

Exiles for the Principle: LDS Polygamy in Canada

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In his thesis on the "Founding of the Mormon Community in Alberta," Archie Wilcox explained, "It can be said, without any fear of correction that the Mormons of Alberta do not and have not practiced polygamy in this province at any time" (1950, 10). While this is the image that the Mormons in Alberta wanted to give the Canadian government, Wilcox's defensive statement is only partially true.

After the Supreme Court in *Reynolds vs. United States* (1879) upheld the anti-polygamy provisions of the 1862 Morrill Act, the stricter provision of the 1882 Edmunds Act seemed almost inevitable. James May, who married a plural wife, Rhoda Ann Lang, in 1877 and moved with her to Cardston in 1888 after serving a prison term for unlawful cohabitation, summarized in 1882: "In this year the Congress of the United States enacted and passed what is known as the Edmunds Bill making plural marriage a crime and punishable by fine and imprisonment. Then commenced a raid on that class of men which lasted about eight years. . . . Men fled to every point of the compass to escape the wrath of those very righteous pharisees" (p. 24). In 1886 and 1887 Charles O. Card, stake president in Cache Valley, directed the settlement to one of these "points of the compass," Southern Alberta. He had originally planned to move to Mexico, but Church President John Taylor encouraged him to go to Canada because, as Taylor explained, "I have always found justice under the British flag" (in Hudson 1961, 80–81).

Card first led an exploring party to British Columbia. On 29 September 1886 when they crossed the Canadian border "at 25 minutes to 10," Card recorded, "I took off my hat, swung it around and shouted 'In Columbia we are free.'" When the group could not find land, they selected property in

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Southern Alberta but discovered, when they returned in June 1887, that the property was part of Cochrane Ranch. They had to move their settlement south to Lee's creek near present-day Cardston (Card n.d., 4; Stutz 1981, 1).

Before returning to Canada in 1887, Card had lobbied hard among plural families in Cache Stake. Some men accepted his request as a call; others felt that it would be a good way to escape the pressures of the U.S. marshals. By January 1887 Card had given President Taylor the names of forty men "desiring refuge in the north" (Card 18, 22). However, when it came time to leave in the spring, only ten of these men agreed to make the trip. Jonathan Layne, one who did, explained that several men were arrested just before the departure date. Some of those still at liberty were afraid that a mass exodus might arouse suspicion and decided to stagger their departures (Layne, 26). By 3 June 1887 nineteen adults — sixteen men and three women — had arrived at Lee's Creek. Of the sixteen men, fifteen were polygamists (Wilcox 1950, 62–63).

The Cardston Ward Minutes from 1888 to 1904 chronicle the arrivals of new polygamous families. When the newcomers introduced themselves in church meetings, many mentioned that they had been on the underground, unable to attend church for a long time. Morgan Hinman, who arrived in Cardston in 1889, recorded in his journal on 30 June, "Rhoda Harrod played the organ, and it is the first one I have heard since I was forced to leave my home. I have not heard one since the last Sunday in August 1886." Almost all of the men echoed Charles Card's lamentation in his journal, 1 January 1887, "My fate seems to be an exile and driven or compelled for freedom's sake to seek a foreign land" (p. 19).

When the Mormons first arrived in Alberta, they were not sure if the Canadian government would allow them to bring their plural families; and Francis M. Lyman, John W. Taylor, and Charles Card traveled to Ottawa to ask for special land, water, and immigrant privileges and also feel out the political situation. In a letter to Canadian Prime Minister John F. MacDonald, these men explained that they were not asking Canada to legalize polygamy or to sanction plural marriage but simply to accept existing families. They argued, "The comparatively few who need to seek rest and peace in Canada would not be a drop in the bucket compared with the millions of people who are protected in their faith and practice plural marriage under the Government of Great Britain."¹

MacDonald informed the Mormon leaders that the Saints would be allowed to settle in his jurisdiction only if they agreed to live monogamously in Canada. When they returned to Cardston, Lyman, Taylor, and Card expressed their disappointment with MacDonald's ruling, but Taylor told the members to

¹ Cardston Ward Minutes, 21 Oct. 1888; Lowry Nelson, "Settlement of the Mormons in Alberta," in C. A. Dawson, ed., *Group Settlements: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada*. (Toronto, Ontario: The Macmillan Co., 1936), pp. 203–4. The letter also included some justifications for the Mormons' practice of polygamy. Before Lyman, Taylor, and Card left for Ottawa, they expressed faith that the mission would be successful. The Cardston members were asked to fast and pray that the mission would be successful and showed their support by uplifted hand.

regard Canada as “a place of refuge where we [can] raise one family and wait till the clouds . . . disperse.” He “exhorted the people not to worry but to thank God they are persecuted for righteous sake, but live here and build up the country and obey its laws” (Minutes, 25 Nov. 1888). Card commented that “he felt to acknowledge God’s hand in all things. Said we should pray for this government that it should be lenient towards us,” while Orson Smith, a resident of Cardston who had traveled with Card in exploring the area and who moved there in about 1888 with his third wife Mary Ellen Wright, added, “We should not feel discouraged as it was no more than we could expect” (Minutes, 2 Dec. 1888).

Despite these restrictions on the practice of polygamy in Canada, polygamists continued to move to southern Alberta, and most of them brought only one wife. Thus, in 1888, when the *Lethbridge News* and the Canadian government began accusing the Mormons of practicing polygamy, they insisted that they were following MacDonald’s instructions.² For example, in 1890 when the Deputy Minister of the Interior questioned the Mormons about practicing polygamy, Card wrote to him, “I am aware of the assurance we gave to Sir John A. MacDonald and the Minister of Interior, and I can assure you that our good faith in this matter has not been broken. Our people understand too well the laws of the Dominion of Canada to infringe upon them” (Letter in Card, Journal, 22 Feb. 1890; see Minutes, 9 Feb. 1890).

Although the Mormons technically obeyed the law in Canada, they talked about polygamy in their meetings. Visiting General Authorities encouraged the Saints to obey the laws of Canada but exhorted them to also continue to live the celestial law of plural marriage. For example, in 1889, John W. Taylor “promised those without children that if they would embrace the celestial order the day would come when all would be right.” He also encouraged those practicing polygamy “to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves and especially those who should return to Utah” (Minutes, 4 July 1889). On 3 November 1889, a number of General Authorities, including Church President Wilford Woodruff and his counselor George Q. Cannon, attended a conference in Cardston, and several of the brethren mentioned plural marriage in their talks, especially encouraging men to not abandon the plural wives and children. According to Woodruff, the laws of God never change and although the United States said the members of the Church should not obey the law of God, President John Taylor had always obeyed the law and the Lord would hold the United States responsible for passing laws against plural marriage. “We will do the best we can, but we cannot cast off our wives and children and we

² The *Lethbridge News* carried a number of articles in 1888 and 1889 attacking the Mormons for asking the Canadian government if they could bring their plural families. The articles appeared on 29 March 1888, 19 November 1888, 5, 12 and 26 December 1888, and 30 October 1889. A 12 December 1888 article read, “Our Mormon neighbors made a grand mistake” to not keep the practice of polygamy “to themselves and neither attempt to practice or flaunt their infamous doctrine in the face of Canadians. This however they have now done and they stand revealed before the public in the hideous aspect of polygamists and apparently proud of what Canadians consider their shame.” A. Maitland Stenhouse, a resident of Cardston and a monogamist, answered the charges in letters to the editor. Copies of the articles and Stenhouse’s replies are in the LDS Church Archives.

will not do it. The result is with the Lord." Cannon "said we have all taken interest in the establishment of a settlement on this side of the line" and he had come to see if the people were obeying the commandments. He congratulated them for their faithfulness and then concluded, "We do not speak of the higher principle of the gospel at home, because it is deemed treasonable, but we testify that God did reveal this principle to Joseph Smith and commanded his elders to embrace the principle of plural marriage."

The Cardston residents also discussed polygamy in their church meetings. The Relief Society minutes record on 5 April 1889, a meeting in which the women spoke of the trials of being separated from their loved ones, but Mary Woolf, the first wife of John Anthony Woolf who served as first counselor in the Alberta stake presidency, explained, "The people of God were persecuted in ancient times and it is the same today. [She] had been asked if we believe in polygamy and had testified to the truth of it. [She] did not know that we should always speak of these things to strangers but [she] had been asked and did not feel to deny her belief in this." On 28 June 1890, the priesthood meeting minutes record a discussion on "whether or not a man can obtain eternal increase with one wife." Everyone who spoke agreed that polygamy was an essential doctrine of the Church and H. L. Hinman who brought his second wife to Cardston in the late 1880s or early 1890s, added that he "thought a man must live with more than one woman at the same time to fulfill the law." Charles Card pointed out that they should "not publish these things to the world," but "they should obey all commandments of God."

The Church members in Cardston continued to openly discuss polygamy in their meetings up until Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto in October 1890. Then both the men and women spoke in favor of the Manifesto in their meetings and expressed their support of Woodruff as the Prophet of the Church.³ However, the Manifesto did not end talk of polygamy in Canada. Both Apostles Matthias Cowley and John W. Taylor continued to advocate plural marriage when they visited Alberta. Louis Brandley, a son of John Theodore Brandley and Margaret Keeler, Theodore's second wife, who went to Canada to live with his father and his father's third wife Eliza Zaugg, remembered "how thrilled I was with their preaching and what fine men I thought they were" (1982, 20). William L. Woolf, a son of John Woolf, one of the early Mormon settlers in Alberta, remembered a conversation with Taylor about polygamy, then added, "I admired John W. Taylor beyond description. I was old enough to see that he was fighting a losing battle, but he was valiant, he was sincere, he stood for what he believed, he was eloquent." Woolf described Matthias Cowley as "a more moderate man, not as out spoken as Brother Taylor, but he was an eloquent man when he spoke and he knew all the inner workings of the polygamous community" (1972, 30).

Because of the respect the Mormons in Alberta had for Cowley and Taylor, a number of men married post-Manifesto wives in Canada. For example, in

³ Minutes, 2 and 23 November 1890. Typical comments were J. R. Leavitt's the Manifesto was "all right" and Orson Smith's "we have demonstrated our firm belief in celestial marriage."

1903, Cowley and Taylor, along with Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, and Reed Smoot, came to Cardston to divide the stake (Wood, *Journal*, 31 Aug. 1903). Heber Allen, then president of Alberta Stake, was asked to move to Raymond and head the new Taylor Stake which was named for John W. Taylor. Edward James Wood replaced him as Alberta Stake president (Tagg 1959, 54–56). Both Wood and Allen had come to Canada with their fathers, who had plural wives, and though monogamous, were persuaded to enter plural marriage. His son, V. A. Wood, recalls the impetus as coming from John W. Taylor (Wood 1982; Palmer 1959, 5–6). Wood married his wife's sister Addie who had been engaged to his brother before the brother died. Neither Tagg's biography of Wood nor Wood's journal mentions his second wife. She lived in Salt Lake. Wood visited her when he went to General Conference, and had two children by her; but he does not include her name in his accounts of his trips.

Welburn Van Orman, the son of a monogamist who lived in Alberta, suggested in an oral history interview (1983, 25) that Taylor tried to convince other Alberta Church leaders to marry in polygamy, including his father, who was called to be the bishop of Stirling Ward in 1904. Van Orman refused: "When the President of the Church tells me to I will, but until then I won't."

Other Canadian men married plural wives after the Manifesto including Louis Brandley's father, Theodore. When Theodore's first wife died in 1892, his second wife, Louis's mother, was ill. Theodore moved to Canada in 1899 with his first wife's children and a housekeeper, Eliza Zaugg. In 1901 John W. Taylor married Theodore and Eliza. Theodore also married another former housekeeper, Emma Biefer, in the early 1900s (Brandley 1982, 14).

Other Mormons came to Canada after the Manifesto to marry in polygamy and then returned to the United States. Theodore Bennion, a son of Edwin Bennion, explained that his father, a member of the stake presidency in Granite Stake and a stockman, "was asked by the presiding brethren of the church to enter into polygamy and take another wife or wives. . . . He married Agnes [Campbell] and also my mother Mary Clark. They went to the Canadian Temple. I think it was in September 1903" (1976, 2). (Bennion was confused about at least some details as the Canadian Temple was not built until the 1920s.)

Since there are no ward records for early members in Cardston, it is impossible to determine what percentage of the settlers were part of polygamous families. However, available sources show that most of the Church leaders had plural wives, although most of them had only one wife in Canada. For example, in 1895 the stake presidency, Charles O. Card, John Anthony Woolf, Sterling Williams, and Sylvester Low, all had more than one wife although Williams may not have had both wives at the same time. Of the twelve men on the high council, ten of them were polygamists and only one was definitely a monogamist.⁴ Of the forty-nine members of the high priest quorum in the

⁴ Alberta Stake Minutes, 27 May 1895. LDS Church Archives. Family group sheets in the Genealogical Department, Salt Lake City, Utah, included only one of Sterling Williams's wives. Although he was married twice, it is thus impossible to tell whether he had the two

Alberta Stake in 1897, twenty-four (48 percent) were polygamists. Three other members of the high priest group, William Wynder, Edward J. Wood, and Frank Leavitt became polygamists in 1903. Of the other twenty-two members of the quorum, only seven (14 percent) were definitely monogamists.⁵

The records of approximately fifty Canadian polygamous families reveal some common trends.⁶ Over 90 percent of the fifty men were married to their plural wives before 1890. Only five men married after the Manifesto. Nearly 44 percent had a third wife; only about 17 percent had a fourth wife and only one of fifty-two men had a fifth wife.⁷

Ninety percent of these men came originally from Utah, and almost 50 percent were from Cache Valley.⁸ Since Card was the president in Cache Stake for a number of years even after he moved to Canada, his greatest influence was with the people in that area. The settlers from Cache County came from both the north and south ends of the valley, with only one from Logan itself. Card recorded in his journal 1 January 1887 that Hyde Park, said to have the highest percentage of polygamy per capita "certainly is a good place and one

wives at the same time. Johannes Anderson, James May, Niels Hansen, Jonathan Layne, Robert Leishman, Simeon F. Allen, Mark E. Beazer, Ephraim Harker, and Oliver Robinson, members of the high council, were all polygamists. James Quinton had only one wife. Available records do not indicate whether Hyrum W. Taylor had more than one wife.

⁵ High Priest Group Minutes, Cardston Ward, 1897, LDS Church Archives. Polygamists were Sylvester Low, William Wood, T. William Duce, Charles O. Card, John A. Woolf, Johannes Anderson, James May, Niels Hansen, Robert Leishman, Samuel Matkins, Ephraim Harker, Mark E. Beazer, John E. Layne, Joseph G. Young, Josiah A. Hammer, Richard Pilling, George M. Hudson, Joseph Gold, Thomas R. Leavitt, William West, John Easthope, and William Henderson. Henry Wynder, Edward J. Wood, and Frank Leavitt became polygamists in 1903. Monogamists were Vincent Stewart, Charles Quinton, D. H. Caldwell, William Orin Lee, Levi Harker, Homer Woolf, and Ephraim B. Hicks. Some of these monogamists had relatives in Alberta who were polygamists. Available records do not provide enough information to determine the status of Sterling Williams, Hyrum Taylor, James Quinton, John Pilling, Hans C. Jensen, Jesse W. Knight, Joseph Barnes, Joseph Paine, Magnes Holman, William Miller, Richard Hancy, Christian Selk, Peter O. Olson, and E. E. Bingham.

⁶ Information on these families was obtained by collecting names from the ward minutes, the stake high priest group minutes, and a list supplied by Charles Ursenbach, an Alberta resident who conducted oral history interviews in the Cardston area and who had a special interest in polygamous families in Canada, then by examining the four-generation group sheets in the Genealogical Department. The list is by no means complete, and no attempt was made to check the dates from the group sheets, submitted by members of the families.

⁷ I have information on fifty-two men for this study. The totals are not always the same because there was not information for all families in all areas of comparison.

| <i>Marriages</i> | <i>2nd wife</i> | <i>3rd wife</i> | <i>4th wife</i> | <i>5th wife</i> |
|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| before 1860 | 3 | 3 | | |
| 1860-1870 | 12 | 2 | 1 | |
| 1871-1880 | 15 | 9 | 4 | |
| 1881-1890 | 17 | 7 | 2 | |
| 1890-1904 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 |

⁸ The fifty-one men on which information was available came from Cache County 20, north of Logan 11, Logan 1, south of Logan 8, Davis County 8, Salt Lake County 6, Weber County 4, Sevier County 3, Box Elder County 2, Utah County 2, Juab County 1, Idaho 4, and Mexico 1.

where union and love for the Gospel abounds.” Four of the men who moved to Cardston were from Hyde Park.

Sixty-eight percent of these polygamous men came to Canada before 1890, and over half came during 1887. Most came to escape the U.S. marshals, while those arriving after 1890 felt more comfortable living in Canada with one wife than in the United States where they had several wives, because they wanted to marry additional wives, or because they wanted to improve their economic conditions.⁹ At least one, William Moroni Palmer, came with his second wife, but his first wife had died, so he was not technically a polygamist (Palmer 1979, 5; W. M. Palmer Family Group Sheets).

Nearly half (43 percent) lived with their second wives in Canada. Twenty percent brought their first wife, and 18 percent had their third wife in Canada.¹⁰ At least three men had two wives in Canada at the same time: John Lye Gibb, Franklin Dewey Leavitt, and Thomas Rowell Leavitt. The wives lived in different communities, and William L. Woolf explained, “The Canadian government[’s] . . . agreement was generally adhered to.” He remembers not more than four to six men who kept more than one wife in Alberta (1972, 18).

Many of the pre-Manifesto marriages followed similar patterns: the husband, one wife, and their children came to Canada to escape the pressures of Utah law, established homes, continued to have children, and became an important part of the community. Most of them died in Alberta while the wife or wives left behind in the United States usually died in their hometowns there.

Jonathan Layne, one of the first men to come to Cardston in 1887, had married his first wife, the widowed Lucinda M. Bassett, in 1851. After her last child was born in 1868 Jonathan also married Anna Longhurst in the Endowment House on 6 September 1869, and they settled in Lewiston in northern Cache Valley. Jonathan recorded in his autobiography, “I said many times that I would not move again . . . unless God’s servants required of me. But I little knew what the Lord had in store for me in way of trials.” When the U.S. marshals started arresting polygamists, Jonathan planned to go to Mexico, “but after thinking . . . over the character of the people in Canada and their Government, [and] the character of the Spanish in Mexico, [I] decided that the English Government was most likely to give all men their rights before the law, so I decided to go there.”

Before he left the United States, Jonathan worked in sawmills and traveled with Anna, spending less time with Lucinda. As he left for Canada, Jonathan remembered, “I looked back on the peaceful homes of Cache Valley and my own homes which contained nearly all I held dear in this world, my wife [both were living in Lewiston] and children.” In 1888 Anna joined Layne in Cardston, another child was born, and Anna died. Layne died within the year,

⁹ Of forty-eight men, arrivals were: 1887 14, 1888–90 13, 1890–95 7, 1896–1900 3, and post-1900 5.

¹⁰ Information was available on forty-nine men. First wife to Canada 10, second wife 21, third wife 9, fourth wife 3, first and third wives 1, first and second wives 1, first then second wife 1, second and third wives 1.

of a broken heart, according to a family member. Lucinda remained in Lewiston where she died in 1911 (Autobiography, 24, 26; Family group sheets).

Sam Smith Newton's family followed roughly the same pattern. Sam married his first wife, Sarah Elizabeth Parker (Lizzie), in 1881 in Salt Lake City. On a mission to England during the 1890s, he met Lizzie's cousin, Amy Susan Johnson, and with Lizzie's permission, married Amy in 1900 in the Logan Temple. At first the two families lived in Salt Lake, but in 1904 Sam moved to Cardston with Amy and her two small children. Mildred, a daughter of the second family, explained that her parents had come to Alberta "in order to avoid the law." Mildred guessed her father brought his second family because "the first family was there and established. . . . It would have been a much easier thing to pick up the two youngsters and move them rather than to move the eight of the other family" (M. Stutz 1982, 9-10).

A year later Lizzie died without seeing Sam again, and her three youngest children, including a three-year-old daughter, came to Canada to live with Sam and Amy. Mildred and her sister Winnifred recalled that the older children seemed especially bitter about their father's second marriage and had little contact with the first family. Sam remained in Cardston until his death in 1954 and became a leader in construction and music there. Amy died in 1963 in Cardston (Stutz 1982, 9-10; Thomas 1982, Sam Smith Newton Family Group Sheets).

In other Canadian families, children of other marriages frequently came to Cardston though their own mothers were alive. As Louis Brandley and three of his full brothers and sisters were old enough that they could help on the farm and in their father's store, they came to Raymond to live with their father and his third wife. Louis arrived in Canada in 1904. When Louis's mother died in 1910, the remaining three children moved to Alberta (Brandley 1982, 14-15). Annie Clark Tanner sent five of her seven children to Canada to live with their father, Joseph Marion Tanner. However, Marion's desire for the children to stay in Canada conflicted with Annie's wish for them to attend school, and the children returned to Utah to live with their mother (1976, 171-256, 266-87).

Because of the Canadian government's open opposition to the practice and articles in the *Lethbridge News* claiming the Mormons were living plural marriage, polygamy was never as visible in Canada as it was in Mexico. As new generations were born, it was not common knowledge who had polygamous families. For example, when Charles Ursenbach, oral historian and Alberta native, showed Wallace Hanson, another native of Alberta, a list of possible Canadian polygamists, Hanson told him, "It's surprising when I look over this list. I've sort of taken for granted that they were of polygamist families. But when I come right down to stating that I think they are, I'm at a bit of a loss" (1973, 1). V. A. Wood (1982) explained that many of the people in Cardston, particularly the younger ones, did not know that his father, Edward J. Wood, had more than one wife. Winnifred Newton Thomas agreed that the older people knew about polygamy, "but it was still kind of hush, hush especially with President Wood because [he] was the president of the temple and he was

president of the stake. Polygamy was out and it was a no-no then" (Thomas 1982, 26). A woman, born in Cardston about 1920 and raised there, explained that she was a grown woman before she knew that E. J. Wood had another family (Resident 1982).

In short, Cardston residents downplayed the importance of plural marriage after 1890, limiting public discussion and keeping information about plural marriage from their children. However, plural marriage played an important role in the settlement of Cardston and the other Mormon communities in Southern Alberta. Although the Canadian government put restrictions on the practice and most Mormons obeyed the agreement to have only one wife in Canada, there was always tension between human law and higher law.

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