



Living and Practicing Law in Salt Lake City

[by Erica Winter]

Are you tired of looking at the concrete and tall buildings that define most major cities in America? While not a legal market on par with New York or Los Angeles, Salt Lake City offers an ever-increasing number of opportunities for attorneys -- as well as a beautiful landscape that provides plenty of room for outdoor activities.

People come to Salt Lake City - and stay - for two main reasons: God and country.

As home base for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church, also known as Mormon), Salt Lake City attracts and keeps many members of the religion, which creates a climate for the town, just as finance does for New York and politics does for Washington. Salt Lake City is a company town.

And, no matter what their religion, natives and newcomers also stay in this city for the incredible natural beauty - mountains, canyons, and the Great Salt Lake itself - that not only surrounds, but also runs through the city itself. Every one we talked to said the words "hiking" and "mountain biking" repeatedly - no matter what their legal specialty or religious affiliation.

Practicing here.

In general, practicing law in Salt Lake City involves a variety of specialty areas, with no one focus standing out as the particular law vein of the town. There are generally fewer required associate billing hours here than for cities on the coasts (about 1,850 hours required, instead of 2,300 or more), with specifics depending on which firm you join.

The Bar is relatively small here, too, compared to larger city Bars. Possibly because of this, there is a very courteous and civil legal practice, say the attorneys we talked with, where professional courtesy is the norm.

Shandor Badaruddin is with the Montana-based firm Moriarty, Gooch & Badaruddin, and

practices in Utah and many western states. Badaruddin, who has been practicing for eight years, went to Emory Law School in Atlanta, and had a solo practice there before moving west in 2002.

Badaruddin did criminal defense in Atlanta, as well as some civil and appellate work. Now he works on civil rights cases (currently, a case in which the police killed someone), and also wrongful death and product liability cases. He sees big differences between practicing in the west and back in Atlanta.

In Utah, attorneys "focus on the things that matter," says Badaruddin, whereas attorneys in Atlanta, while very skilled and professional, would sometimes lose focus over smaller issues (such as at which office to hold a meeting).

When Salt Lake attorneys are litigating against firms from New York, Chicago, L.A., or even Texas, there is a noticeable difference in how work gets done, says Sean Reyes, with Parsons Behle & Latimer, a Salt Lake-based firm of 125 attorneys and the largest firm in Utah.. Attorneys from those cities are more in-your-face, aggressive and confrontational. "That's just not how we practice" in Salt Lake City, says Reyes.

Reyes is from Los Angeles, went to college at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah (just to the south of Salt Lake City), and went to law school at Berkeley. He has been practicing for seven years. Reyes specializes in civil litigation involving First Amendment issues, libel and defamation cases, and media law, advising several Hearst publications (*Redbook*,

Cosmopolitan) as well as local newspapers and magazines.

Salt Lake City does not support a media law practice in the same way that L.A. or New York does, he says; but, the overall quality of the legal work, in his opinion, compares favorably with the legal work from larger firms on the coasts, and ends up costing the client less per hour.

Starting salaries for associates are around \$80,000 for local firms, and \$85,000 to \$90,000 for regional and national firms - but you should expect to work longer hours for those shops, Reyes says. Still, firms here "are not sweatshop firms," he says.

"People do pretty well here" finding jobs, says Kristin Erickson, J.D., Associate Dean for Career Services at the University of Utah's Law School. There is a good legal job market here, with higher job stability than in larger markets, and higher civility, says Erickson. There are "some top-notch lawyers here," she says.

And that is the basic picture. The questions that arise whenever you hear the words "Salt Lake City," or "Utah," however, take a bit longer to examine.

Company town.

The perception that Salt Lake City is politically and socially conservative is absolutely true.

This is the state capital, and several large companies have offices here, including United Parcel Service, Intermountain Health Care,



Pacific Corp (Utah Power), Wells Fargo Bank, Qwest Communications, and Alcoa. Plus, the 2002 Winter Olympics were held here.

Still, if Salt Lake City has a “company” that defines it, it is the socially and politically conservative LDS Church.

With just over 181,000 people living in the city proper, Salt Lake City is not a large community, nor is it as racially diverse as many other urban communities. Add to this mix a strong religious majority who have a very tightly connected community, and some basic career questions arise:

- Can you get a legal job here without being from here?
- Can you get that job without being in the LDS Church, and having access to its professional network?
- How do racial minorities, women, and gay people fare professionally in this conservative climate?

We asked a mix of natives and newcomers about these issues. Some of the answers may not be what you expect.

The conservative climate here is “a fact of life,” says attorney Ruth Lybbert, with the Salt Lake City firm Dewsnap, King & Olsen. This fact, however, has not restricted her career progress as a woman. Consider her résumé.

Lybbert, a Salt Lake City native and alumna of the University of Maryland Law School, started practicing law 18 years ago with the Utah Attorney General’s Office, where she enforced consumer protection laws by bringing suits against myriad companies trying to hoodwink state residents.

It was in the AG’s office that she caught, as she puts it, “the plaintiff’s bug,” which led her to her current firm in 1990, heading up complex litigation involving medical malpractice, product liability, and personal injury cases. She also does some antitrust and insurance

bad faith work. Her eight-attorney firm is “atypical” in town, she says, in that the firm works on a contingency basis, and all clients come on referral.

Two years ago, Lybbert was named by the state Supreme Court to chair the Utah Judicial Conduct Commission, which looks into complaints against judges in the state. She is on the Utah Supreme Court’s Advisory Committee for Professionalism, and she has been president of the Utah Trial Lawyers Association.

Understandably, Lybbert does not consider that being a woman has held her back professionally in this town. She has experienced insensitive comments, but women practicing law in any town - not just small conservative towns - will have the same experience. “I have been treated very fairly,” she says.

Far more relevant to legal success in Salt Lake City than gender is an attorney’s case selection, professionalism, and level of preparation, says Lybbert.

Part of the conservative and religious climate here is that there is a strong focus on families in Salt Lake City. There is a growing trend in town for firms to allow both women and men to have time off or alternate work schedules to accommodate caring for children or other family needs, says Jenniffer Byde, with Holme Roberts & Owen LLP, and president of Women Lawyers of Utah. For example, one attorney Byde knows works three days a week - and one of those days is Saturday.

The Women Lawyers of Utah conducted a survey of maternity leave policies of firms in town in 2002, showing that most firms do have paid maternity leave policies, generally ranging from four to 12 weeks. Other firms that do not have paid leave allow unpaid leave.

While firm policies are not perfect, there is not the same pressure to ignore family needs here as there is in many other cities, says Byde, who has been practicing for seven

years, and is a graduate of the University of Utah’s Law School. Salt Lake City is “very family friendly,” says Byde. Even litigators have family time; “I’m very proud of that,” says Byde, “I’m happy to be here.”

Holme Roberts is a national firm with about 225 attorneys, 35 of those in Salt Lake City. Seven of the attorneys in her offices are women, says Byde, two are partners. Byde herself is not a partner, but she has a young daughter, and she is at the same level as men with similar professional experience at her firm.

There are still challenges for women; primary among them is the “invisible networking” that men have, where a lot of business is conducted on the golf course or at other sporting events where women are not invited.

Interestingly, there is a growing women’s network in response to this - partly because of hurdles women attorneys face.

Some women practicing law decide to go into government or become in-house corporate attorneys - preferring 50-hours-a-week jobs over billing 1,850 hours as associates at law firms, says Byde. These same in-house attorneys - women - represent their corporate clients, and end up opening a “market to be tapped,” says Byde.

Women in law firms can network with women who are in corporations, and they don’t have to play golf to do it. For example, female attorneys can take their corporate client’s in-house counsel, women, out for spa days, instead of golf outings - building professional relationships and creating other networks.

Byde, a Utah native, is not a member of the LDS Church, and is not aware of any barriers to her professional life because of that. She has not seen men who are part of the church acting any differently towards their female colleagues than men who are not.

Overall, Byde cautions: conservative does not

mean closed. The town is politically conservative, but also, "Salt Lake City is more progressive than people give it credit for," she says.

The town is also racially diverse in ways you might not expect. For example, because of LDS Church missionary work, many people on the Polynesian Pacific islands of Tonga and Samoa are members of the LDS Church. And, if these Pacific islanders come to live on the mainland U.S. - they often settle in Salt Lake City.

Another effect of the Church's missionary work is that many of the natives speak foreign languages, including Spanish, but also German, Chinese, Japanese, Tagalog and other languages you might not expect to find in the American Southwest. Knowledge of foreign cultures is also strong in town, says Sean Reyes, who is of Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander descent.

Still, typical of many southwestern cities, the largest minority group in town is the Latino community, with a very small percentage of African-Americans.

The Utah Minority Bar Association was able to convince many firms in town to sign a diversity pledge, agreeing to try to increase the number of people of color hired, says Sean Reyes, who is president-elect of the association. His firm, Parsons Behle, actively tries to recruit minority attorneys, says Reyes.

At his firm, there have been a higher percentage of associates hired recently who belong to racial minority groups, says Reyes. If he makes partner at his firm, he will be the first person of color to do so in its 140-year history.

Ironically, being in a minority group can help focus your legal career, and possibly even forward it. Marlin Criddle has carved a career for himself serving the gay and lesbian community here, focusing on estate planning, bankruptcy, and criminal defense.

Criddle, who has been practicing for 21 years, started off as an attorney in Los Angeles. He decided that he "wanted to be here for the gay and lesbian community in Salt Lake City," and marketed to that community. There could be similar opportunities in serving the legal needs of the growing Hispanic community, and in the Polynesian community here, says Criddle.

Criddle also has clients who are not gay, but want a gay lawyer because they are seeking a more open-minded attorney.

On the flip side, Laura Milliken Gray had to refocus part of her practice when Utah changed its laws in 2000, prohibiting gays and lesbians from adopting a partner's child. Gray had worked with couples on these second-parent adoptions, and had found judges in and around Salt Lake City who were quite willing to approve the adoptions, despite a largely conservative judiciary.

When the law changed, however, the judges were "hamstrung a bit," and she shifted her practice to estate planning, working within contract law to give gays and lesbians more legal protection. Overall, she says that in Salt Lake City, "the judges are fair."

And, if there is one thing that everyone we talked to said about Salt Lake City, it is that your work is not the only thing that you do. There is a very family-focused culture here, which leads to an assumption that you will have things to do outside of the office and your career - whether you have children or not.

Living here.

"I'm a transplanted Easterner and I love it here," says Laura Gray. She is an alumna of the University of Utah's Law School and has been practicing for 13 years, but is originally from Pittsburg, coming west for the natural beauty of it. If you like nature and outdoor sports, "there's nowhere better" than Salt Lake City, she says.

There is even a canyon - City Creek Canyon - right in the middle of town. Lawyers practicing in town go hiking or running there in the morning before work. And on the weekends, driving "four hours in any direction," says Kristen Erickson, you can find Yellowstone National Park; Zion National Park; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; or the Colorado mountains. There are eleven national parks less than a day's drive from the city.

Skiing, hiking, and all possible kinds of activity in nature are all very popular here. There is also sailing and boating on the Great Salt Lake. "I love the seasons - there is beautiful weather!" says Sean Reyes. Summers get desert-hot, but the heat is dry. There is snow in the winter, but it only sticks in the mountains, making for world-famous skiing. "The best snow is Utah snow," says Reyes.

Loving sports is good, because then you might be too tired to want to go out and party at bars at night. From all accounts, this is not a hopping nightlife town.

Still, there are some good restaurants, with more and more international food available. "We can entertain clients and not be ashamed," says Reyes. There are also many cultural and sporting events to attend, which "make it a good place to live," says Marlin Criddle.

Having lived in the San Francisco Bay area, where you would pay "\$1 million for a Tough Shed," says Reyes, housing costs in Salt Lake City remain reasonable, even though they are not as low as they were ten years ago. Now you could expect to pay between \$250,000 and \$350,000 for a 4,000 square-foot house in the area (Reyes lives in the city now, but he and his family are house-hunting).

All our sources agree, good neighborhoods in town to look for a house include The Avenues, Sugar House, Capitol Hill, Harvard/Yale (did we mention you could live on a street named after your alma mater? Princeton, too...), and



Gilmer Park.

Public schools are quite good in Salt Lake City, says Erickson, despite low state spending per-pupil. If you pay attention to which neighborhood you move to, you could find a truly “wonderful” school, says Erickson.

Salt Lake City Advice.

1. If you are considering a life of biking and hiking far from L.A. or New York, “don’t assume there is no rat race” in Salt Lake City, says Ruth Lybbert. This is a smaller city, but do not assume that there is an easier pace here. Your law practice won’t take care of itself, she warns.

2. If you are single and looking to find people, Salt Lake City is not what you’d call a party town. Many singles events are run within the LDS Church, says Sean Reyes - there is very little nightlife.

3. Keep in mind that Utah has an integrated Bar, meaning you must be a member in order to be licensed in the state. Utah has reciprocity licensing with any state that has reciprocity with it; you must have been active in your own state bar for five of the last seven years to qualify for reciprocity in Utah.

4. Save money to bring with you if you decide to relocate to Salt Lake City; you will need it to cover startup costs, says Shandor Badaruddin.

5. Before you come to town, be clear on what legal market you are trying to reach, advises Marlin Criddle, especially if you are trying to launch a solo practice.

6. Most importantly, if you are considering relocation, “network, network, network!” says Kristin Erickson. Connect with other lawyers, agrees Laura Gray.

7. If all you want to do is work, “stay where you are,” says Badaruddin. Practicing law out west allows you to have a life and a legal

career, too.

If you want to look for a job in Salt Lake City, though, there are over 50 jobs in the region on LawCrossing right now.