

The Support Networks of Mormon Women in the Nineteenth-Century West

by Morgan Jones

The Western frontier was a place of opportunity, but not without a cost. Women lived very different lives during the nineteenth century and did not have access to the majority of the liberties women now rightfully enjoy. Support networks built on close friendships were common by way of writing to friends and family members to provide support for the everyday challenges of being a woman.¹ Mormon women occupy an interesting place in the history of the American frontier. Being a part of the Mormon community meant that women could hear by word of mouth about gatherings occurring within a realistic travelling distance. These gatherings were sponsored by their churches or made up of women who shared their same beliefs. Polygamy was, and still is for some, a highly controversial issue, and as a result, women living as sister wives dealt with persecution. Plural marriages could have been difficult emotionally for these women. However, this research does not focus on the relationships between the women and their husbands, but on the relationships between the women themselves. What is clear from these women's first-hand accounts of their own lives is that practical benefits existed to having more than one adult woman living in a house on the frontier. The support networks that existed among the women involved in plural marriages, their churches, and associated clubs allowed Mormon women to overcome persecution and establish communities in the West.

Included in the book, *Remarkable Stories from the Lives of Latter-day Saint Women*, are short biographies of many different Mormon women from the nineteenth century through the 1970s. Beginning with a woman named Mary Isabella Horne, it is evident that Mormon women faced the same difficulties as any other family settling the frontier. Mary tells of their four-month journey to the land on which their family decided to settle. Upon their arrival to their new home, the family "lived in a tent until logs could be obtained from the canyon for a house."² The family started with nothing in their house other than the two windows and other possessions they brought with them. They had to build the walls, floors, and all the furniture. Mary wrote that it took quite a long time. The family farmed their own food and traded for milk and other commodities that they were unable to bring or find for themselves. They struggled with mice and the

¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 189-201.

² Leon R. Hartshorn, *Remarkable Stories from the Lives of Latter-day Saint Women*, (Salt Lake City, Utah: Desert Book Company, 1974), 45-47.

weather, but over a period of time, seemed to establish a home for themselves. However, not everyone else on the frontier was as fortunate.

Elizabeth Jackson Kingsford was one of these women who suffered greatly as a result of her venture out West. Her company was crossing the plains in October (the year was not recorded but was likely between 1848 and 1857). On the 25th they reached camp. This group of pioneers struggled—supplies were scarce, many were sick, and it was very cold. In her account of the journey, Elizabeth wrote:

The weather was bitter. I listened to hear if my husband breathed—he lay so still. I could not hear him. I became alarmed. I put my hand on his body when to my horror I discovered that my worst fears were confirmed. My husband was dead... I called for help to the other inmates of the tent. They could render me no aid; and there was no alternative but to remain alone by the side of the corpse till morning...The ground was so frozen they could not dig a grave.³

Her moving account of the death of her husband on the frontier reminds the reader the intense loneliness and suffering that was all too common on the frontier. This is why support networks were so vital to the of women in the West. Without making connections, it was entirely possible they could end up completely alone. Due to the environmental hardships and amount of work needed to survive, life alone on the frontier would have been desirable for no one.

Due to the sheer amount of work to be done, the culture of the West, where Mormon women were settling, was much more collective than the Northeast or the South. Women engaged in many forms of “work” —whether it be mending fences on a farm, upkeeping the home, caring for children, or teaching at a school. A woman’s own family and the other families in the community depended on everyone doing their part.⁴ Equally important in American culture was the friendship networks that were common in the lives of women in the Northeast and the South. Domesticity was a central component of the shared set of ideas about a woman’s place which “bound non-related women to each other.”⁵ It is important to note that not all Mormons were involved in polygamous relationships. In fact, polygamous marriages made up a minority. However, even where polygamous marriages did not exist, the Mormon Church was still extremely interconnected. Men and women called each other “Brother” and “Sister.” There were also relief societies, and clubs centered around the church. Women gathered to perform songs, write, and engage in community service. Because of

³ Hartshorn, 52.

⁴ Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Monk. *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 16-19.

⁵ Schlissel et al., 21.

these social networks, close connection to community was an integral part of a Mormon woman's life.⁶

There are many examples of the influence of polygamy in creating friendship networks—Ida Hunt Udall is one of these. In fact, Ida lived in the same area and time as other women in this research. The book, *Mormon Odyssey: The Story of Ida Hunt Udall, Plural Wife*, is a compilation of the diary entries and letters she wrote throughout the course of her life. Just after the first month of marriage, Ida already believed she, her husband David, and his first wife, Ella, were already better off than before. They all benefitted from the added companionship and from the help with the intense amount of work that came along with frontier life. At first Ella did not seem to welcome Ida's arrival in her home with David, though it did not take long for the two women to become friends.⁷ She and Ella had time to talk about their relationship to each other and learn about one another.

However, it is worth noting that these ideas came from Ida's letters home to her family. Ida's relationship with Ella likely did end in friendship, but it is also possible that Ella was feeling pressured by her family to respond positively to the polygamous marriage. Her letters back to her concerned family members may not have accurately portrayed the way she felt. She did not describe the emotional difficulties of sharing a husband with another wife, but that does not mean she did not feel them. Ida clearly cared very much for her family, so it makes sense that she would not have wanted them to worry about her.

Not long after Ida and Ella began their friendship, Ida began to experience hostility from the rest of the country due to her polygamous relationship. In March of 1884, she mentioned an anti-Mormon newspaper "whose sole mission was to misrepresent and vilify our people... My name frequently come out in glowing colors, calling me a prostitute, mistress etc. This was very hard for our brethren to bear, but they treated it with silent contempt, and quit reading the paper altogether."⁸ A few months later in July, there was a raid and Ida, along with a few other Mormon women, had to leave their homes to avoid the persecution. Polygamy was illegal, so local law enforcement would come after men who were leaders in the Mormon communities to arrest and eventually jail them for having plural wives. Americans moving to the West to settle the frontier did not want Mormons where they were going to settle and build communities because they saw polygamy as a threat to white, middle-class Protestant values. Therefore, it was not uncommon for raids to occur in an attempt to rid the West of Mormons. While Ida was hiding out, her husband was summoned in August as a witness to the Grand Jury in Prescott. Ida responded in her diary: "I felt badly at seeing

⁶ Schlissel et al., 75-78.

⁷ Ellsworth, *Mormon Odyssey*, 57-61. Grammatical errors are original punctuation from diary.

⁸ Ellsworth, 68.

him start for I was strongly impressed that this was only the beginning of a long train of annoyances and persecutions for our people, in Apache County.”⁹ This persecution was not only present in Apache county, but all around the country.

Because polygamy created a different structure than was typical for most families in America, Mormons were viewed in a negative light. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union specifically mentioned their hatred for polygamy in their meeting notes. One of their main goals was to keep a man named Mr. Reed Smooth from a Senate seat. Their reasoning was that Mr. Smooth was an Apostle in the Mormon Church and would be loyal to the Mormon Church above the United States. Their ultimate goal was to pass an amendment prohibiting Polygamy, and if this was ever to be achieved, a Mormon man on the Senate would not be acceptable. Their meeting notes declare “We believe that the W.C.T.U. cannot be true to its declarations in regard to the family and home and not oppose polygamy; that it cannot be patriotic and not oppose the political power of the Mormon church.”¹⁰ Ironically, their main opposition to polygamy seems to be that it would undermine the family, but Mormon women’s lives still had very strong ties to their family, and even the white, middle-class ideal of domesticity.

Persecution caused families to work together to provide protection and meet practical needs. Catharine Cottam Romney was the second wife of Miles Romney. They lived in St. Johns, Arizona and then had to move to Mexico when the American government started raids in Mormon communities with the goal of eradicating polygamous marriages. The close-knit community of the Mormon church was important when danger came and polygamy began to be prosecuted by law enforcement. When Ida’s exile began, she and David took shelter with the Romney family and then stayed out in the country with another Mormon family. Catharine left her five children at home while one of the other women brought her two younger ones with her. As danger became more serious, Brother Romney took his two wives and Ida in a wagon to Mexico.¹¹ Ida and Catharine both mention each other in their diaries and letters home to their families. This shows how connected the Mormon women were on the frontier.

Catharine had a more difficult time than Ida in adjusting to married life. She frequently mentioned in letters to her parents, brothers, and sisters how much she missed them and that she was anxious to hear from them.¹² Even though Catharine very clearly missed her family, her difficulties did not come from the polygamous marriage;

⁹ Ellsworth, 75-76.

¹⁰ *Report of the Seventh Convention of the World's Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Tremont Temple, Boston, Mass., October 17th-23rd, 1906.* Evanston, IL: Woman's Temperance Publishing Association, 36.

¹¹ Maria S. Ellsworth, *Mormon Odyssey*, 73-74.

¹² Jennifer Moulton Hansen, *Letters of Catherine Cottam Romney, Plural Wife*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 32, 36 59, 66. These pages are just a few examples of Catharine mentioning missing her family – there are more aside from these few pages.

her struggles were being so far away from her family. However, she did adjust to life in a polygamous marriage and seemed to have close, loving relationships with her husband's two other wives. She frequently mentioned them in letters to her parents, describing their children and how the women themselves were doing. Miles's third wife, Annie, even helped throw a surprise birthday party for Catharine. On that same birthday, the two women would have usually had their wash day, but Annie "did'nt like the idea of washing on my birthday."¹³ The fact that Annie wanted Catharine to enjoy her birthday, by suggesting that the two leave chores for another day, shows that the women cared more for each other than beyond housemates sharing a work load.

Ida and Catharine both mention in their letters the support they gave their husband's other wives when one of the women was sick. They were there for the birth of each other's children and loved each other's sons and daughters as their own. A love that was possible because, as Catharine expresses, "being the child of my husband, it seemed this little stranger had a claim on my heart no other child had ever had."¹⁴ Wives of polygamous marriages were able to share housework together similar to when Catharine and Annie did their laundry together. Even when they did not split the work, they at least had company.

The women were also involved in relief societies and women's clubs. Catharine specifically mentioned the Young Ladies Association and the entertainment they put on with singing, recitals, and recitations. Annie was also a teacher for the school in St. Johns.¹⁵ Ida frequently spoke of spending time with their neighbors, and other brothers and sisters from the church to share meals together and enjoy company. Because Ida and Catharine both sought refuge together during the raid on their community, it is likely that her family was close with the Romneys, and they may have been one of the families she was referring to in this instance.

Another notable woman—not connected to Ida and Catharine—who was highly involved in her community was Emmeline B. Wells. Emmeline became a Mormon at the age of fourteen in 1842, and by 1853 she was on her third, still unsatisfying, marriage. However, "despite her personal problems and disappointments, she contributed greatly to the social and civic life of late nineteenth-century Utah."¹⁶ Emmaline founded the Utah Woman's Press Club in 1891 for the purpose of engaging women's literary efforts. The majority of the women in this club were Mormon. There were three clear categories of women in this club: a small number were professional writers active in the national circle of writers; some were editors of newspapers or writers at the local level; and the

¹³ Hansen, *Letters of Catherine Cottam Romney*, 69, 80 and 94. Grammar error is original punctuation from diary entry.

¹⁴ Ellsworth, *Mormon Odyssey*, 62.

¹⁵ Ellsworth, 51-58.

¹⁶ Linda Thatcher and John. B Stillito, "'Sisterhood and Sociability': The Utah Women's Press Club, 1891-1928," In *History of Women in the United States: Historical Articles on Women's Lives and Activities*, edited by Nancy F. Cott, 432-444. K.G. (Saur: Munich 1994) 433-444.

last, largest category were those who published in order to join the club but were not professional writers. For its members, the Utah Women's Press Club "functioned primarily as a place where they could meet socially with other more professional writers and receive advice on improving their literary skills."¹⁷

This club existed for over thirty years, not only to promote the literary efforts of these women, but to give them an avenue to discuss the important issues of their time and promote friendship and sociability. In their first volume, the women stated their goals to be for "women [to] help each other by the diffusion of knowledge and information possessed by many and suitable to all... The aim of this journal will be to discuss every subject interesting and valuable to women."¹⁸ Though not explicitly associated with the Mormon church, the majority of its members were Mormon. The social aspect of this club was no doubt an important opportunity for women. Aside from social value, the club provided a legitimate academic opportunity for women to publish their work and receive criticism from their peers.

Mormon women in polygamous marriages clearly had advantages in the support they had from their husbands' other wives, along with the support network that came from the Mormon church. Social clubs and relief societies that both Catharine and Ida mention being involved in provided an opportunity for women to leave their homes but still maintain their domestic role of upholding morality. Relief Societies, such as the Young Ladies Association, were often political in nature—demonstrating the intellectual ability and outlets of Mormon women during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The women involved in the relief societies held formal and informal classes and meetings where they would discuss "all questions that are calculated to benefit the community."¹⁹ These clubs were not merely social in every aspect. In cases like the Utah Woman's Press Club, they provided an intellectual outlet for women, along with a social atmosphere.

As evidenced by the lives of Ella and Ida Udall, Catherine Cottam Romney and the work of the Young Woman's Association, Utah Woman's Press Club, along with the clubs and communities affiliated with the Mormon church, support networks existed for women in the West. Religion was a way for women to find common ground and support each other as they raised families and established communities. These support networks were vital to the emotional health of the women who comprised them and provided immense practical help as well. Many women moving out West faced hardships in keeping up with the amount of work they had to do and learning how to raise a family. Mormon women involved in polygamous marriages had the advantage

¹⁷ Thatcher and Stillito, 433,444.

¹⁸ Lula Green Richards, "A Utah Ladies Journal," *The Women's Exponent*. (Salt Lake City, Utah, June 1, 1872).

¹⁹ Christine Talbot, *A Foreign Kingdom: Mormons and Polygamy in American Culture, 1852-1890: "More Than Companion and Much Less the Subordinate," Polygamy and Mormon Women's Citizenship*, (University of Illinois Press, 2013). ProQuest Ebook Central, 66.

of close proximity to other women who provided help and support. They also had the added advantage of the religious affiliation to the Mormon church which provided them knowledge of social events and clubs to enhance their qualities of life. Although these women may have struggled with the emotional aspects of a plural marriage, the accounts they left of their lives in the writings of their diaries and letters to their families place more emphasis on the benefits of a plural marriage that were central to their ability to thrive on the Western frontier.