

office? Well, the First Counselor resigns, stepping down to make room for him. Dog-gone, for a Gentile Peter Bart really knows how the church is run, doesn't he?

But that's not all. Dana Sloat has a son who is head man of a Fundamentalist colony in the Arizona Strip patterned after Ervil LeBaron's group. Its male members are Danites who have a hit list. On the list is the *samizdat* publisher, Hiram Cobb, who is kidnapped and murdered while being tarred and feathered.

Finally the church hierarchy decides that Dana Sloat has got to go. But instead of just pulling the rug, the Church President calls the secret Council of Fifty to assemble in the temple and give Sloat the mitten, for reasons I can't fathom except that the author had to get the Council of Fifty into the book, if by the hair of the head.

Had enough? Well, there's more, if you're still with me, including some of the crudest four-letter dialogue you'll find in a Mormon book. Maybe high-level

church members talk that way. I dunno, because I'm merely a low-level member myself. In fact, I suspect my bishop gave me a job with an imposing title (titles don't cost anything) in a desperate attempt to activate me. Poor guy.

At last report, Peter Bart was trying to sell his book to Hollywood, and claiming that church pressure was keeping it off the screen and tube. If so, I wish the Church would back off. The book would be a marvelous companion piece to *Superman*, *Star Wars*, *Tarzan the Ape Man* and other fantasies. It has about the same basis of fact. I have written considerable fantasy myself, but never anything as wild as *Thy Kingdom Come*. I think Hollywood might change its mind if Bart could get Bo Derek to play the Relief Society President, with her boyfriend, Robert Redford, cast as the head of the Church Public Communications Department and Marie Osmond playing the kinky girlfriend of Tad. With such a cast, he'd be in like Flynn.

Weaving A Mexican Webb

Uncertain Sanctuary: A Story of Mormon Pioneering in Mexico. By Estelle Webb Thomas. Salt Lake City: Westwater Press, 1980. 146 pp. \$11.95.

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One of the strongest virtues of this volume is the modesty of its project. It does not claim to be the story of Mormon pioneering in Mexico, but simply a story of the same. It makes no attempt to duplicate or surpass the contributions of such fact-filled works as Thomas C. Romney's *The Mormon Colonies in Mexico* (1938), Nelle Spilsbury Hatch's *Colonia Díaz: An Intimate Account of a Mormon Village* (1938), or Annie Johnson's *Heartbeats of Colonia Díaz* (1972), each of which relies to a considerable extent upon documentary research and attempts a record for a

relatively large group of colonists. Rather than a product of research, *Uncertain Sanctuary* is more a Proustian "recherche," a highly personal collection of memories. Rather than presenting a view of community accomplishments, the book focuses upon those of a single family and its close associates. For its narrow field of view and its selection of particulars, the book is a good complement to histories already written, for it provides a sense of daily living and dying which the more collectively oriented accounts have sacrificed. Generically speaking, the work is a personal history, like a journal. This should by no means suggest that it has no value to the general reader; on the contrary, this is perhaps Mormonism's most universal and successful form of literature to date.

Uncertain Sanctuary records selected moments in the family life of Edward Milo Webb and his three wives, Ellen Ashman,

Sarah Elizabeth Carling and Charlotte Maxwell. The time period is 1898–1912, which takes members of the family from their departure from Woodruff, Arizona, along successive moves to Colonias Dublin, García, Pacheco and Morelos, to school in Colonia Juárez and finally on their exodus to El Paso, Texas. The author is a daughter of Edward and Charlotte; she writes in the first person, and indeed personally participates in nearly every episode narrated. Through supplementary materials, every attempt has been made to lend coherence to Mrs. Thomas' impressionistic account. An introduction by former Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall and his wife, Ermalee Webb Udall (Mrs. Thomas' niece), gives historical background on the Mormons' Mexican colonization and on the family, with particular attention to Edward Milo Webb. A "Dramatis Personae" helps us keep track of who is who among the large polygamous family, Church officials and figures in the Mexican government. There is a short chronological listing and even a glossary explaining the meaning of terms from the Mormon vocabulary.

The text itself is a cascade of episodes from the pioneer life. We read lively accounts of a runaway wagon, home talent shows, visits from gypsies, church dances, a kidnapping by revolutionaries and a gun smuggling expedition, to cite just a few. An experienced writer, Mrs. Thomas knows that a small detail often makes the difference between an ordinary image and an extremely vivid one. For example, a flood destroys most of Colonia Oaxaca and washes away numerous trees from the family's property in Morelos, but its destructive force is most acutely described when a daughter sobs at the loss of a sardine-can soap dish, tacked to one of the fallen trees. The colonies are generally made to seem like a *locus amoenus*, a lush refuge close to paradise. But the author skillfully tempers this impression of sanctuary with the impression of mutability and uncertainty, by weaving accounts of a brush fire, a flood, and a child's accidental witness of an old man's dying agony, amid otherwise idyllic childhood memories. These solemn intervals effectively serve as forebodings for the final chapters, with their stories of

kidnapping, murder and pillaging by revolutionaries, tortured insecurity on the part of the colonists and the ultimate exodus with its shock of displacement.

Uncertain Sanctuary should have special appeal to those interested in pioneer women, for the women are the most completely described characters in the book. Mrs. Thomas' mother Charlotte is a particularly hearty and humane character. She drives wagons, teaches school, fights brush fires, manages a hotel, "fudges" at customs and effectively takes over for a father who must share his time among families. Readers should not expect to find a story of the trials borne under polygamy; this narrative makes it seem a completely workable practice, out of which the three Webb wives emerge as paragons of selflessness. One of the book's most arresting and poignant anecdotes involves this theme. The story is told by a close friend, Aunt Diane, of being unable to bear children, and of receiving a son from her husband's second wife: "Look at him, Diane. This is the child you could not bear. I, I had this one for you. . . . Take him, Sister Diane, with all my love."

Almost in spite of itself, the book portrays the cultural isolation of the Saints among the Mexicans. When speaking generally about her native neighbors, Mrs. Thomas is usually congratulatory. But when she speaks of individuals, her descriptions, almost without exception, reveal condescension or distaste, if not revulsion. The girls lose their appetite when Amador, one of Papa's employees, comes to the dinner table. The young students make fun of the garlic breath, the physical appearance and the manner of their Spanish teacher, Señor Giles. A Mexican uses Sister Webb's oven to bake a local delicacy (a cow's head), which with its smell nauseates all *gringos* within a quarter-mile radius.

It is hard to be critical of a personal history, because "mistakes" are often so informative. Mrs. Thomas' occasional errors in Spanish orthography (in place names and occasional bits of "local color") are mistakes of this type, for they support what she says about the women's difficulties learning the language—the women worked at home, while the men learned