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Jell-O Medium

Kate Holbrook

LAPEL PINS ARE A PART OF THE OLYMPIC cultural experience produced to represent the hosting community, and generally one pin becomes more popular than the others. For the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City, the runaway favorite pin featured green Jell-O, and enthusiasts paid \$150 or more for pins that originally cost \$7.¹ Aminco International, the company that makes Olympic pins, recognized that Jell-O was no status symbol. “We were worried that Utah would be embarrassed about being known as the Jell-O-eating capital of the world,” admitted vice president David Hyman. Yet he somehow came to decide that, “Utah-ans are very proud of it.”² Every few years since 2002, someone writes about Latter-day Saints and Jell-O, and invariably they mention this pin as evidence of some profound truth about Latter-day Saint culinary traditions. The pin is thus a popular medium for expressing messages about Latter-day Saints, and these messages are revealing, inaccurate, contradictory, and apt. For some they reinforce unkind stereotypes while others have found them reassuring.

1. Debra Rosenberg, “Olympics, Winter Olympics 2002, Olympic Games, Winter Games, Salt Lake City, Utah, Jello-O Pin [*sic*], Green Jell-O, Olympic Trading Pins,” www.Newsweek.com, February 7, 2002.

2. Carolyn Wyman, “In Utah, It’s Good to Be Green (Jell-O),” *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 2002, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/feb/13/food/fo-jello13>.

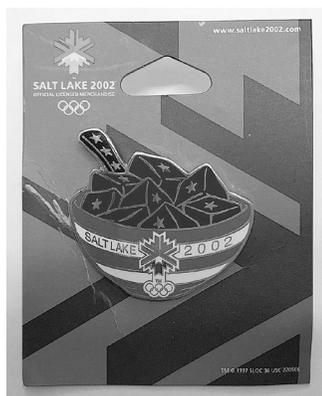


Figure 1 Lapel pin from the 2002 Olympics in Salt Lake City.

One misleading message of the pin was its rendering of Utah Jell-O as green squares. Plain squares were not the main way Latter-day Saints enjoyed Jell-O, and not why green Jell-O was popular. Mormon Jell-O consumption has been, overwhelmingly, in salad form, and this was true of Jell-O consumers throughout the US. Molded Jell-O salads were all the rage by the 1930s, and their popularity lasted for decades. In fact, green Jell-O was initially developed in 1930 expressly for use in making molded salads.³

Molded salads were fancy. Today's American tastemakers with their devotion to whole foods, simply prepared and eaten in season, reject Jell-O outright, and American eaters have forgotten what it meant when their ancestors first became acquainted with Jell-O at the beginning of the last century: a radical democratization of elite culinary creations. Several companies were making gelatin convenience products during the last decade of the nineteenth century, and these products soon came to perform in recipes as gelatin had for the wealthy in centuries past.⁴ A royal's servants had to start with calves' feet or a deer's antlers, chopping, scraping, boiling, and skimming for most of a day to create the gelatin for her lady's aspic (savory jelly set in a mold) or his majesty's kholodets (jellied meat dish). Flavoring gelatin with savory ingredients such as meat or tomato and suspending foodstuffs in a translucent medium were what gelatin was for. Mrs. John E. Cooke won third place in a 1905 Knox gelatin recipe contest for "Perfection Salad," or cabbage salad suspended in gelatin.⁵ When Pearle Wait invented the first exciting and affordable gelatin flavors, which his wife, May, named Jell-O, he further

3. Carolyn Wyman, *Jell-O: A Biography* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2001), 45.

4. Wyman, *Jell-O*, 2, 5–7.

5. Laura Shapiro, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 94; and Wyman, *Jell-O*, 44–45.

brought elite culinary traditions within the reach of everyday people. And those everyday people often used Jell-O for savory concoctions as the wealthy had done before them. But just because Jell-O made gelatin easier doesn't mean cooks used it for simple preparations.

Not only did bare green squares of Jell-O on the pin suggest that Mormon Jell-O was plain, the squares also represented Jell-O as easy to prepare. Jell-O in plain square form was what you met in hospitals and grade school cafeterias, but Mormon Jell-O preparations were not so straightforward. True to the gelatin pedigree of venerable, aristocratic tables, Jell-O concoctions were intended to impress and delight. Although Jell-O had been touted since its inception as easy to make, molded salads required expertise, and they took hours to set. To compose and serve a cabbage salad on a platter was clearly easier than to make it and then suspend it in gelatin. Informed practice was necessary to make fruit, vegetable, or meat contents hang throughout a mold instead of all falling to the bottom. Jell-O also had to set just the right amount before receiving additions such as mayonnaise, whipped cream, sour cream, or cottage cheese. When it set too little, the cream would melt or turn into particles; if set too much, the Jell-O wouldn't combine well and broke into pieces. Unmolding the salad loomed as an additional potential disaster. Thirty minutes before the meal began, with no way to hastily re-create a dish that required hours to set, the cook had to coax the salad out of its mold without leaving any of it behind, without it breaking, and without it ending off-center of the platter.⁶ Both Jell-O experts and flops knew the ways in which a molded salad was not easy.

Due in part to all this fuss, many women combining professional work and family, or just trying to reduce housework during the 1970s and '80s, abandoned molded salads.⁷ Yet often two-thirds of the salad recipes in ward and popular Latter-day Saint cookbooks of these decades were for molded salads. Jell-O lost its chic here, and the opportunity to use Jell-O as a new avenue to belittle Mormons was born. All at once Jell-O salads could represent domestic enslavement, perfectionism,

6. For reliable tips on successful unmolding, see Wyman, *Jell-O*, 50.

7. Wyman, *Jell-O*, 60–61.

regression, celebration, or community members' love in tangible form. And Mormons were not the only Americans who continued to eat Jell-O salads. Jell-O traveled well, cost little, and appealed to a wide range of palates, from those for whom chewing or swallowing caused difficulty to those who delighted in its translucent, quivery sweetness. It was ideal for delivery to an ailing community member, a family welcoming a new baby, and especially communal meals. Just as Utah Latter-day Saints recognized its utility in such situations, so did many American Protestants. And they, too, found humor in its consumption. For example, Garrison Keiller's poem "I'm a Lutheran" proclaims:

We've got chow mein noodles on tuna hotdish
And Jello with cottage cheese,
And chocolate bars and banana cream pie,
No wonder we're on our knees.⁸

A woman posting a Jell-O salad recipe to an online forum for expectant parents wrote, "I'm Methodist, and we always joke that you can't have a Methodist potluck without at least a couple of Jell-O salads!"⁹ And the *1979 Marysville United Methodist Women's Cookbook* does in fact have recipes for Pretzel Jell-O Salad, Asparagus Salad (with green Jell-O), and Mint Salad (made, again, with lime Jell-O).¹⁰ Iowa, Utah's main competitor in Jell-O consumption, is bursting with churchgoers.¹¹ Jell-O and church functions work well together.

When Jell-O consumption seems more related to whether one lives in the middle of the country or on a coast, why the insistence on Mormons and Jell-O? Non-Mormon Scott Blackerby is part of the

8. Garrison Keiller, "I'm a Lutheran," *Garrison Keiller* (blog) <http://www.garrisonkeillor.com/radio/im-a-lutheran/>.

9. Sweetky_06, comment on teacherlindz, "need a good jello recipe . . .," <https://forums.thebump.com/discussion/7635377/need-a-good-Jell-O-recipe>.

10. Humuhumu, "1979 Marysville United Methodist Women's Cookbook," Junkyard Clubhouse <http://www.junkyardclubhouse.com/2008/04/19/1979-marysville-united-methodist-womens-cookbook/>.

11. Pew Research Center, "Religious Composition of Adults in Iowa," <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/iowa/>.

answer. Former executive chef of Bambara, a Salt Lake City high-end restaurant, Blackerby playfully objected when Utah came in second to Iowa for Jell-O consumption in 1999. Blackerby waged a “Take back the title” movement that included a Jell-O sculpting contest and put his own Jell-O innovations on Bambara’s menu for a summer. BYU communications major Jeremiah Christenot picked up on the effort and launched a successful campaign to make Jell-O the official state snack food that same year.¹² Blackerby and Christenot thus paved the way for the 2002 Olympic Jell-O pins. They did not make the Utah Mormons and Jell-O connection up—it was evident in Mormon cookbooks, in family traditions, and in insider jokes. For example, the Walter and Hays Band invoked a tradition of Mormon Jell-O (and many other) jokes in their popular 1988 single “The Mormon Rap.”¹³ What the contest, the state Jell-O legislation, and the Olympic pin did was to further a few business careers while projecting a concrete link between Utah Mormons and Jell-O.

The second incarnation of the Olympic Jell-O pin added grated carrots to the Jell-O. The carrot depiction was more accurate than plain squares because it was more like salad and it had shown up at ward dinners. Yet green Jell-O and carrots is what people referenced when they wanted to make fun of Jell-O (or, implicitly, the women who prepared it), and people made fun of shredded carrots in Jell-O far more often than they actually made or ate it. What Utah Mormons liked about their Jell-O was mixing it with cranberries and nuts at Thanksgiving and with fruits and dairy at other times of communal celebration. While it might be funny, the green Jell-O and carrots pin is also misleading, not because no one ever made it as an attempt to get her family members to

12. Miriam Oh, “Utah Concludes Week Long Jell-O Celebration,” *Daily Universe*, February 8, 2001, <http://universe.byu.edu/2001/02/08/utah-concludes-week-long-jello-celebration/>. See also the web’s best article on Mormons and Jell-O: Christy Spackman, “Mormonism’s Jell-O Mold,” *Slate*, August 17, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/food/2012/08/jell_o_and_mormonism_the_stereotype_s_surprising_origins_.html.

13. Jonathan Decker, “JamestheMormon: Not Your Parents’ ‘Mormon Rap,’” *Meridian Magazine*, April 28, 2016, <http://1dsmag.com/jamesthemormon-not-your-parents-mormon-rap/>.

eat their vitamins but because reducing Jell-O salad to green Jell-O and carrots is a distortion of the women behind the Jell-O. Green Jell-O and carrots as emblem of their salads makes these women look like they care not at all for others' culinary pleasure. In fact, the opposite is true. Why bother to Jell-O-ize regular food if not to increase recipients' delight?

Analyzing this representation of a food is really analyzing representations of a religious culture. When people reference the green Jell-O pin, they perpetuate its assessments of Utah Mormons and judgments about Utah Jell-O makers and eaters. The media of the pin thus provides an analytical opportunity to interrogate meanings in a clearly focused method. This focus, in turn, grounds our discussion in the concrete, in common practice and historical context, while also allowing exploration of the varied religious worlds one Jell-O pin can hold.

Although Jell-O is not the most apt symbol for Latter-day Saints (and homemade whole wheat bread *is*—stay tuned for a sequel), the cheerful product has signified different meanings at different times in LDS history, from the culinary democratization of elite foods during the 1930s to a consecration of family tradition during the '70s and '80s. When a newer generation of LDS women make Jell-O today, they tend to do so with some sheepishness. The popular bloggers from *Our Best Bites* report in their most recent cookbook's only Jell-O salad recipe, "If you never thought gelatin and 'truly impressive' could ever be used in the same sentence, seeing the looks on people's faces when you serve this might change your mind."¹⁴ They list the recipe in the index under "gelatin" instead of "Jell-O," distancing themselves somewhat from Jell-O's passé associations. The Six Sisters, best-selling authors at church-owned Deseret Book stores, still use older recipes calling for a can of condensed soup or prepared salsa to a recipe. "We wanted to create a collection of simple recipes . . . that could help busy parents and families spend less time cooking in the kitchen and more time creating lasting memories together," they explain. And they have only one Jell-O

14. Sara Wells and Kate Jones, "Glass-Block Gelatin," *Savoring the Seasons with Our Best Bites* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2012), 217.

salad recipe (not a molded salad) in their best-selling cookbook.¹⁵ Their recipe for homemade fruit snacks also calls for Jell-O, and it's hard to see how making your own fruit snacks aligns with the goal to limit kitchen time in favor of family time. But who among us lives contradiction-free? And which of the media we live among is contradiction-free? Like the other media through which we live, Jell-O carries and shapes meaning in myriad ways.

Kate Holbrook, managing historian of women's history at the LDS Church History Department, enjoys an endless fascination with the meanings and methods of kitchen work. Her most recent book is *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*.

15. *Six Sisters' Stuff: Family Recipes, Fun Crafts, and So Much More* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2013), introduction, 98–99.