

The Missionary Side of George Romney



Keep an eye on Michigan's new governor: he's pursuing politics with the same zeal that made him a wizard of industry and a leader of the Mormon Church

By MARYA SAUNDERS and BOB GAINES

A SURLY CROWD jostled about in the street below Edinburgh's grim castle that spring day in 1927. The center of their attention was a grinning Scottish heckler and his prey, a young Mormon street preacher from America named George Wilcken Romney.

The heckler was moving in for the kill. "Hey, Yank, what do you mean here?" he barked as he waved one of the pamphlets the youth had given out explaining his Church of Latter-Day Saints. "It says Christ was born 'of Jerusalem,' and every bloke knows Christ was born in Bethlehem."

The question caught young Romney unprepared. As he fumbled for an answer, the heckler, an old hand at baiting street-corner preachers, shouted: "The Yank who wrote this book was pretty cockeyed." The crowd laughed. The young missionary clenched his fists and tried to reply, but the heckler snapped a rude remark about Mormon polygamy and swaggered off to attack another street speaker. The crowd moved on.

Romney's face was grim. "What right do I have to preach if I can't answer questions about my religion?" he said to a companion.

The rest of the afternoon and evening, the distraught young man sat in the city library searching for an answer to the heckler's question. Finally, he discovered "of" meant "close to" and that Jerusalem was about three miles from Bethlehem.

When the library closed, he withdrew all the books he could on religion and took them to his lodgings. "In a few weeks, the Edinburgh hecklers realized there weren't many questions they could stump me on," George Romney recalled recently. "I was ready to outtalk anyone."

This booming confidence in his ability to outtalk or outsell anybody on something he believes in has carried Romney a long way. He took over American Motors, which lost \$19 million in 1956, and lifted its earnings to \$60 million three years later. As Michigan's recent Republican gubernatorial candidate, he ran a whirlwind campaign which ended 14 years of Democratic rule in the state and shot his name into the limelight as one of the most exciting new figures in politics.

He Acts to Serve God and Society

To understand Romney, you must begin with his religion. He handles problems in the Mormon way, which he calls "prayerful consideration." Before deciding to run for governor in 1962, he studied all sides of the problem, then fasted and prayed for 24 hours. When he emerged from his room, he announced to his wife: "I've decided. I'm going to be governor of Michigan."

Such an announcement could seem presumptuous; but there is in Romney a humility and burning missionary zeal to serve both his God and society which demands respect, if for no other reason than that it gets results.

George was born July 8, 1907, in Mexico in a Mormon colony that had been established there after the United States declared polygamy illegal in 1885. His grandfather had several wives (by whom he had 30 children) and so was forced to flee into Mexico to avoid imprisonment. The Mormon Church banned plural marriages in 1890, and George's father, a carpenter, confined himself to one wife, who gave him seven children.