The *Keep-A-Pitchinin* or the Mormon Pioneer was Human
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Ronald W. Walker

“If there's anybody doleful
Just grab him by the fin
And lead him to the office
Of the keep-a-pitchinin.”

*Keep-A-Pitchinin*, March 1, 1870, p. 3.

Salt Lake’s short-lived *Keep-A-Pitchinin* (pronounced “keep a pitch-in’in”) was more than one of the West’s first illustrated journals and humor periodicals. Written by men of talent, including sons of Mormon apostles and even a distinguished apostle incognito, its boisterous wit demonstrated that the nineteenth century Mormon pioneer was something besides a crabbed and humorless yeoman building a commonwealth. It testified to the early settlers’ humanity, providing a valuable but over-looked index to those concerns and qualities which shaped Utah society. In 1938 Cecil Alter’s *Early Utah Journalism* declared the periodical was “probably one of the longest remembered and least important of all Utah papers.” From today’s perspective he was wrong on both accounts.¹

The frivolous and irrelevant tone of the *Keep-A-Pitchinin* belied its apparent purpose. Its chief editor “Uno Hoo,” whose editorial assistants were “Ubet Urlife” and “B. I. Z. Ness,” ostensibly explained its origin. “Everything was dull, dark and torpid,” he wrote. “The world needed waking up.”² But from every indication the proposed “arousing of humanity” proceeded from a specific and serious intent. While the paper had commenced as early as 1867 as primarily an occasional advertising broadside, only in 1870, after the Godbeite protest began to rend Mormon society, did the *Keep-A-Pitchinin* become a regular bi-monthly. Hardly coincidental, the Godbeite “New Movement” became a consistent victim of the paper’s satire. Led by such former Mormons as William S. Godbe, E. L. T. Harrison, Amasa Lyman, Henry Lawrence, Edward Tullidge, and T. B. H. Stenhouse, the Godbeites spurned what they considered to be the theological fundamentalism, the cultural and geographical isolationism, and the temporal emphasis of nineteenth century Mormonism. Embracing spiritualism and given to intellectual pretension, the “New Movement” became an irresistible staple for the periodical’s humor.

But the *Keep-A-Pitchinin’s* attraction to Godbeitiism involved more than humor seeking its natural affinity. During the schismatic crisis the
periodical became an important vehicle and voice for orthodoxy, its humor a perfect foil to the Godbeite challenge. If not tied directly to the Mormon leadership, it certainly possessed semi-official approbation. It was recommended to the Saints by the Church organ, the Deseret News, printed upon the Church owned press, and written by men closely associated with the Church leaders. Indeed the Mormon leadership may well have provided financial assistance. While the paper floundered financially prior to the Godbeite insurrection and failed upon the “New Movement’s” demise, during the confrontation between the Church and its dissenters it enjoyed a stability incompatible with its limited advertising. The source of its fleeting strength may only be surmised.

The identity of “Uno Hoo” and his editorial assistants, however, may be more than presumed. The Keep-A-Pitchinin’s publisher and editor was George J. Taylor, eldest son and sometimes business manager of John Taylor, apostle and subsequently president of the Latter-day Saints. Young Taylor’s career illustrated that individuality and diversity are often humor’s requisites. Indicative of his close ties to the Mormon community, he had been baptized by Joseph Smith himself, while Brigham Young had on one occasion saved his life. He served as a missionary (several times), a member of the Salt Lake High Council, a regent and instructor in grammar and geography for the University of Deseret, a Salt Lake City Councilor, a member of the editorial staff of the Deseret News, chief clerk of the Utah upper house, and for many years as county coroner. His private concerns were also as numerous. Illustrator, art instructor, music composer, bicycle enthusiast and inventor, debater, Taylor participated in the territory’s first nail manufacturing by machine, its first glass works, and its first building association—and somehow found time to manufacture shoes, contract for the Union Pacific Railroad, establish a short-lived concern, and engage in lumbering and sawing. If his consuming timidity prevented marriage, it could not subdue his humor.

Taylor’s Keep-A-Pitchinin associates were from the same mold. Their pseudonyms—“Marrowfat,” “Resurgam,” “Viator,” and “Saxey,”—only slightly disguised the participants. Charles Savage and George M. Ottinger, who provided cartoons and even prose, were occasional partners in a photography business. Savage had been converted to Mormonism as an English youth; later he received national attention as Utah’s pioneer photographic artist. Ottinger had joined Mormonism after an eventful career on the sea as an adolescent, and although he served Salt Lake as its superintendent of water works and chief of its fire department, his consuming but largely unfilled passion was to succeed as a painter of fine art. Equally talented were Joseph C. Rich and Heber J. Richards, sons of apostles Charles C. Rich and Willard Richards. During his career Joseph Rich would serve as a surveyor,
missionary journalist, telegrapher, merchant, lawyer, judge, and politician; before contributing to the *Keep-A-Pitchinin* he had proven his mettle as an humorist by creating, in his words, that “wonderful first class lie—‘The Bear Lake Monster,’” Utah’s long-lived transplant from Loch Ness. Richards was one of the territory’s first men to receive medical training in the East, Brigham Young himself supporting his education. But of all the periodical’s contributors, the most eminent and indeed the most anonymous was Orson Pratt. The Godbeites apparently never realized that the scholarly apostle, one of the men they most revered in Mormonism, was a clandestine author of some of the paper’s pungent satire.

Collectively the contributors seemed an ideal combination for the enterprise at hand. As Taylor later characterized them, they represented a “brilliant array.” Blood and sentiment bound them to the community’s leadership. As young men—with the exception of Pratt, most were in their thirties—they possessed the youthful perspective often necessary for social humor. And as members of Mormonism’s second generation, they benefited from Deseret’s relative stability and growing prosperity, fundamental requisites to cultural productivity.

The *Keep-A-Pitchinin* enjoyed an immediate response. When it commenced regular publication in March, 1870, with its banner declaring its devotion to “Cents, Scents, Sense and Nonsense,” the four page bi-monthly was greeted favorably by its more serious sister journals. Not only did the *Deseret News* laud its advent, but the *Salt Lake Herald* found its fun “pretty good to take.” Even the *Tribune*, the organ of the Godbeites, attempted to reply in kind by archly complimenting the “Orthodox party . . . on their ‘New Move,’” borrowing the *Keep-A-Pitchinin*’s own waggish epithet for the Godbeite “New Movement.” In April the humor periodical announced that three printings of its first regular issue had been exhausted, and when an actor of the Salt Lake Theatre “ad-libbed” a comment concerning the *Keep-A-Pitchinin*, the audience roared with approval. Clearly the newspaper had gained a following.

The *Keep-A-Pitchinin* secured its success with the comic conventions of its day. Like much of American nineteenth century humor, especially that of the frontier, the paper’s spirit frequently was Gargantuan, its brag-gadocio and exaggeration tempered by mocking, self-deprecation. “The first number of this paper, which caused such a revolution in the newspaper world, was issued in 1867” the editor declared in 1870 when the paper actually first commenced a regular publishing schedule. “Since then, it has been issued regularly to the minute according to prospectus. There may be isolated individuals among our subscribers who have failed to receive all their numbers. This we attribute to the irregularities of the males [sic] . . .” Many of its short jests were rustic and unsubtle, derived if not borrowed
from the American almanac traditions. While some possessed an enduring quality ("Text for sinners—Pretext.")\(^{12}\), most should be charitably forgiven and forgotten ("A fond wife threw a bottle of hair renewer at her husband’s head, at which he exclaimed: ‘We must part—the dye is cast.’")\(^{13}\) The paper reflected the nineteenth century American delight for spelling and grammatical gaucherie, specializing in misspelled names. Such Godbeites as Harrison, Godbe, Tullidge, Salisbury, and Eli Kelsey were rechristened "Harrassing," "Goodboy," "Gullidge," "Sourberry," and "Ye Lie Kelsey." As Utah’s first illustrated journal, its woodcuts bore an obvious debt to the political cartoons of the day, often crude and complicated by modern standards, but believed to be "wonderful" at the time.\(^{14}\)

While the Godbeite challenge provided the *Keep-A-Pitchinin* with impetus and purpose, the religious controversy by no means dominated its pages. Occasionally the paper printed excerpts from the writings of American humorists Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, and Joshua Billings. During the Franco-Prussian war, its columns were filled with dispatches from the front. The *Keep-A-Pitchinin*’s own correspondent, Lord John Rustle (not to be confused with the Whig statesman, Lord John Rustle) filed a typical communiqué for the 1 September 1870 issue:

> I passed a better night, I also passed a regiment of cavalry and had five or six swords run through me accidentally. I shall have them pulled out tomorrow. I was taken for Napoleon. Send $40,000 to $50,000 to my family. You ask what position I held in the late conflict.—I held the King’s mule.\(^{15}\)

Commonly inveighing against any specie of pretension, the periodical printed the text of "Uno Hoo’s" speech following a "serenade given in front of the *Keep-A-Pitchinin’s* office." It provided a skillful parody of the spread-eagle oratory of the day with its bloated and cliché-ridden images:

> Twenty-three years ago to day [sic], at six o’clock in the morning this whole Territory was one vast, howling wilderness. (Applause.) The red Indian scoured the plain where now our plain women scour the floors, (laughter,) while the sage brush and greasewood, towering in majesty over it, lent a grateful shade to the blood-thirsty cricket and the carnivorous grasshopper…. No Iron Horse snorted aloud its discordant notes on the palpitating air at five o’clock in the morning, just as you were getting your morning nap; but the modest mouse and timid bed bug went forth, hand in hand, peacefully, over this broad land, with none to molest or make them afraid. . . . There is only one thought that mars the festive jocundity of this occasion—it is the evident jealousy, whose sweltering venom rankles and fester in the puny bosoms of our weakly contemporaries. (This was followed by sixteen cheers and a tiger and two cubs for our paper.)\(^{16}\)

Much of the *Keep-A-Pitchinin*’s humor dealt with immediate and local concerns. The 1870 United States Census canvassing prompted the journal to warn that the local citizenry might well be asked whether they belonged to
the “Strangites, Rigdonites, Morrisites, Josey-fights, Hit-tights or Git-tights.”

Reference to the Bear Lake Monster, which Rich had introduced to the territory the year previous via the columns of the Deseret News, appeared frequently in the Keep-A-Pitchinin, with special focus upon attempts to snare the elusive but celebrated leviathan. Inasmuch as the friendly monster had begged “no ‘tobacker,” in sometime, Rich concluded that he was absent, “perhaps prospecting.” In mild protest over a Relief Society work project, Rich also reported “Sister Molwitcher has not yet got the Female Relief Society in complete working order, there not being at present any wooden-legged men to knit socks for.”

The journal’s lively and deprecating wit frequently belied Mormonism’s serious and straight-faced image. Using one of the favorite metaphors of the Church leaders for their own purpose, the paper had the potter declaring to his clay, “be ware.” If the question of the Danites received respectful and serious attention by the Gentiles of the territory, the Keep-A-Pitchinin’s attitude was hardly reverential. The paper denied the Danite band simply by satirically confirming its presence. Nor did it take overly seriously the super-charged question of polygamy. It playfully authored, if only to subsequently deny, the light-hearted charge that men married their grandmothers in their quest of plurality. The periodical reasoned that many refused the “principle” because they could not “bear the courts,” a pun that assumed larger meaning during the judicial persecutions a decade later. When the Reverend J. P. Newman, pastor of the Metropolitan Church at Washington and Chaplain of the Senate, peremptorily traveled to Salt Lake to challenge a wary and reluctant Brigham Young to debate polygamy, the magazine in turn issued its own call to the Washington minister for forensic combat. Its terms were unique:

The Dr. to try polygamy for six months, in order that he may get a practical knowledge of it, and we to enter into monogamy for the same length of time; at the end of which period, should the Dr. survive, we are to discuss the matter in the presence of our wives, socially, intellectually, physically, spiritually, morally, practically, syllogistically, somatically, materially, theoretically, temporally and eternally; neither to speak more than six hours at a time; and should the Dr. prefer it, we furthermore agree to occupy his pulpit in Washington, and edify his congregation there as much as he possibly could and draw his salary, as close as he dare to, while he takes our place in this city and draws our salary. We also intend to challenge the Pope of Rome and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and should they fail (as we fully expect) to come to time, we shall publish them to the world as recreant poltroons and cowardly vagabonds.

Newman eventually debated—not Brigham Young—but one of the Keep-A-Pitchinin’s own contributors, Orson Pratt.

The year 1870 saw several dramatic confrontations between the Mormons and the National Government, but the tone of the Keep-A-Pitchinin
hardly corroborated the high emotionalism often suggested to have accompanied these events. Under a cartoon satirizing the extravagant anti-Mormon charges attending the Congressional debate of the Cullom bill, the paper dismissed the unconfirmed rumors of a Mormon insurrection. There was “Nothing Like It In History,” it reported, “Excepting That Affair in France, When”

The king of France, with forty thousand men,
Marched up a hill, and then marched down again.24

During the so-called “wooden-gun rebellion,” a struggle between the Mormon community and the territorial government over control of the local militia, Savage and Ottinger were arrested and imprisoned for treason—charged with unauthorized drilling with mock guns. But the Keep-A-Pitchinin’s assessment of the event revealed that the paper had not lost its perspective. With tongue bulging in cheek, it described the event as

one of the most daring and desperate attempts on the peace and safety of a nation ever recorded in the annals of crime. . . . The mind of man faints, staggers and falls back in its vain attempts to grasp the SAVAGE diabolism projected by these friends in human form. Had they been successful, they would undoubtedly have slain the inhabitants, destroyed the nation and emptied the debris into the Gulf of Mexico.25

A Grand Jury failed to indict either Savage or Ottinger or their fellow miscreants.

While the journal’s interests were diverse, its special and continuing attention focused upon the Godbeites and their “New Movement.” The paper frequently attacked what seemed to be the “New Move’s” pretentious and vaulting nature, a characteristic not unknown to those bearing the tidings of new revelation. But the Godbeites intensified the effect by combining their religious enthusiasm with both a spirit of reform and a spirit of sophistication. The result naturally invited humor. Under the caption of “New Lights for the City,” the Keep-A-Pitchinin responded to the dissident’s unending claims of further “light and truth.” “We learn that the City Fathers design pulling down the recently erected lampposts and substituting a few personages of the New Move. That’s as it should be,” the paper asserted. “The people require light, and while there is so much of it in the Movement, why not utilize it? This new gas does not equal the old in brilliancy, but this is made up in quantity.”26

Repeatedly the Keep-A-Pitchinin satirized the Godbeite over-weening vocabulary, which at times seemed more suited to specialized treatises than common persuasion. Edward Tullidge’s praise to the announced revelations of Harrison and Godbe was an irresistible object to assault, with the magazine borrowing Tullidge’s tone and even an occasional phrase from the Godbeite revelations:

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The idiosyncrasies [sic] of peculiar individualities, indicate the very incarnation of those inherent intellectual qualities, so natural to those of spiritual organic quality; giving to the whole being an impressive, inspirational tone which constitutes the divine essence of those lofty aspirations which permeate the circumambient atmosphere and lead to ethereal constituents. Such susceptible embodiments of the sublimest conceptions venture into an infinitude of glorious periphery of thought; leaving the mundane circumstances of the terrestrial world they inhabit far beneath them, in their lofty flight in search of those heavenly gems of truth which were exemplified in the life of “the good Queen Bess.” Triumphant! Triumphant!

In a postscript, “Uno Hoo” promised a key to the above would be provided “in the ensuing number of the Tribune.”

The Godbeite penchant for the lofty and sublime was heightened with the advent of Amasa Lyman, the silver-tongued former Mormon Apostle. Joining the “New Movement” in May, 1870, Lyman became its public champion and eventually its titular leader. Again the Keep-A-Pitchinin filled the measure of its creation. In an anonymous letter which sounds a lot like Orson Pratt, the paper contrasted this modern Amasa with his Biblical namesake. The latter was a warrior and dealt in blows, while the son of Roswell found strength “in pretty words.” The letter concluded by mocking Lyman’s style and even quoting from his vocabulary. The latter-day Amasa “planted his children footsteps in the incipient stages of his upward journey;” he “in the artless innocence of uneducated youth, was cast upon the world’s broad ocean of ever-varying conditions and circumstances, and in his fragile bark he pursued his way over the seething waves of life’s storm-tossed ocean, to find in the prosecution of his imposed labor all of life’s opportunities for the culture of the soul and the development of its own constituent divinity.”

“This he did,” the letter suggested, “by reading novels whenever he could.” The charge of novel reading in nineteenth century Utah society was not meant to be complimentary.

Nor could the Keep-A-Pitchinin resist repeated comments on the “New Movement’s” attraction to spiritualism. “Encouraging the growing number of alienated Godbeites (many former adherents had become distressed with the movement’s increasingly apparent spiritualistic tendency), the paper promised a spiritual column probably to be written by Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and “a few choice spirits who seem to have nothing better to do. . . .” Not much came of the promised feature, although “Wilkins Micawber” did write from “Hot Springs, Purgettory” on “June 41th, 1870,” to affirm the presence of “His Sul-furious Majesty.” The affirmation was in direct contradiction to the Godbeite denial of Satan. When the spiritualists apparently claimed, in addition to their usual visitations, an actual “spirit photograph,” the paper confirmed the event by suggesting “the spirit was
in everybody’s mouth.” It employed the same play on words after the Walker Brothers dispossessed the “New Movement” from meeting in their old store in favor of the establishment of Howard’s Liquors. The irony did not escape the periodical, the change being viewed as merely the trading of one kind of spirits for another.29

The Keep-A-Pitchinin frequently dueled with the Godbeite magazines and newspapers. But its weapon was sarcasm and never substance, refusing to accord the “New Movement” the dignity of debate. Referring to the Utah Magazine, a weekly journal which Godbe later transformed into the Salt Lake Tribune, the Keep-A-Pitchinin expressed what at first seemed to be a compliment. “We have seen some good things in that magazine,” it observed. “We once got a pound of sausages rolled up in it.” “Uno Hoo” and his associates employed a similar observation to explain the Utah Magazine’s transformation. Its earlier format had been invaluable for butchers and fishmonger for the wrapping of butter, lard and bacon. “Feeling encouraged by this liberal support and realizing from past experience what it {the Utah Magazine} was most useful for, and being desirous to extend its usefulness, the proprietors immediately enlarged it to a size better adapted to the wants of the community, in papering trunks, and enclosing packages of dry goods. . . .”30 When the Tribune condescendingly noted the receipt of a copy of the Keep-A-Pitchinin via its “hired hand,” the humor magazine immediately secured a “hired girl” to critique its rival, a choice no doubt influenced by the Tribune’s embrace of the “woman’s movement.”31

Feeling somewhat disadvantaged in the contest, those with Godbeite sympathies produced the Diogenes, a journal dedicated to fighting humor with humor. The Tribune disavowed any connection with the new periodical. However, Daniel Camomile, its editor, as well as many of his associates in the venture, had earlier warmly embraced the Godbeite dissent.32 If their orientation had changed, the Keep-A-Pitchinin did not discern the evidence. To its vantage both the Diogenes’ sympathies and format seemed to confirm a common parentage with the Tribune. The orthodox paper at first rechristened its opponent the “Di-agonies” and subsequently when rumors spread suggesting its suspension, the Die-agonus.33 Commencing about the first of January, 1871, it was projected as a weekly—the Keep-A-Pitchinin misspelling its prospectus, “a weakly.” The pun proved prophetic. After less than two months the Diogenes suspended publication, and none of her issues seem to have survived to the present.

The death of the Diogenes was a sign. What had commenced so optimistically a year earlier as a revolution of Mormonism and the world had failed in its promise. Although the Godbeite movement persisted in altered and faltering form through the 1870s, it lingered primarily as a cherished hope by its most faithful. By early 1871 indications of its decline were
apparent. The boastful *Keep-A-Pitchinin* exuded mocking triumph. “Yes, we are happy to be able to say that it [the New Movement] is about exhausted, and that the *Keep-A-Pitchinin* has exhausted it. . . . We shall not charge anything for the obituary notice; as we stated in the beginning, we will publish the marriage or death of any of our friends or contemporaries with pleasure.”34 Six weeks later the newspaper proceeded with the figuraiive burial of its opposition. Unable to restrain a final taunt over the Godbeite inability to secure the leader of its choice—the dissidents apparently had hoped to secure Joseph Smith III, the son of Mormonism’s founder—the journal advertised for a stone-cutter:

One who can cut a nice inspiration in granite to be placed over the sepulchre of the “New Move.” No Head stone required but a simple inexpensive footboard with the following inscription. 1871. Sacred to the memory of the “New Move,” aged 1 year and six months. Requic “scat” in pace.35

But the *Keep-A-Pitchinin*’s jubilation was premature. The decline and demise of its opposition denied the journal its own sustaining purpose. On 15 February 1871, after only a year of regular printing, it too suspended publication. Although Taylor produced a special July 4th edition later in 1871 and for several years steadfastly claimed that the paper would again be published, its enterprise was virtually at an end.

As often is the case, the *Keep-A-Pitchinin*’s historical bequest differed from its aspirations. Of course its role was hardly more than contributive to the Godbeite collapse, and while its humor was at times clever, more often than not, it was a wit that failed to transcend its own time. But more importantly its brief career testified to a warmer and more human society than is often accorded pioneer Utah.

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1. J. Cecil Alter, *Early Utah Journalism: A Half Century of Forensic Warfare, Waged by the West’s Most Militant Press* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1938), pp. 317–18. Mormon humor has been most effectively treated by folklorists, with historians, more by omission than commission, creating a somber stereotype. This paper was written under a summer research grant by the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter cited Historical Department).

2. *Keep-A-Pitchinin*, 15 April 1870, p. 15, most issues available on microfilm at Western Americana Library, University of Utah.


4. Papers of George J. Taylor, uncatalogued and unindexed, Historical Department; for his timidity see Taylor’s missionary blessing, *ibid.*; for Young saving his life, George J. Taylor to Brigham Young, Salt Lake, 20 May 1874, Brigham Young Papers,
Historical Department; other biographical details are found in “Journal History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” 2 February 1868, p. 3, 3 May 1897, p. 8, and 15 December 1914, p. 2, Historical Department.


7. Taylor later identified his collaborators, including Pratt, in a penciled and unpublished autobiographical sketch, Papers of George J. Taylor, uncatalogued and unindexed, Historical Department.

8. Ibid.


11. Ibid., 1 March 1870, p. 2.


16. Ibid., 1 August 1870, p. 42.

17. Ibid., 15 August 1870, p. 47.

18. Ibid., 15 November 1870, p. 72.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 1 April 1870, p. 10; *Keep-A-Pitchinin’s* emphasis.

21. Ibid., 1 November 1870, p. 67.

22. Ibid., 15 March 1870, p. 7; 1 November 1870, p. 66.


24. Ibid., 15 March 1870, p. 5.

25. Ibid., 1 December 1870, p. 76.


27. Ibid., 15 March 1870, p. 6.

28. Ibid., 1 August 1870, p. 44. Not only was the letter suggestive of Pratt’s satire and filled with his relish for vocabulary and scriptural imagery, but it also promised a sequel which never materialized, possibly because of the apostle’s sudden involvement with Newman.

29. Ibid., 15 June 1870, p. 30; 15 July 1870, p. 39; 1 July 1870, p. 36; 1 May 1870, p. 18.


31. Ibid., 7 March 1870, p. 7.

32. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3 December 1870, p. 1; Daniel Camomile to Brigham Young, Salt Lake City, 9 November 1869, Brigham Young Papers, Historical Department. Earlier Camomile had been the general canvassing agent for the *Tribune*. 
34. *Ibid.*, 1 January 1871, p. 82.