Salt Lake Steeler

By Curt Miner
Even among a breed known for spinning a tale or two, Orrin Hatch's log cabin story is hard to beat. Try an unheated frame house made from used lumber, or maybe a converted chicken coop. He's lived in both.

It's a tale that the fifth-term senator from Utah has retold often over the course of his quarter-century career in American politics, a career that has placed him in the vanguard of the conservative movement. Hatch rose to prominence during the 1980s as one of the core Republicans behind the Reagan Revolution. As ranking member and former chair of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee, he has been at the center of some of Capitol Hill's more riveting dramas: the Bork nomination controversy, the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas wrangle, the Iran-Contra affair, and a host of smaller scraps with liberal foes.

But back to Hatch's poor boy story. By Depression standards, it was probably downright ordinary, but in the U.S. Senate, whose seat he first won in 1976 and has managed to keep for 24 years running, it was enough to set him apart from the other royalty in that clubby crowd. Put aside, for the moment, that most of the folks sitting in the Senate, including Hatch himself, are presently millionaires several times over.

During the 1980s, journalists joked that seeing Hatch trundling around town with Ted Kennedy, a partisan rival but close personal friend, was like watching "the odd couple" of American politics. Kennedy, with a penchant for self-destruction and over-indulgence, born into America's most well-known political royal family; Hatch, with his trim build and personal reserve, born into near obscurity in Pittsburgh.


That he would grow up to become one of the most quietly powerful politicians of the late 20th century, and an icon of the conservative counter-revolution, is a surprise eclipsed only by the fact that the distinguished Senator from Utah actually grew up poor and Mormon in Pittsburgh. Talk about a rare breed.

In case you haven't noticed, Mormons are not one of the many ethnic groups we celebrate here in Pittsburgh. With the present Western Pennsylvania Mormon population estimated at around 5,000, and its historic population even smaller, there are no plans to add a Mormon Room in the Cathedral of Learning.

Judging from the family tree, Hatch by all rights should have stayed west of the Rockies. His father, Jesse Hatch, was a native of Utah, and family legend has it that a great-grandfather by the positively Bunyanesque name of Jeremiah Hatch was among the state's earliest Mormon settlers. With the help of several subsequent polygamous unions, the Hatch clan multiplied quickly.

It was a woman — Hatch's mother, Helen — that sent Jesse on the road that eventually led to Pittsburgh. The couple met in the mining town of Hiawatha, Utah. Helen was
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promptly sent back home to Illinois shortly after the romance was discovered, but Jesse was undaunted. Smitten with the dark-haired beauty, he followed her to Illinois, where the two married before moving east again, this time to Pittsburgh.

The Smoky City might have seemed like an odd destination for a Mormon, especially back then. But if you were a skilled tradesman, as was Hatch's father, Pittsburgh was the center of the Old Economy, and thus not a bad place to wash up. A trained wood lather, Jesse anticipated Pittsburgh's expanding housing market might afford him steady work, if not a fortune.

Unfortunately, he didn't get either. Shortly after the couple placed their down payment on a house in Homestead Park, the market collapsed. With six mouths to feed, the senior Hatch was left scrounging for odd jobs and cheaper shelter. The couple was forced to abandon their dream house for what would become one of Orrin's defining memories: a modest, unheated homemade house on an acre wooded lot in Baldwin Borough. The Baldwin Historical Society says it was on Cathell Road.

There's a photo of the place in Leading the Charge, journalist Lee Roderick's 1994 account of Hatch and his contribution to the conservative counter-revolution in American politics. It's easy to see why the grainy image made the final cut amidst the more polished publicity shots of Hatch with presidents and other dignitaries. Hatch's father had built the house himself, "board by board," from salvaged lumber. Until a heavy coat of paint obscured it, one side advertised "Meadow Gold Ice Cream," evidence of its earlier life as storefront lumber. The children slept in one dormitory-like room on the second floor and the younger siblings, including Orrin, were three to a bed. Without indoor plumbing, everyone made the trek to an outhouse 100 yards away.

To this day, Hatch jokes that "I never pass up a bathroom."

At the time, though, it was just another badge of his outsider status.

The family might have been a streetcar ride away from Pittsburgh, but it might as well have been a world away. The family lived off a vegetable garden, raised their own chickens, sold the eggs around town. As a child, Hatch helped out with all those chores, rising early to check the eggs before changing into his hand-me-down school clothes. (The sense of deprivation wasn't entirely relentless. In his free time, he ran in the woods that surrounded their house and swung from a vine, Tarzan-style, across the stream that ran nearby. If they weren't so poor, it would have seemed like an idyllic, Huck Finn childhood.)

The demands of the Hatch's religion insulated them even more. With the region's miniscule Mormon population so widely dispersed, getting to the local chapel, a red-brick converted synagogue on Shadyside's Wallingford Street, entailed a 15-mile round trip from the family home. On Sundays, they made the trip twice: once for Sunday school, and a second time for evening service. During the week, the family's homestead became a surrogate boarding house for itinerant missionaries and other visiting Mormons. Among the visitors was Vernon Law, the Pirates Cy Young pitcher nicknamed "the Deacon" by local fans; befriended by the Hatches, Law frequently stayed with the family during the season.

For all his otherness, Hatch was still a product of his place and time. As a teenager, for instance, he proved himself in classic Pittsburgh terms by going out for sports. According to his senior yearbook, he lettered in three sports, but the one that caught his passion was basketball. He started by practicing on a wooden rim nailed to a tree. As a freshman, he made captain of the JV team. During his senior year, he helped bring Baldwin to a championship title and twice defeated perennial powerhouse and city champ Carrick High. Ever the scrappy competitor, the 6'2" Hatch held Carrick's standout center, 6'8" "Meatball" Clark, to four points.

But perhaps the strongest regional influence was just growing up blue collar in a town that had defined blue collar. Apprenticed as a lather, Hatch had his first union card (in the Wood, Wire and Metal Lathers International Union, an AFL-CIO affiliate)
by age 16. He also immersed himself in the writings of labor leaders like Samuel Gompers and the local drama of the city's labor history. "I was appalled at how the men were bullied and pushed around by some of these great industrialists," he told Roderick. Like his father, and most every other working man in Pittsburgh, Hatch was a New Deal Democrat and an unabashed union man. "We thought President Roosevelt was the biggest hero around."

For someone who later led the Senate charge against Big Labor in the 1970s, it was a peculiar ideological genesis. But Hatch reasoned it mostly in terms of fairness, the same fairness that led him to occasionally breaking ranks with his conservative brethren on issues such as AIDS awareness.

Hatch kept his union card, even as he worked his way through Brigham Young University, where he earned his BA in history, and completed a two-year missionary stint. In 1958, fresh out of college, he returned to Pittsburgh, where he seemed to be eerily following in his father's footsteps. Although he had a college degree, he also had a wife and small child, and desperately short on cash, he began lathing full time. He found himself back in the figurative log cabin. Short on cash, and desperately in need of housing, he and his father set to work fixing up the old chicken coop. It was cramped, with two rooms, but it served its purpose.

Even after Hatch caught what amounted to his first break — a full, three-year academic scholarship to Pitt Law School — he continued as a union man. By day, he was among the 27 law students on the 14th floor of the Cathedral of Learning. But by night and on weekends, he was back at his craft, work he supplemented by cleaning toilets on the Pitt campus. Like everything else he put his mind to, Hatch later boasted that he was good at that too, a statement to which friend Ted Kennedy is said to have replied: "He should have stuck with it."

Given his background, Hatch seemed primed for a career in labor law. But not long after starting school, his political conversion began taking hold. It wasn't as much an epiphany as a gradual awakening that had started years earlier. Although he'd grown up in the conservative Mormon church, it wasn't until he left Pittsburgh for the Mormon mecca of Brigham Young University that he was exposed to the full breadth of Mormon philosophy, with its combination of social conservatism and free market entrepreneurship. That, combined with a strong dose of Republican talk at Pitt Law, jolted him into submission.

"As a union worker I had heard only one side of things. Almost all the people I knew were working people and Democrats." Like many who would abandon it, Hatch came to believe that the party of Roosevelt was living off its populist rhetoric but selling the working man down the river. "It gradually dawned on me that Democrats were really compassionate, not to the poor, but mainly to union leaders who could help them stay in power."

Prophetically foreshadowing the "hard hats" who would come out in support of Reagan two decades later, as a law student
and, by 1962, practicing attorney, Hatch came to a fervent belief that working people were better served by lower taxes, limited government, free enterprise, and a healthy dose of personal responsibility. He became a Republican.

After graduation in 1962 and still poor — but perhaps sensing the opportunity that awaited him after graduation — Hatch and his growing family left the chicken coop for larger digs in Mt. Lebanon. He even found himself working in the den of capitalist attorney privilege, the Frick Building, where he joined the venerable Pittsburgh firm of Pringle, Bredin and Martin. In 1969, after seven years in practice, he and his wife were finally able to put the down payment on their dream house, a sprawling manse of brick and stone in exclusive Ben Avon Heights. (There's a picture of that too in his book.)

An offer that same year from a Utah acquaintance took him back to the land of Mormonism. The following year he convinced his parents to leave behind their house and chicken coop in Baldwin and settle there as well, thus closing the Pittsburgh chapter of the Hatch family story.

Well, almost.

In 1976, during his campaign for one of Utah's Senate seats — his first political campaign ever — Hatch once again felt the familiar sting of being an outsider. His Democratic opponent, a heavily favored incumbent, responded to his upstart challenger by dubbing Hatch nothing more than a carpetbagger. He was, after all, born and raised in Pittsburgh. In a state like Utah, which had never elected a non-native senator, the charge was potentially lethal, but the scrappy Pittsburgher returned fire. After enumerating a long list of ancestors, among them several fertile polygamists, Hatch predicted that the family vote alone "is going to rise up and bite you in the ass."

And then there was the small matter two years ago, when Hatch announced, to almost everyone's surprise, that he would be running for president. It was the summer of 1999, and to say it was a crowded field would be an understatement. (Among the announced contenders was another local son, McKees Rocks native John Kasich, now an Ohio congressman.) Struggling for a message to distinguish his own campaign from that of the others, Hatch struck up an interesting refrain: he may have been a Republican, but he knew "what it was like to be hungry." He had grown up in Pittsburgh, after all. A reporter from the National Review announced his campaign with the headline "Salt Lake Steelies."

On the campaign trail in New Hampshire, Hatch lambasted his Republican rivals as "children of privilege." The National Review quoted him as saying, "We do have some class difference out there in the country.... Why shouldn't I talk about it?" Hatch admitted that his view was "an unusual thing ... a Republican campaign for the working people." Whereas his opponents "aim to exploit them [working people], we propose to help them.... We'll have a big Republican Party for the people, not the fat cats," although just to reassure his old conservative supporters, he added "we'll still do all right by the fat cats."

At the outset of the campaign, Hatch announced "I believe in miracles — and it's going to take a miracle for me to be elected." The miracle didn't happen. But then, he didn't return to the henhouse either.