Dixie Living

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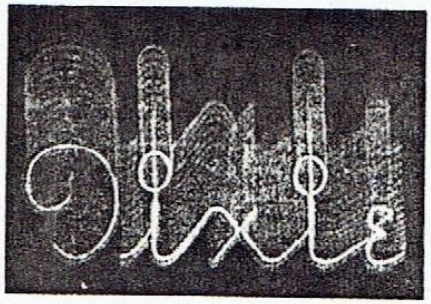
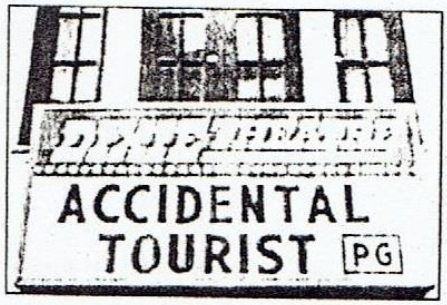
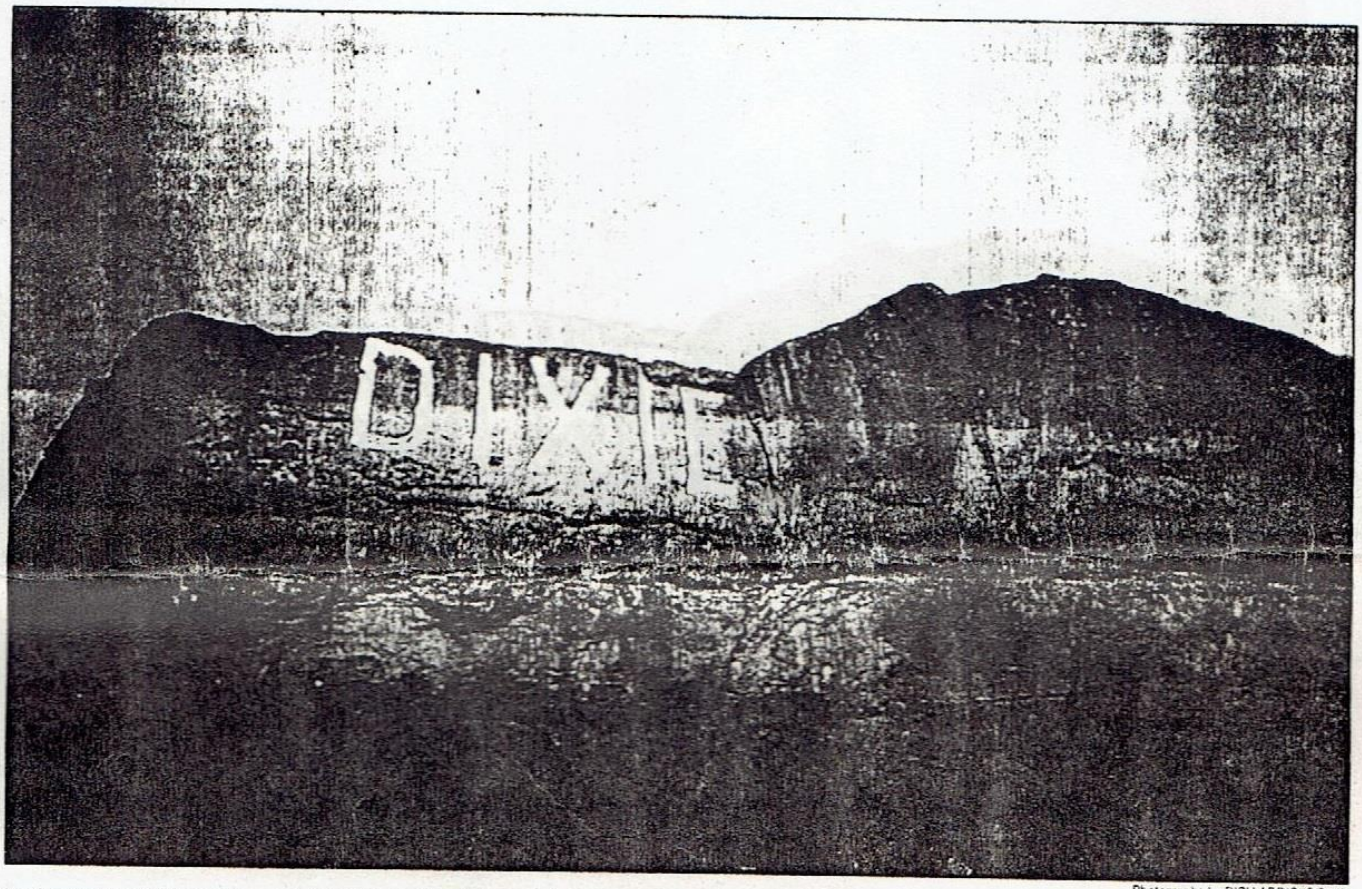




The town of St. George, Utah, is the capital of a semi arid region known as Dixie, and various signs help to make Southerners feel right at home.

WAY OUT WEST IN DIXIE



Photographs by RICH ADDICKS/Staff

On the north end of town, the word 'Dixie' is written in huge letters across red sandstone cliffs, welcoming visitors to an area where cotton once grew.

Cecil Gollehow sits at the 'gossip counter' at Dick's Cafe, 'Where the West Meets the Guest.'

American South Finds Counterpart In a Utah Town

By Keith Graham
Staff Writer

ST. GEORGE, Utah — "Welcome to Dixie," the signs proclaim. And a Southerner moseying through the wide streets of this palm-dotted community in the dusty but sun-kissed southwest corner of the Beehive State has to stifle the urge to exclaim, "Deja view, y'all!"

Like a raucous downhome banjo breakdown, the litany of names on storefronts rings familiar: Dixie Palm Motel, Dixie Eye Center, Dixie State Bank, Dixie Nutrition, Dixie Theatre, Dixie Bowl.

At night, a big "D" is lighted on the slopes of the Black Hill towering to the west. And, as if to say, "Fergit, hell," to any wayward fool who fails to understand the letter's significance, a huge whitewashed "Dixie" is scrawled across the red sandstone cliffs on the town's north rim.

By George — or even St. George — it's a good thing Sherman didn't march through here.

Pickup trucks parked for the drag races at Dixie Raceway don't sport Confederate flag license plates, as you're apt to find in Georgia or Mississippi. But the Stars and Bars are sold in several local stores, where fans of the Rebels sports teams of Dixie Junior College snap them up. Not to put the "court" before the "hoarse," as folks in this area say, the fans boast about those teams with a distinctive Southern accent. A southern Utah accent, that is. Christians — likely as not to drive "Fard" trucks — are "barn" again, but that doesn't stop them from calling you "dorling" if they take a cotton to you.

Pharmacists fill prescriptions at Dixie Drug, and sick patients take to bed at Dixie Medical Center. Golfers have their clubs repaired at Dixie Golf, a duffer's chip shot from the Dixie Doll Shoppe. Art patrons, living at the Cotton Manor Condominiums

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Brigham Young Led Pioneers on 'Cotton Mission'

By Keith Graham
Staff Writer

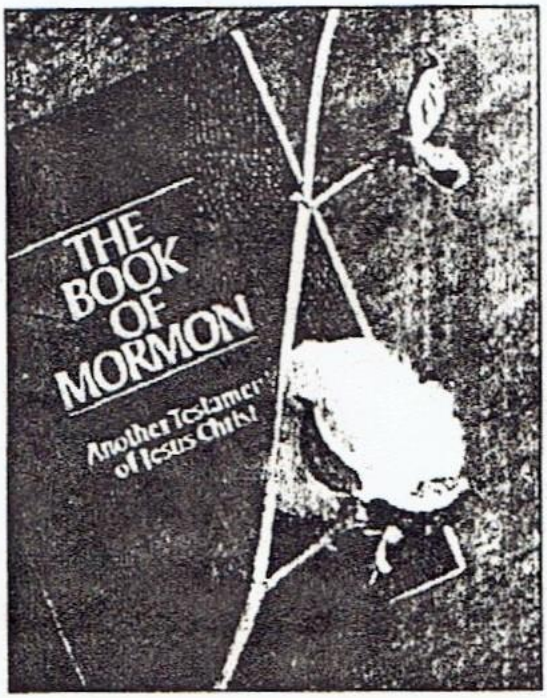
ST. GEORGE, Utah — Though still more than three decades away from statehood at the time of the Civil War, Utah officially stood on the side of the Union.

That did not stop Mormon leader Brigham Young from trying to re-create Dixie in an area that was once the domain of Shivwit and Paiute Indians.

Hoping to capitalize on the war's disruptions in the economy of the slave-holding American South, Mr. Young envisioned an easy transformation of the desperately bare landscape of southwestern Utah into fertile cotton plantation land.

As early as 1852, Fort Harmony had been established in the region and treaties made with the Indians. In 1861, Mr. Young recruited 309 dutiful families for his "cot-

COTTON Continued on **6L**



Once a thriving crop, the only cotton growing in St. George is at Brigham Young's former home.

Cotton

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ton mission" in the area soon dubbed Utah's Dixie.

Current residents of the area claim that the original pioneers met quick discouragement on their arrival: Rain for the first 40 days and 40 nights. The story sounds apocryphal but illustrates the difficulties. "They were still in their covered wagons," says St. George native Ruth Squire, 66, a former telephone operator who serves with her husband as a Mormon missionary. "You realize what devoted, strong people were determined to keep things together."

Already experienced at growing in irrigated fields, the pioneers persisted and developed a viable operation by the end of the Civil War. In the first year, their irrigated fields produced more than 100,000 pounds of cotton, according to Mormon missionary Phil Squire, 67.

To process the raw fiber, a cotton mill — which is now a museum and site of the area's own monthly "Grand Ole Opry" — was built in nearby Washington. Though Utah's Dixie never managed to match the productivity of Southern fields, the mill continued to operate until 1910, the last year anyone remembers cotton growing in the area, except for three rows still dutifully planted behind the home where Brigham Young spent his last several winters.

Like the early settlers of Georgia, Utah's Dixie pioneers also tried unsuccessfully to produce silk for a time. But they soon turned to growing sugar beets, alfalfa and, at higher elevations, peaches and other fruits. Cattle ranching, still widespread, and sheepherding also became major sources of income.

The Mormon Temple in St. George was completed in 1877, and churches always outnumbered saloons here and in most of the smaller towns of Utah's Dixie with the exception of Silver Reef, a mining community. More than $10.5 million worth of silver was shipped from the town — which boasted six saloons, a billiard parlor and two dance halls — after the discovery of a mother lode of silver in 1868. At its peak, Silver Reef had a population of 1,500 to 2,000, including its own Chinatown with 250 inhabitants. A ghost town now, it is being restored by a private, non-profit organization. Already the old Wells Fargo building has been opened as a museum and art gallery.

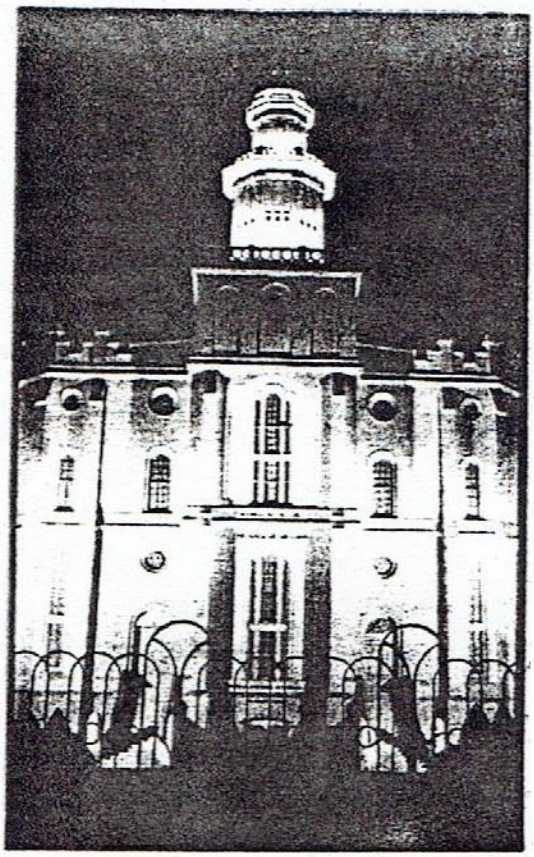
"It was an original Wells Fargo building, and it was falling down. Nobody cared about it but me," says Joy Henderlider, president of the Wells Fargo Silver Reef Monument Restoration Committee. A St. George native, she grew up picnicking in the deserted town. "I used to come and sit in the corner, and I could just hear the stagecoaches and the cowboys," she says. "No Mormon — not one Mormon — lived here. But this town was the lifesaver of St. George." The Mormons sold their produce, fruit and wine here for the cash they needed for their economy.

In more recent times, few have observed the progress of Utah's Dixie as keenly as Mount Sterling, Ill., native Dick Hammer, who had $3 in his pocket and paid his rent nightly when he founded Dick's Cafe in 1935.

"There was nobody here but a few cattlemen, sheepherders and miners," he says, describing the scene when he arrived in St. George, then just a desert stopover with 1,600 inhabitants. "There was no hard road."

Earlier, Mr. Hammer had cowboyed and worked as a cook on ocean liners. But he was looking for a warmer climate after a stint running a dude ranch at Big Bear Lake, Calif. There, he had endured 11 days snowed in with 500 people. "That's when I learned that when people get hungry, they get mean," he says, recalling how he talked a trapper friend, Airedale Ike, into killing eight burros so the guests would have something to eat. "I've ate burro and horse meat many times," Mr. Hammer insists. "It ain't bad. The way we did it, we boiled them, and you get that good broth."

In the first couple of decades after he opened his cafe, he saw little change at all in St. George. Among the most memorable events of the 1950s were the atomic bomb tests in neighboring Nevada. No one knew much about the hazards, but the Dixie area, which was plagued by fallout from the open air tests, subsequently "lost hundreds and hundreds of people to cancer, leukemia," Mr. Hammer says.



RICH ADDICKS/Staff

Morman temple in St. George was finished in 1877.

A brighter note from the 1950s and well into the '60s was the heyday of western moviemaking amid the red mesas and Joshua trees of the surrounding countryside. John Wayne made "The Conqueror" here, and Gary Cooper starred in "They Came to Cordura." Mr. Hammer worked as a stunt man, doing horse falls in several films, and he played an outlaw in one, "Stallion Canyon." "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," "Jeremiah Johnson," "The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing," and "The Appaloosa" were also made here, and a scene from "Electric Horseman," starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda, was filmed inside Dick's Cafe. Ken Curtis and Milbourn Stone, who played Festus and Doc on the television series, "Gunsmoke," were once frequent visitors to the cafe.

The area is still important for filming commercials. "We did over a million dollars just in commercials last year," says Ramona Johnsen, director of the Southwest Utah Film Commission, based in St. George. More than four times that amount was generated in related services.

But, according to Mr. Hammer, much of the business for longer length features has been lost to Mexico, where prices are cheaper.

Fortunately, the economy has expanded in other ways. As far back as the 1920s and '30s, community leaders began to emphasize tourism as the town's future. But they did not have immediate success. As a former state senator once remarked, "We hardly knew we had a depression in St. George in the '30s because our economy was always pretty well depressed."

Only in 1958, when the first golf course was developed, did the tide begin to turn, and with the opening of the first major real estate development in the late 1960s, the stage was set for St. George's transformation, paralleling the rise of many Sun Belt communities.

Utah

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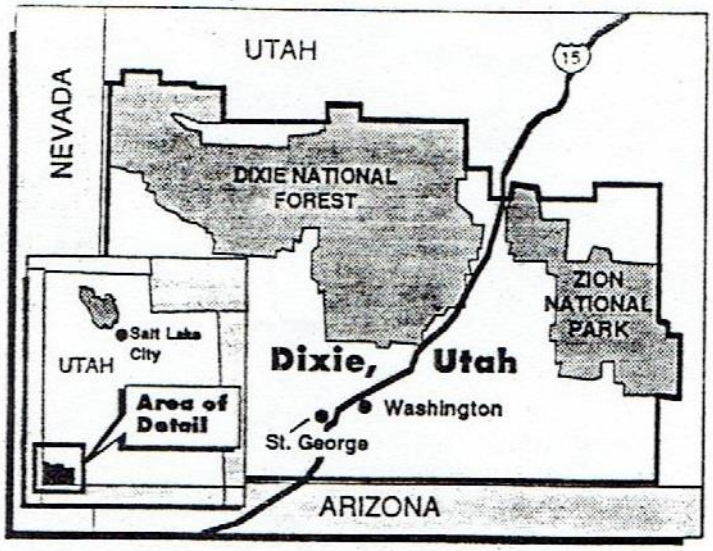

or in houses they bought from Dixie Realty, choose between paintings at the Dixie and Rebel galleries. Their cousins spiff up their autos at the Rebel Car Wash and then motor to the cool, green expanse of Dixie National Forest for picnics or the Dixie Downs Race Track to watch the horses.

Named for George A. Smith, a Mormon who became known as the "Potato Saint" after he provided spuds for pioneers shrunken with scurvy, St. George is Montgomery and Richmond rolled into one, as far as Utahans are concerned. It's the capital of Dixie, a semi-arid region that owes its start in the 1860s to a misguided notion of Brigham Young, second president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that cotton could be produced here to rival the American South.

Though old times here are not forgotten, King Cotton was dethroned shortly after the turn of the century. Until well into the 1950s, the region — including all of surrounding Washington County — remained as sleepy and languorous as the most magnolia-drenched areas in the Old South. But just as there is a New South spirit in the old Confederacy, a new southern Utah spirit prevails here today.

The lament on a postcard sold locally says, "St. George, Utah: 15 miles from water, four feet from hell." And legend has it that the saint for whom the town is named once said if he owned a lot here and one in hell, he'd sell the one in St. George. He would have made a Texas-size mistake. Today, it's the fastest growing area in Utah, says Donald Hogun, publisher and general manager of The Daily Spectrum, the newspaper that covers this Western Dixie like the dew.

"It's probably the one area in the intermountain West that's booming," agrees Steve Crane, a prominent Salt Lake City architect. "It's *the* spot that's doing well for our state."

Those sentiments are borne out by statistics kept at the St. George Area Chamber of Commerce. Once just a convenient place to gas up on the way to nearby national and state parks or to the dens of sin a two-hour drive away in Las Vegas, the town's population has increased by an average 8 percent each year since 1980 to a total of 23,500. Washington County, with a population of 42,200, has grown four times faster than the state overall in this decade.

In fact, some residents accustomed to a slower pace contend the area might be doing too well. "There are just too many rentals and condos," says Peggy Canfield, 52, as she peddles Dixie pins, Confederate key chains and hats that advise, "My Cow Died So I Don't Need Your Bull," at a local curio shop. "There is a lot of overbuilding in the area, really."

The boom has come about because of an aggressive effort to sell St. George as a place where the sun spends the winter. Major league baseball pitcher Bruce Hurst, who grew up here, has been enlisted as an official spokesman. "You can't get a place like St. George out of your system," he says. "No matter where you go, nothing compares." Utah Gov. Norman Bangerter, who visits each winter, calls it his favorite spot. And Utah's most famous resident, actor Robert Redford, says his fondness for the St. George area "almost approaches a sacred degree. I see incredible variety and space there, and I feel something quite spiritually prehistoric about the place."

With almost no snow and an annual average temperature of 75 degrees, St. George is sometimes dubbed "the Palm Springs of Utah," and Rand McNally's Places Rated has named it the sixth best place in America to retire, the best in the West. Most new residents hail from Utah, California and other Western states. But, says former Idahoan Kaylene Preston, co-owner of R&K's Bookstore, "We're getting a lot of snowbirds from the East Coast, New York. The trailer parks are filled with them. Then they start pricing homes and wanting to move here."

Indeed, the home prices are an inducement to people coming from larger cities, where income outpaces the roughly $9,000 per capita in St. George, a figure lagging well behind the average for Utah. A four-bedroom house in Dixie Downs subdivision sells for $59,900, while one in Dixie Deer costs as little as $44,900. An A-frame backing up to national forest can be had for $39,900. A three-bedroom condominium in an intown development with a swimming pool is priced at $37,500.

And whether people come to stay or to visit, they can find plenty to keep themselves occupied. Some — including a few in cowboy hats — just like the option of playing golf in their shirtsleeves year 'round on the six courses, including the Dixie Red Hills spread. Others drive six hours from Salt Lake City or fly in on the local commuter airline, SkyWest (which the locals affectionately call ScareWest), to play tennis on 50 courts, ride horseback, four-wheel through the adjacent desert and canyons or hook the state fish, rainbow trout, in nearby streams. Among the area's state parks are Snow Canyon — named for a Mormon apostle who came to St. George with the early cotton planters — and Gunlock Lake recreation area, which borrows its name from the nickname of a frontier sharpshooter. Spectacular vermilion-and-buff Zion National Park dominates the landscape only 40 miles away. And bass-filled Lake Powell, the second largest man-made lake in North America, is a good, long flycast farther.

"It's just a small town, but people come in here from all the world," says Edith Jackson, a guide at the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers Museum. "There was even a family in here from Tel Aviv, Israel, and interestingly enough they were Mormons."

Interestingly enough, most of St. George's residents are Mormons, as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are known. So many Saints come marching in here that Hank Williams Jr. should have had the area in mind when he sang, "If heaven ain't a lot like Dixie, I don't want to go."

Deep in the heart of Utah's Dixie, you will find only one Southern Baptist church, but Mormon churches are on nearly every corner. A gleaming white Mormon temple, sometimes called the iceberg in the desert, dominates the center of St. George. The first temple completed in the state that Mormons

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Utah

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sometimes call the land of Zion, the structure was built by hand on boggy land stabilized with 17,000 tons of native rock.

Local residents swear that shortly after Brigham Young's death, the original tower, which was not built to the church leader's specifications, was destroyed by lightning. In a miracle rivaling the widely celebrated arrival of sea gulls to eat swarms of crop-devouring locusts farther north in the state, rains doused the fire and spared the rest of the building. Afterward, the devout built a new tower as Mr. Young had wanted.

In motel rooms, visitors find the Book of Mormon as well as a Bible. At the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers Museum, they see a "Cotton Mission" era photograph of seven polygamists — imprisoned following the outlawing of the traditional church practice of taking multiple wives — as well as Brigham Young's bedroom furniture arranged in a room that includes a picture of his 19 wives. A few blocks away, tourists traipse through the winter home of Mr. Young, a two-story adobe house across the street from a bed and breakfast called the Seven Wives Inn. Motels and restaurants reflect the Mormons' anti-smoking attitudes so strictly that if Erskine Caldwell had written about this Dixie, he would have called his book "No Tobacco Road."

A full-time volunteer missionary for the church now that he has retired from the "tiring business," one-time tire store manager Phil Squire estimates that 75 to 80 percent of the population is Mormon. "That's a decline since the '60s," he says.

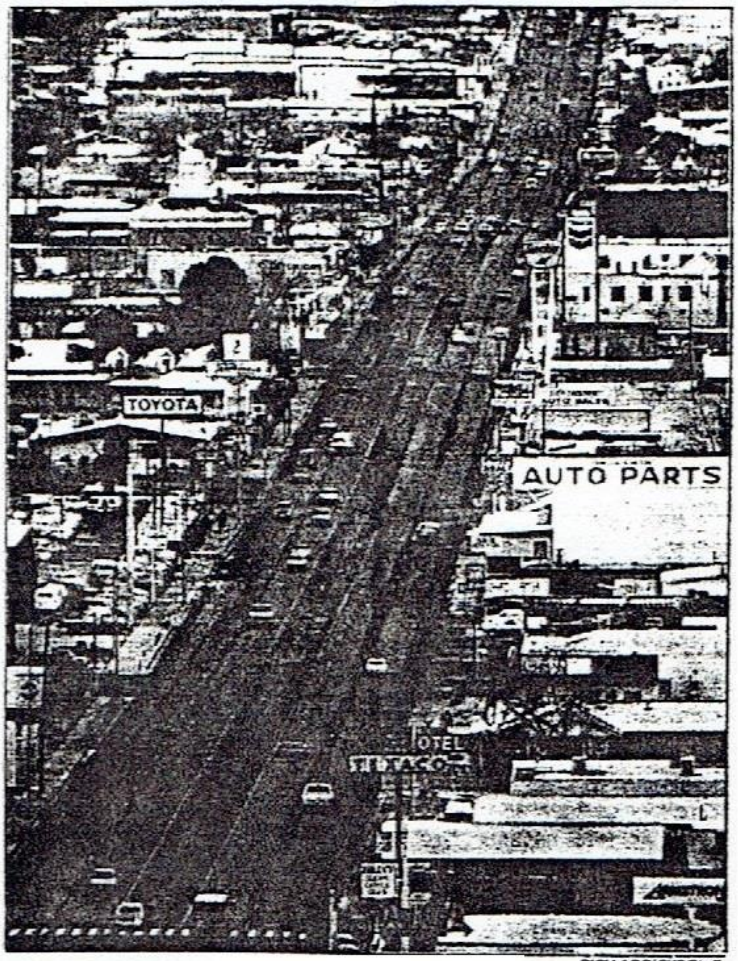
It's a decline that worries some of the faithful, who liked the old insularity of St. George. Not only do they carefully distinguish between Mormons and "Jack" Mormons (backsliders who are church members in name only), they also note that Mormons and non-Mormons mix about as well as oil and water.

Though outwardly respectful of the religion, newcomers often engage in the local conversational sport of Mormon-bashing among themselves. At one extreme is the graffiti scrawled on a restroom wall: "Mormons are proof that self-induced lobotomy is possible." Taking a more moderate position are 62-year-old real-estate developer Jack Furst, who moved here from Montana 11 years ago, and his wife, Sydney, 58. Though they say they like their LDS, or Latter-day Saints, neighbors, they applaud the increasing mix in the community and admit to being put off by questions about their own religion. "When we first came here, people would ask us if we were members of the church. And we'd say, 'Yes, we're Presbyterians,' " says Mrs. Furst, laughing as she sips a martini. "And they'd say, 'What's a Presbyterian?' " A year ago, the couple helped found a Presbyterian church that now has 110 members.

Non-Mormons and some "Jack" Mormons as well also chafe at the social restrictions the dominant religion imposes on the community.

"You can't go out and sit down here and have a drink," says Durango, Colo., native Pat Robins, 55, who manages a western-wear store where python boots and cowboy dusters are the hot sellers. For fun, Ms. Robins drives 37 miles to the 24-hour casino in Mesquite, Nev., and spends the night.

But drinks can be found in several private clubs in St. George, and a handful of bars sell 3.2 beer and setups for brown-baggers. A couple



RICH ADDICKS/Staff

St. George, Utah, is Montgomery and Richmond rolled into one.

even have cubbyhole state liquor stores down the halls where mini-bottles can be purchased.

"There's a saying around here," says Bob Jones, 48, who runs the lounge in the Hilton Inn. "When you go fishing, always take two Mormons. If you take one, he'll drink all your liquor."

Raised Mormon, Mr. Jones grew up in St. George but left as an adult to work in Florida. He came home because he tired of flat land with pine trees blocking his view of wide open spaces. Used to a dry climate, he learned to hate humidity. "I suffered more from heat and cold there than I ever have here," he says. At his lounge, 90 percent of his customers are locals, and most are regulars who drop in several times a week to listen to a jukebox (stocked with records by the likes of country artists Randy Travis and Rickey Van Shelton) or watch Utah Jazz and Brigham Young University basketball games on the wide-screen television.

Despite the occasional clashes that result from being in the heart of the Bible-and-Book-of-Mormon

Presiding over the discussion is 86-year-old owner Dick Hammer, who opened the cafe in 1935 and credits part of his continued success to having one of the town's first air conditioners.

Always dressed in western clothes, the Illinois-born Mr. Hammer roped calves on the professional rodeo circuit for 18 years, and when he got too old for that, he took,

up cutting horse competition. A statue of his favorite horse, Maczan, stands in his parking lot.

St. George has changed tremendously in recent years, he says, crediting tourists more than the influx of retirees with bringing the biggest boost for business.

"They come from all over, New York, New Jersey, Cleveland. We get the charter buses. There's an awful lot of foreign people," brags Mr. Hammer, the town's earliest non-Mormon businessman. "It's not the little Mormon community you've heard about."

But Mr. Hammer is a comparative newcomer next to lifelong St. George resident Anthony Atkin. Mr. Atkin, 80, followed in his father's footsteps to herd sheep on the Arizona Strip outside town from 1925 to 1945. The rugged terrain was a haven for outlaws until the 1930s, he recalls. But his biggest bane was four-footed: the coyote.

At 18, while dynamiting to scare off the creatures, he blew off one hand and rode more than 20 miles on a mule back to St. George for medical attention. That's the kind of pioneer spirit that made the town what it is, he says, and he continues to be proud of his community.

"It don't look like it's going to stop growing," says the Dixie native, who admits to doing fairly well in real estate after selling some of his land for a motel site. "I guess it wouldn't hurt for St. George to get a little bigger."

Belt, Dixie living, Utah style, is generally laidback. When asked what time zone Utah is in, residents often reply, "Twenty-five years behind." And in St. George, says camera store owner Fred Topalian, 35, the lifestyle is considerably slower than in the San Fernando Valley of California where he grew up.

Mr. Topalian moved here four years ago because he thought the economic climate was right for a new camera store. In his spare time, he enjoys hiking through nearby hills and taking pictures. Not surprisingly, outdoor activities keep many people happy. Phil Squire, for instance, has busied himself through the years hunting deer, quail and pheasant, playing baseball and softball, fishing and calling coyote. Calling coyote? "Yes," he says. "You make a sound like a dying rabbit or something, and then the coyote come in, and you shoot them."

Cable television keeps the town connected with the entertainment world and news from larger cities. And though radio stations do not offer much Dixieland jazz, they do have plenty of rock for the kids and country-western for the older hands. It's the latter that you hear on radios in many stores. As one clerk talks, KONY-AM in St. George plays Dwight Yoakam's "I Sang Dixie (As He Died)" then opens a contest giving away tickets to a Dixie High School production of Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple." On the FM powerhouse for the area — Kanab, Utah, based KCKK, which broadcasts over several different frequencies to accommodate listeners spread throughout the sometimes lonely countryside — the biggest hit of late has been Alabama's "Song of the South."

Despite St. George's penchant for things Southern, the town's more than 50 restaurants display a surprising ignorance of Dixie cuisine. To be sure, there is a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise. Chicken Time in nearby Hurricane, a former home of country singer Tanya Tucker, offers a Rebel Burger. And there are plans to open a Texas-style hickory-and-mesquite barbecue joint down the road a piece.

Relatively safe by any standards, St. George enjoyed a 10 percent drop in its crime rate last year despite the growing population. Only three robberies were committed, 135 burglaries and no murders. In its entire history, the town has seen six or seven murders, says Deputy Police Chief Kelly Larson. A dam break at a nearby reservoir and the continuing cleanup and repair efforts have dominated the local news of late, but there was still room on the front page of The Daily Spectrum for a story about the opening of a new 24-hour grocery store.

The real news, however, is passed along each morning at the "gossip counter" of Dick's Cafe, or as its signs proclaim, "The Famous" Dick's Cafe, "Where the West Meets the Guest."

Lingering over cups of coffee, men in cowboy hats and work caps compare notes about calves born during the night, construction projects under way and what the young people are doing.

Students Get a Taste of Fort Lauderdale in St. George

The local Chamber of Commerce likes to call St. George "the Palm Springs of Utah," but during the college and high school spring break, it's another comparison that comes to mind.

"For our area, it's like Fort Lauderdale," says Salt Lake City architect Steve Crane. "You can't get a room there during spring break."

"No, St. George doesn't have many of the things that make Fort Lauderdale a mecca for vacationing college students every year at spring break," said an article last April in The Event, Salt Lake City's equivalent of Atlanta's Creative Loafing. "But for students in Utah, it has one distinct advantage. It is a couple of thousand miles closer than the Florida beach resort."

The annual descent on the once-sleepy Mormon community by students not only from Utah but other Western states with cold climates began with a trickle about four years ago, residents say, and has increased dramatically in the past two years. Some 10,000 students made the trip last year, up 3,000 to 4,000 from the year before. More are expected this Easter weekend.

"It's phenomenal," says Kaylene Preston, 51, who moved here from Burley, Idaho, 12 years ago. "You cannot get up and down St. George Boulevard. It is bumper to bumper all four lanes. At 10 o'clock at night, you still have kids all over the place."

As far as Mrs. Preston can tell, the kids "just have a good, clean time." But local police, who work overtime throughout the students' break, beg to differ. "We make more arrests in three days than we do in the first three months of the year," says Deputy Chief Kelly Larson. "We have a lot of alcohol problems."

For souvenirs, students snap up T-shirts proclaiming, "I survived St. George Boulevard and Bluff Street" (the town's two main drags), "St. George Beach Club Member," "St. George Sport Sailing Yacht Club" and "Sail St. George," and they do a lot of meeting and greeting. They do not drink openly on the streets, nor do they frequent local bars in massive proportions. Many don't even buy alcohol in St. George but bring their own from home. And the wildest events seem to be well-attended keg parties on the Arizona Strip just outside of town.

"It gets rowdy," camera store owner Fred Topalian says with a chuckle. "For Utah."

Ironically, the town that appeals so much to vacationing young people from elsewhere has trouble keeping its own young at home.

"You must remember — there's not a whole lot to do here," says Dick Hammer, owner of Dick's Cafe.

Claiming that a turkey farm was at one time the largest employer, Steve Miller, 27, says, "They closed the farm, but the turkeys are still here." Mr. Miller, who moved to Utah's Dixie from Detroit 18 years ago, makes his living as a jack-of-all-trades who does everything from framing houses to laying carpet. Recalling his shock after moving from Detroit, he says fun for young people here meant only two things: going to a bowling alley or roller skating.

For young adults starting out on careers, the area has even less to offer, he says.

After finishing Dixie High School, he traveled around and worked at other jobs, including a three-month stint as a cook in Lakeland, Fla. "But I always end up here," Mr. Miller says. "I hate it, but I don't really. This is paradise. But there ain't much work here."

— Keith Graham