

Blossom as the Fig

How my father, a California transplant, adapted to Utah FEATURE BY JARED

Dad loved figs. He loved them so much that he convinced my mother to sacrifice the only window in their basement bedroom for the foundation of a greenhouse. As a child in Provo, Utah, I took it for granted that our house had a tropical annex; as a teenager, I saw it as further evidence of my family's peculiarity. Now, in retrospect, I regard it as a poignant expression of my father's personal California Dream.

James Lee Farmer grew up in South Gate, California, near the concrete ditch known as the Los Angeles River. South Gate was an unusual place — a working-class garden suburb within walking distance of major industries. The town contained a Firestone plant, a Ford assembly works, and a Peerless Pump factory, where my father's father built metal cylinders for industrial ice cream mixers. South Gate was a place where, in the Depression era, a pensioned workingman such as my grandfather could buy a bungalow and fill his backyard with lemon, loquat, fig and pomegranate trees.

Most sons of South Gate aspired to work in the trades of their fathers. To provide a backup, the junior high school offered courses in agriculture. James was not destined for either career path. Even though he was raised in a home without books — and struggled with a condition eventually diagnosed as attention deficit

disorder — he became a self-taught bibliophile who gained entrance to MIT and Caltech. His teachers and fellow students voted him "Mr. Math." On the back of his 1956 senior class picture — a yearbook substitute — one of his classmates, John "The Fish" Robbins, wrote: *James "Da Brain." Why don't you design a booze machine when you get out to Caltech? Then we can have a ball. That brain of yours may as well do some good.*

A decade later, newly wed and with an Ivy League Ph.D and a new baby, Dad chose security over excitement, and accepted a tenure-track position at booze-free Brigham Young University. He stayed for over 30 years, teaching microbiology and genetics, without truly fitting in.

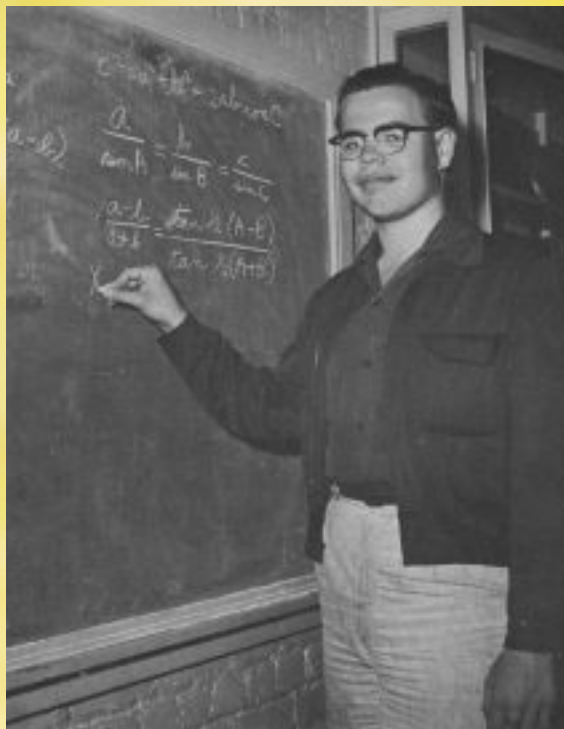
Prior to moving to Provo — possibly the most Mormon place in the world — my father had never experienced the full force of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). His mother was an Arkie orphan who cared more about stray cats than organized religion. His father was an old-school Jack Mormon from the Arizona Strip, an ex-cowboy who occasionally sat in Sunday pews but would sooner take his spot in the bleachers at the Hollywood Park racetrack. Nevertheless, Grandma and Grandpa Farmer sent Jim to the local LDS ward house because church was good for kids.

Dad's introduction to the culture of Mormon Utah was eased by his wife, my mother, Gladys Clark Farmer. She came from an all-LDS family with irreproachable historical connections: Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, pioneering, missionizing, polygamy, persecution, hardship, perseverance — the complete package.

For that very reason, Dad could never hope to compete with his father-in-law, who lived under the same roof, as a Mormon patriarch. When my parents settled down in Utah Valley, Grandpa Clark took the opportunity to sell his ranch in Bear Lake Valley, Idaho. He purchased the suburban Provo plot and made the down payment on the house — designed to his requirements as a duplex with a potato cellar. In return, my mother — the only daughter of seven children — provided elder care for him and his wife. Grandma spent most of her remaining life inside, immobilized by osteoporosis. Grandpa lived in the yard. Well into his 90s, he went out in his overalls, shovel in hand, to labor in his garden.

As a child, I looked up to my grandfather more than my father. Everyone in our LDS ward respected "Brother Clark" for his plainspoken testimony and indomitable industry.

Long before Dad took up California-style fruit culture, Grandpa gardened the old-fashioned Mormon way. The first step



James Lee Farmer as a toddler in South Gate, California, as Mr. Math, and newly wed to Gladys Clark Farmer.

PHOTOS COURTESY FARMER FAMILY

FARMER

was weeding out rocks. We lived on the Provo Bench, a former shoreline of Lake Bonneville, at the paleo-delta of the Provo River. The ancient river had deposited millions upon millions of limestone cobbles from the Wasatch. One by one, my grandfather loosened rocks from the clay on our one-third acre. He filled the wheelbarrow again and again, dumping his loads over the edge of the adjacent hill.

With a sufficient number of rocks removed, Grandpa began classic furrow irrigation. He tried to re-create his food garden in Idaho — and only half succeeded, despite painstaking aeration of the soil. Grandpa did well with English peas and Russet Burbank potatoes. But the varieties of corn, raspberry and strawberry that did so well at Bear Lake didn't adapt to the summer heat of Utah Valley.

My father may have been named Farmer, but he had no interest in farming. As a boy, his hobby was ham radio; as graduate student, he studied biochemistry, not botany. He never understood how my mother could enjoy weeding. But over time Dad became fascinated by horticulture and viticulture. After prolonged exposure to Utah — a dry state in more than one sense — he became homesick for the luxury of year-round access to luscious fruit. His hankering became a hobby, then a minor obsession. Living in the cold desert of the Great Basin

brought out his inner Angeleno.

Mormon settlers in Utah and post-Gold Rush settlers in California shared an impulse to “redeem” the “wastelands.” They drained water from marshes, imported water to deserts, and introduced crops. They expected the environment to adapt to them, not the other way around, and they often used biblical language to justify and celebrate their landscape revolution.

Outcomes diverged. In the Golden State, horticulture joined agribusiness and begat horticultural capitalism: a lucrative economy dedicated to contriving and fulfilling mass consumer desires for non-local out-of-season perishable fruit. Meanwhile, in Utah, Mormon agriculture was hard-scrabble. Despite (or because of) this marginality, the pioneer determination to make the desert “blossom as the rose” persisted long after the Beehive State became overwhelmingly suburban. Contemporary Mormons enlarged the meaning of “multiply and replenish” to encompass asphalt, concrete and turf.

My father preferred the California



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Grandpa Clark, left, gardening in Provo, Utah. Grandpa Farmer working in South Gate, California.

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way and tried to replicate it in miniature, planting a virtual arboretum in our front lawn and on the perimeter of Grandpa's backyard garden. He started with fruiters: peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, Royal Ann cherries (the kind that become maraschinos), pie cherries, and many varieties of apples. He mastered the art of grafting. He studied pruning manuals, and stayed alert for late-spring frosts. He applied the latest chemical pesticides with a stainless-steel spray nozzle.

Stage two of Dad's fructification plan entailed the addition of a tall arbor on the southwest wall of the house, where he planted Concord grape vines. My father's special contribution to the Mormon obsession with food storage was row upon row of homemade grape juice. Our basement storeroom — we called it the "Fruit Room" — might have been the only one in Provo that resembled a nouveau wine cellar.

The Fruit Room also contained lots of jars with canned peaches — an annual late summer project of my mother, who brought home sweet-smelling bushels from roadside orchard stands. Mom tried, and mostly failed, to get her five children to eat canned fruit for breakfast, and likewise tried, and totally failed, to serve it as a healthy dessert. My father subverted her frugality. "In California, we eat fresh fruit, not canned fruit," he would say. "Canned fruit is not dessert. Fruit pie — now, that's dessert!"

For me and my siblings, here was an easy choice between competing food philosophies: sustenance versus desire, puritanism versus hedonism, Mom's Utah versus Dad's California. We gleefully embraced my father's invented tradition of "Saturday candy." Every pre-Sabbath day he would pile us in the Mercury Monterey, drive us to the supermarket, present each of us with a quarter, and tell us to buy whatever treat we wanted.

Dad partook of this

sacrament, too. His usual was "Big Cherry" — a sickly sweet milk-chocolate-covered maraschino cherry immersed in hot pink syrup. For generations of Southern Californians, Big Cherry was a regional favorite from the same candy company in Los Angeles that originally concocted Sunkist Fruit Gems.

Given his sweet tooth, it's not surprising that when Dad decided to get into greenhousing, a dozen years into his Utah residency, he did it for the cause of figs, which have one of the highest sugar-content ratings of any fresh fruit. Sweeter than candy and 100 percent natural: my father's ideal food.

He became a kind of epicurean missionary. He joined the Friends of the Fig Society, and studied their xeroxed tracts. As a lay teacher in Sunday school, Dad told us Mormon kids that the forbidden fruit on the Tree of Knowledge must have been a fig.

It's amazing that my father's greenhouse progressed from dream to plan to reality. Dad's attention deficit disorder was severe. He once confided in me that he had never finished a nonfiction book (including my own). However, because he started reading so many thousands — and because he really was "Da Brain" — his erudition was legendary.

My widowed mother has since confirmed: Of the many creative projects Dad began — including science fiction novels and homemade telescopes — he finished exactly two. The first was a full-sized electronic organ for Mom, a church musician. He pieced and soldered it together from a mail-order kit containing hundreds of transistors. The greenhouse, which required heavy manual labor, was an even greater accomplishment.

His enthusiasm came at a price. The cobbles he dug up to lay the hand-mixed concrete foundation became an unsightly pile in the backyard — and remained there permanently. I suspect his father-in-law saw this accidental earthwork as

a sign of moral lassitude.

Once completed, Dad's greenhouse either worked too well or not well enough. During cold spells, Dad brought in long extension cords for space heaters; during hot periods, he vented the sauna by partially opening the sliding entry. For weeks at a time, he ran the swamp cooler at maximum to counteract the heat and humidity.

In season, the sticky air smelled ambrosial: Dad grew lemons, too, and guavas, and various tropical flowers. But for the greater part of the warm season, the greenhouse functioned as a sunshine storage unit. Once his dwarf fig trees were done fruiting, Dad moved them outdoors to the deck, where they served as potted ornamentals.

He set just one fig in the ground outside. My father held out hope for this plant because he reared it from a cutting taken from a large naturalized ficus he discovered in Provo. An Italian immigrant tended it back in the day, and the tree had managed to thrive in seemingly inhospitable conditions. Dad's scion died back each year from frost, yet always recovered. It never amounted to more than a leafy shrub, but at last, for one season only, it bore fruit that ripened to succulence. My father could scarcely be more proud if one of his children had graduated from Caltech.

Was my father an immigrant? Probably, in Utah, he felt like one at times — a Californian first, a Mormon second. He told me half-jokingly that he wanted a bumper sticker with this message: SAM BRANNAN WAS RIGHT. Brannan was the 19th century Mormon entrepreneur — and eventual apostate — who tried to convince Brigham Young to abandon



Utah and transplant Zion to California.

Dad hated the Great Basin's winters. "The Greatest Snow on Earth" held no charm for him. The happiest he ever appeared in a photograph was Christmas in Davis, California, during the single academic year he secured a visiting professorship away from BYU. He's sitting in a lawn chair, shirt off, his flabby torso exposed to sunlight, a goofy straw hat on his prematurely bald head, grinning ear to ear as he holds a handmade sign: "December 25."

In Utah Valley, he endured the bleakness of January — a time of depressing inversions with dirty, sunless skies — by looking at the latest hybrids in seed catalogs. "If we lived in California, we could grow these," he said longingly. Each year he would order cuttings of something new and exciting — a plant with fruit that tasted like chocolate! — only to watch it die before fruition.

Greenhouse figs were more reliable. Over the winter semester, he bided his time, teaching Genetics 101 to another group of pre-meds and waiting for the magic moment around graduation when his dozen or so potted figs presented their annual gifts. Daily, he inspected his fruits, taking them only when they detached from the stem with the gentlest touch.

Dad hummed cheerfully as he prepared his delicacies. With a pocketknife, he halved or quartered each fruit to expose a colorful cross-section, and plated them according to variety. Then he would bellow upstairs and downstairs: "Come now for fresh figs!" He never dried or preserved them, or even saved them for later in the day. They were relished within minutes. If you missed out, well, too bad.

Horticulturists use bodily metaphors to describe what happens to older fruit trees: *fatigue*, *exhaustion*, *decline*. As he approached 60, Dad lost the energy and also the interest needed to maintain his

greenhouse. Fruit growing became too onerous once the five Farmer children left home. Besides, his figs had spent their vitality, and his DIY construction of plexiglass, fiberglass and plywood was slowly falling apart.

By the time he took early retirement in 2000, geology had supplanted horticulture as his favorite hobby. I interpret this as an adaptation to place as well as age — Dad's belated realization that rocks are Utah's best crop.

After leaving BYU, my parents left Provo, too, downsizing through a series of urban apartments — first in outer Boston, then central London and finally downtown Salt Lake. There, a small back patio housed my father's fossil and rock collection, along with a few planter boxes for tomatoes. And there, Dad unexpectedly died of a stroke, just days after turning 70.

For the funeral, all his children came from out of state. None of us had put down roots in Utah — a rare outcome for a Mormon family. Our pioneer ancestors had joined "the gathering"; the Farmers un-gathered instead. We inherited Dad's cosmopolitan tastes.

Back in Provo, old neighbors still speak admiringly of "Brother Clark's garden." Dad's arboretum, much like Brother Farmer himself, always elicited something closer to polite bemusement. Although he dutifully went to church every week, he never got invited to the backyard barbecues where neighborhood men, all returned missionaries, swapped stories about deer hunting and power-boating. He never became a "Utah Mormon," as they say. The Democratic Party placards Dad planted in our mangy front lawn marked him as a non-native just as much as the fig trees in back.

If my father's diverse collection of trees and vines represented the Golden State, and if my grandfather's backyard irrigation project harked back to the 19th century Mormon kingdom, our neighbors

two doors down created the apotheosis of the postwar LDS landscape: a monocultural plot with no trees, no flowers, no fruits, no vegetables, just the most manicured and chemically perfect turf this side of Augusta National.

Today, not much remains of Dad's vines and fruiterers. The greenhouse was long ago dismantled. Only his conifers are flourishing: *Pinus nigra* and *Pinus sylvestris* (both European species), *Picea pungens* (Utah's state tree), and, improbably, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*.

Unlike ornamental conifers, fruit trees rarely outlast their human planters. When our enormous Royal Ann cherry died — perhaps in part due to my overzealous pruning as a know-it-all teen — my father lacked the energy or the equipment to extract the root system. Nothing could be seeded on top of it. The stump of the cherry presided over bare dirt. Dad finally devised a solution at a science conference in San Francisco. On a field trip to Muir Woods, he purchased a giant sequoia seedling at the gift shop. As an experiment, he decided to plant the tiny Big Tree beside the cherry's remainder.

I'll be damned: Despite the scorching summer heat and the rocky clay soil, his experimental sequoia grew taller than the house in less than a decade. This delighted my father no end. His success — a tree unique to the Sierra Nevada, somehow adapting and thriving in the Great Basin — tasted sweeter than a Big Cherry.

His sequoia is still there, bigger than ever. Never mind that the homeowner, current or future, will surely hire an arborist to chop it down someday. In the meantime, I'm heartened by the mental image of living sequoia roots entwined with dead cherry roots, each knotted around Pleistocene cobbles. A fruitless California tree has managed to prosper in a place where its planter never quite could. □

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Farmer children Rachel, Jared and Deborah, from left; James with his scion fig; the greenhouse in its glory days; the former Farmer house today. The rock foundation is all that remains of the greenhouse. But the sequoia, seen behind the house, center, lives on. FAMILY PHOTOS COURTESY FARMER FAMILY. JARED FARMER, ABOVE RIGHT