young-age marriages, Utah has a reputation of having the highest divorce rate in the country.

Inaccurate. Utah ranks just 16th highest among the 50 states.

Eagle Scouts flock here: Does Utah really produce more Eagle Scouts than any other state?

It's true, Scout's honor. Almost three times as many boys earn the award in Utah than the national average. And that's not counting all the "Life" Scouts who were only two merit badges away.

Electric traffic lights: It's a Utahn's fault that we get stuck at red lights so often.

Could be. According to some accounts, the first traffic light (a birdhouse-type doohickey) was invented by Salt Lake City policeman Lester Wire in 1912. (Here's hoping a Utahn will discover synchronized lights before 2012.)

Energy consumption: With the nation's highest per-capita use rate, Utah zaps enough electricity and power to light 17 European countries or one Las Vegas hotel.

False. Utah ranks 33rd among the states — in part, probably, because of frugal mothers and fathers who lament about it costing 25 cents every time you turn the lights on and off.

Elevation: Utah is higher (we're talking sea level here) than any other state in the nation, even higher than Colorado, Alaska and that patch of grass where they held Woodstock.

Bingo. Based on county high points at 11,226 feet above sea level. Utah also has more peaks higher than 10,000 feet than any other state. Even Iowa.

Flunking the final exam: Perhaps you've heard the story or a version of it: Students at either BYU or the University of Utah pass by a beggar seeking assistance on the way to a final exam for an LDS Institute of Religion class on Christ's life. No one helps the man, actually an actor, and so they all flunk the class.

Jan Harold Brunvand, U. folklore expert, said the story can't be verified and it also meets two other parameters of urban legends by teaching a moral and being told with slight variations. In other words, they all failed Institute for other reasons.

Great Salt Lake: It's so salty, you can walk or float on it.

False. It's so stinky sometimes, you can't get near enough to even try. Only brine shrimp without use of olfactory senses dare go near. But it is the largest salt lake in North America and is three to five times saltier than the ocean (depending, of course, on the chef's tastes). It's also the largest lake west of the Mississippi River. (Then again, after this drought, it's one of the only lakes left this side of the Mississippi.)

Home computer use: Salt Lake City ranks No. 1 in computer geeks per capita. (Insert your favorite Super Dell joke here.)

To be nice, we'll leave out the word geek and say it's true. More than 60 percent of Salt Lake households have computers.

Household size: Utah has the largest average size in the country. No, this isn't a lead-in to a Chuck-A-Rama joke. But . . .

It's true as far as people per household goes: 3.13 (people, not children).

Hunting is a no-no: Some factions believe hunting is against the teachings of the LDS Church, and not because of the unsightly orange apparel.

False. Some past church leaders, like President Joseph F. Smith, taught that animals or birds should not be killed unless they are needed for food. However, a 1979 official

church statement said the decision on whether to hunt or fish is left up to the individual. The church is only against the unnecessary and wasteful slaughter of animals and not against hunting or fish and game control.

Hypnotism is a no-no: You are not supposed to let someone tell you in a monotone voice, "You are getting sleepy" or allow them to make you act like a chicken at a comedy club. It's against LDS Church doctrine, right?

Partially true. "The use of hypnosis under professional supervision for the treatment of diseases or mental disorders is a question to be determined by competent medical authorities. Church members should not participate in hypnosis for the purposes of demonstrations for entertainment," a 1999 official LDS Church statement said.

Ice cream consumption: I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream more than anybody else — that's the common conception at least.

Sorry, Salt Lake City. Portland, Ore., St. Louis and Seattle comprise the top three ice cream consumers. And Utah is not one of the top five producers of ice cream. (This is unacceptable. Hungry, prideful Utahns unite and do something about this — at Leatherby's and Cold Stone!)

Jell-O consumption: I Jell-O, you Jell-O . . . uh, doesn't work as well, but another common conception is that Utah slurps down more wiggly, jiggly gelatin than anyone.

It's true: Utahns consume Jell-O at twice the national average. No wonder Bill Cosby likes us so much.

KFC should've been UFC: Grandpas have been claiming for generations that the world's first Kentucky Fried Chicken started in Salt Lake City.

Grandpa wasn't just pulling your drumstick. The colonel first cooked up his secret finger-licking good recipe with those yummy original spices at the Harmans Restaurant on 3300 South and State Street in 1952.

Kids play: With all those children running around McDonald's playlands across the

Beehive State, there's no doubt this place has the most youngsters in the country.

Sure enough. The mean age here is 27.1, as compared to a 35.3 national average.

Literacy rate: Utah has the highest reading rate in the nation.

True. Ninety-four percent of residents age 20 and older can read and write (including a few at the Deseret Morning News).

Marriage refund: If you graduate from BYU without getting married, your tuition is refunded.

Uncertain. Neither has ever happened. OK, that's not true, of course — single graduates only get 50 percent back.

Mount Timpanogos: Not only is it supposedly the highest peak in the Wasatch Mountains, but a really large woman made its peak her final resting spot.

False. Mount Nebo is the tallest at 11,928 feet. Timp registers in at a second-highest 11,750. As for Sleeping Beauty, we won't know until a really big Prince Charming gives her a smooch.

Ogden City's secret tunnels: Legend has it that a vast network of underground tunnels exists below historic 25th Street.

There are some intriguing basements under some of the old bars of the city's "Two Bit Street," but there's no current evidence of widespread tunnels, though a few connections logically might have existed to aid bootlegging traffic and sneaking into Wildcat sporting events.

Piano Land: Utah has the most ebony and ivory keys per capita — true or falsetto?

This isn't just piano-teacher propaganda. The Beehive State sells pianos at five times the national average, meaning, of course, more kids in Utah are thinking of ways to get out of piano lessons than anywhere else.

Polygamy: All Utahns have multiple wives, except the women.

Wrong. Most Utahns do have multiple parents, though.

Prescription Land: Utah has a reputation of prescribing more antidepressant drugs than any other state.

The depressing truth: Utah's antidepressant prescription rate is nearly twice the national average.

Radio stations: The Salt Lake radio airwaves are more crowded than anywhere else.

Believe it. You can tune into 29 AM and 32 FM stations, as many as Chicago, New York or Los Angeles. By the way, it only seems like they synchronize their commercials.

Rattlesnakes, westward ho! Is it a tall tale, or do Salt Lake County rattlers really migrate each spring from the Wasatch Mountain foothills to the west desert?

This is unfounded. Different snakes live in different locations and can't travel that far — not even through secret underground passages.

Salt Lake City will be wickedest: Some claim an LDS Church prophecy predicts this lovely Deseret will become the wickedest den of sin, a downright Sodom and Gomorrah.

Not quite. The actual prophecy made by Heber C. Kimball, an LDS apostle in Brigham Young's time, states that Salt Lake City will be "classed among the wicked cities of the world." (This is good news for some.)

Smoking deaths: Fewer Utahns die from smoking than anywhere else.

That's true, at 159.8 deaths per 100,000 people, a national low. Thank Lab Rat 204.

Taxes: In Utah, you can count on three things: Being asked if you're Mormon, death and state taxes being highest in the nation.

True, true and false. According to the U.S. Census and Tax Foundation, Utah's local and state tax rate is eighth highest. And for all taxes, the state ranks 27th. Utah's taxes on gasoline are the nation's ninth highest.

Television birthplace: Thanks to hometown boy Philo T. Farnsworth, Utahns were first to be swamped with infomercials and reality shows.

It is true, at least the part about Farnsworth inventing the TV in 1927.

The Three Nephites: Various stories around Utah credit these three "translated beings" from Book of Mormon times for performing modern-day miracles.

However, Elder James E. Talmage, an early LDS leader, said the Three Nephites would be the most overworked of all individuals on the basis of all the feats being attributed to them.

U.S. Constitution: It will "hang by a thread," according to one LDS prophecy of the last days, won't it?

Joseph Smith indeed made this prophecy, though later recollections by other church leaders indicated it may or may not be saved, depending on if God wants it saved.

The Vanishing Hitchhiker: An elderly man was picked up off the side of the road and began warning the people in the vehicle they should have adequate food storage. Then, suddenly, he vanished from the back seat in a ghostly manner.

Brunvand, University of Utah folktale expert, believes the LDS tale comes from prevalent non-LDS stories of similar, but never substantiated, occurrences. That he was carrying a "Kolob or bust" sign should've been a clue this was an urban legend.

Wasatch Mountains: They run from Nephi to Brigham City, or do they?

Actually, they go from Nephi to Soda Springs, Idaho, a 220-mile distance, and include several "fingers," including the Wellsville Mountains.

Water wasters: Despite "Slow the flow" campaigns, Utahns are notorious water

guzzlers.

Fact: Utah has the highest rate of residential water use in the United States— 269 gallons a day per household — despite being the second-driest state.

Wellsville Mountains: Some claim the steepest mountains in the world are west of Wellsville.

That story's on a slippery slope, according to Donald Currey, chairman of the U. geography department, who labels this steepest claim as "purely rhetorical." Although they are steep and very narrow in the Sherwood Hills area, there's no known formula for determining steepness. At a maximum height of 9,372 feet, they are also far shorter than many other ranges.

We're No. 1: Smoke-free job sites; current non-smokers; percentage of Christian adherents; most likely to have engaged in leisure time physical activity in past 30 days; percentage who are bilingual; percentage of driving that is on interstates; and MS cases per capita.

All true.

We're No. 50: Percentage of baby boomers; percentage of Methodists; percentage of students in private schools, K-12; spending per student in public schools; alcohol consumption per capita; families headed by a single parent; and births to unwed mothers.

Yet more inventions: Fry sauce and the first video game (Pong) were invented by Utahns.

True. Not at the same time, though.

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