

## A Shaded View

*Sunbonnet Sisters: True Stories of Mormon Women and Frontier Life* by Leonard J. Arrington and Susan Arrington Madsen (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 161 pp.

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ANOTHER "SISTERS" book — enough for a quartet. Where *Mormon Sisters* is a topical approach to pioneer women's history, *Sister Saints* a compilation of biographical essays, and *Women's Voices* a selection of diary excerpts with historical commentary, *Sunbonnet Sisters* sets out to tell the story of the young pioneer girl. As such it takes a refreshing introductory look aimed at the popular Mormon market, thereby making a valuable contribution to the "sisters" genre.

The book is consciously written to include a younger audience in its readership, though this by no means excludes those past adolescence. The authors' major premise is that as "the child is the father of the man . . . we can learn much about pioneering by studying the lives of the girls who went through the experience" (p. ix). They further assert that "these lives are a splendid example and model for today's women" (p. 10). The stories of seventeen women are told, with a skillful interweaving of history and lessons from the past.

The book is organized in four sections:

— "In the Early Days of the Church" (Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Elizabeth Haven Barlow, Drusilla Dorris Hendricks, Jane Snyder Richards, and Rachel Emma Woolley Simmons)

— "Four Who Crossed the Ocean" (Patience Loader Rozsa Archer, Anna Gaarden Widtsoe, Minnie Petersen Brown, and Susanna Goudin Cardon)

— "Pioneering in the West" (Mary Jane Mount Tanner, Sariah Louisa Cham-

berlain Redd, Sarah Endiaetta Young Vance, and Catherine Heggie Griffiths)

— "Second-Generation Achievers" (Lula Greene Richards, Ellis Reynolds Shipp, Annie Wells Cannon, and Mary Elizabeth Woolley Chamberlain).

*Sunbonnet* is more interpretive than the other "sisters" books in giving a detailed picture of the day-to-day existence of a pioneer woman. As we follow our heroines from Italy or Norway or New York, we cover much historical ground as well. I learned of relief work on the Saints' behalf by fellow citizens of Illinois, the realities of crossing the Atlantic in a ship's hold, the unpleasantness of collecting and cooking with buffalo chips, and the tragic details of the handcart catastrophe. A reader will obtain a basic introduction to the history of the Waldensians, Utah sericulture, the Sunday School newspapers of young people, and many more historical snippets.

We also get some amusing glimpses into the many-layered dress of these girls and the long and short of pioneer courtship. In fact, the book abounds with local color. We share in the "home evening" of Anna Gaarden Widtsoe in Norway, complete with singing, scripture reading, poetry recitation, and telling of Norse tales. We can almost smell the warm milk as we see twelve-year-old Mamie Woolley Chamberlain milk an average of twenty cows a day every summer with a group of boys and girls: "The young men wore blue overalls and heavy shirts while the girls wore big, sack aprons made of blue denim over their dresses and red bandannas to cover their hair. The milk was poured into a large vat in the cheese room" (p. 142). Painless history to be sure, and of "real women," not those saints who make it past Correlation to be deified in our Relief Society manuals.

Some surprising findings emerge from the authors' study of approximately 200 diaries and reminiscences. Half of the

women were foreign born, and a large number of them "suffered because of the early death of one or both parents" (p. 1). Deaths of siblings were also common—"of those who survived infancy, about one-fourth died before they reached sixteen" (p. 109). As compensation for these and other dangers of pioneer life, pioneer parents are portrayed as watchful creators of a warm and loving home environment. Most families moved every two or three years, interrupting the children's formal education.

As befits a book directed at a Mormon audience and more especially "the youth," there are lessons to be learned from these lives. Rachel Woolley Simmons pays for excessive bathing with a whipping and sore neck but is more pained by a guilty conscience. Patience Archer's escape to a county fair was marred by "the idea of my father and mother being angrey [sic] with me" (p. 52). Susanna Cardon's decision to abandon the beloved Englishman who did not share her faith and cross the plains to marry a kind cousin lingers painfully—closer to life's truths than the common "one and only" romantic notion.

In some ways women's lives remain much the same. Mary Jane Mount Tanner at age fourteen was left reeling from her parents' divorce. And the tightrope of career and family is illustrated by Sarah E. Young Vance's struggles to become a midwife. She locked her three "lively" young sons in the rooming house while attending classes, with generally harmless yet predictable results. "One day they came home chewing gum which they had picked up on the street" (p. 104). We can certainly

understand Lula Greene Richards's reasoning as she gives up a five-year editorship of the *Woman's Exponent* to raise her children, choosing "the happy medium between being selfishly home bound, and foolishly public spirited" (p. 124).

The book is not without flaws. Polygamy is mentioned only once or twice—a glaring omission in the account of the life of Jane Snyder Richards. How can one understand her without knowing of her relationship to sister-wife Elizabeth McFate? Often the stories end lamely with a generalization like "she lived a life of rich satisfaction and accomplishment" (p. 25) and paragraphs from a eulogy. The prose is somewhat sentimental in places as are such story subtitles as "Undaunted Through Danger and Hardship" or "From Milkmaid to Mayor."

*Sunbonnet Sisters* appears to be the first "sisters" book directed at the wider church market. As such it veers toward the tradition of what Claudia Bushman has called "our glorious pioneers." As the market for "sisters" books widens, there is the urge to sanitize. Feminist ideas are soft-pedaled, polygamy shrouded, virtues paraded, and faults shaded. The tension is difficult to resolve: should we preach to the converted or reach more with less?

This book proclaims that it is for young women, and I would certainly recommend it to that audience. After all, isn't that what the "sisters" books are for—to fill out our Young Women lessons, prop up our morality, enliven our talks? This book fits the bill. It puts its best foot forward, but we must thoughtfully check the compass.





