

# The Captivity Narrative on Mormon Trails, 1846-65

*Stanley B. Kimball*



he captivity narrative is one of the oldest literary genres of the New World: some 1,000 examples survive from the sixteenth century. It is also one of the earliest forms of popular literature in the western hemisphere. Because the focus has largely been on women and the probability of their victimization, sexual and otherwise, few other purely American topics ever so caught the public fancy or fired the imagination of fiction writers.<sup>1</sup>

While burgeoning European romanticism may have seen the Indian as nature's nobleman, the religious view saw him as evil in contrast to their own good — a whole New World peopled by “red savages” standing against a few stout-hearted Christian whites, whose mission was redeeming native souls and regenerating the wilderness.

Among the Puritans, Indianization was believed to be a “fate worse than death,” rescue tantamount to redemption. They saw the contest as one of passion versus reason, the union of Christian and pagan something akin to the horror of incest or demonic possession, and anyone who preferred captivity to redemption was considered completely degenerate. The record, however, suggests that it did happen. Both Francis Slocum in the eighteenth century and Mary Jemison in the nineteenth left stirring biographical accounts of their captures, ordeals, and escapes that were very popular.

Since sensational captivity narratives made a lot of money, the fictional genre soon developed out of autobiography. Certainly captivity narratives

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<sup>1</sup> Captivity narratives include a broad range of stories, legendary and factual, in which European whites were captured by natives. Such narratives come from all over the world, exist from at least the fourteenth century, and played an important role in the mythology of the American frontier. This paper treats only captivity incidents on Mormon trails, but not incidents of actual or threatened captivity after settlement. See Slotkin 1973, Turner 1980, and Myers 1982.

were good business by the time Mormon women ventured West. Their fictional impact had passed into popular effect, along with reports of deaths by torture. "Army women were made to understand the almost inevitable fate awaiting her and her children if captured alive," recorded one historian. "For her's was one long agony of horror and shame til death as the victim of lust of successive chiefs and the slave of their jealous squaws." He reports that during the siege of Fort Phil Kearny on the Bozeman Trail in 1867, Colonel H. B. Carrington placed women and children in the magazine with a powder train laid and a sergeant ordered to touch it off if the Sioux captured the fort. General Custer allegedly had a standing order to all officers of the Seventh Cavalry that if Indians attacked a train in which Mrs. Custer rode, she was to be killed at once (Downey 1944, 99).

Did white Mormons hold such real or exaggerated fears? What was the general Mormon attitude towards Indians while crossing the plains? Because of the Book of Mormon, Mormons shared in some respects the redemptive goal of the Spanish padres and the French Jesuits and Ursulines. On 13 October 1845 in Nauvoo, Joseph Herring, a Shawnee, and Lewis Dana, an Oneida, were ordained to the Melchizedek priesthood; the next day, Dana was sealed to Mary Gont — the first such mixed marriage so solemnized (H. Kimball, 13 Oct. 1845). Although I have found no other accounts of pre-exodus sealings, the demonstration of equality probably consciously and unconsciously affected the attitudes of Mormon women towards red men.

In over 700 Mormon trail accounts, I noted very little fear of Indians recorded by men or women pioneers. Over 200 record little more than simple "saw Indian" comments. Since I am interested primarily in the reactions of women, I focused on those. Bathsheba B. Smith, later Relief Society general president, considered one Potawatomie a "stately looking man" (1846, 13). Sarah Leavitt (1846) thought a Potawatomie named Le Clerk, "very helpful." Mary Ellen Kimball, wife of Heber C. Kimball, considered some Shoshones "the best looking and most clean" Indians she had seen. "They really looked nice in their costumes of skins, ornamented with beads" (Aug. 1847, 27).

In 1849 Lucy Meserve Smith, sister-wife of Bathsheba, taught in the Pawnee Mission School in Bellevue, fifteen miles south of Winter Quarters, so successfully that she was offered double wages to stay on. She refused, however, and went on to Utah.

In 1850, Martha Spence Heywood, whose trail journal is among the best, recorded her favorable impressions when her company visited an Indian camp eight miles east of Fort Laramie. She noted that "the Indians had very handsome & large teeth . . . the children were cleaner and handsomer than any I've seen before. The children were very pretty and good for a wild people." In one tent she saw some "Indians and squaws looking quite stylish and gay," later discovering that they were "sparking" or courting (1978, 17-18). Jane Rio Baker Pearce, another superior journal keeper, noted in 1851 that a band of Shoshone warriors made a "grand appearance . . . on horseback . . . with guns, bows, and arrows" (23 Aug. 1851).

Sarah Ann Ludlum, a member of Willie's Handcart Company in 1856, was pleased when the first Indians they met "came to our carts and pushed them into camp for us. . . . They left camp and soon returned with fresh buffalo meat which they traded for clothing and salt" (5:257). In 1859, near Chimney Rock, Sarah Alexander wrote, "I shall always be glad I have seen the Indians in their primitive grandeur in their own country where they were kings and where they dominated so royally" (p. 3), a rather early reference to the "vanishing American." In short, few Mormon women expressed fear of red men. In 1862, near Ash Hollow in Nebraska, when some sisters tried to wade the North Bluff Fork "one Indian offered to let the sisters ride his horse across the stream while he held it for them" (Ajax, 20 Aug. 1862).

In fact, Indians were more likely to help women than harm them, if the Mormon record is typical. In 1856, a Sister Redde was missing from a company. Some men rode back along the trail finding only her tracks and those of some Indians. Assuming she had been kidnapped, they returned to camp but tried again to find her. Thirty-six hours after she had been missed, she was found unharmed. Nothing further was recorded about the Indians one way or another, but it was obvious she had not been molested (Savage, 18 Sept. 1856).

A few years later in 1859, another sister, lost for several days, returned to her camp. "Her life," it was said, "had been preserved by an Indian" (Hobbs, 15 Sept. 1859).

The best story concerns seventy-three-year-old Elizabeth Watson of a handcart company. She was missed 2 August 1859 and the search was given up the next day. Sadly the camp moved on, only to be amazed and delighted on August 15 when she met them at a trading post west of Independence Rock. She reported:

I traveled till darkness came upon me. . . . I lost my way and, of course, gave up all hopes of seeing our camp that night; Passed the night alone without food or fuel. Next morning, cold and hungry, I started out to try and find camp; but no camp or human being could I see for two days. I traveled in this way without food or covering at night and the third day I came upon an Indian camp; without fear I went up to an Indian who was cooking and tried to make him understand I was hungry and wanted something to eat, he soon made ready a cake and with some beans and milk I soon made a good meal. I then made him understand that I wanted to cross the river so he kindly ferried me across and put me on the proper road. . . . I was almost giving up all hope of seeing the handcarts when I noticed ahead of me a wagon. I soon made it up to it and found a very agreeable man. . . . This man treated me very kindly and brought me to this trading post" (McIntyre, 1-15 Aug. 1859).

I found only eleven accounts of Indians attempting to trade for Mormon women. Somewhere in Nebraska in 1849, Caroline Barnes Crosby from Massachusetts tells of meeting with a band of "splendidly dressed" Sioux warriors who "offered my husband a young squaw for me, and wanted to buy our children" (June 1848).

In 1852, Mary Garner from England reported:

I had long red curly hair hanging in ringlets down my back which seemed to attract the Indians. I was afraid of them but one Indian Chief took a special fancy to me and wanted Mother to give me to him as his white squaw and he would give

her many ponies. Of course Mother refused him, but he was very determined to get me, so he followed our camp of Saints for several days. We were all very worried for fear he would steal me, so after he left camp one night Mother decided to try and hide me the next day. In the morning before we broke camp she took our feather beds and placed them over two boxes so I would not smother and I crawled in there. Sure enough the Indian Chief came back with his men. He asked for me. Mother told him I was lost. He was not satisfied with this so he proceeded to look in every wagon to see if I was there, then he came to search ours. He even felt the feather bed I was under but did not find me. He stayed with the company all day to see if I came back. When it became dark that night he went away, saying some time he would find me, but we never did see him again during the remainder of our trip to Salt Lake Valley (Garner 1852).

Since these purchase offers seem to have been made in good faith, it seems dangerously irresponsible for some whites to joke about selling women. In 1856 Priscilla Merriman Evans, a Welsh convert with a handcart company recorded:

My husband in a joking way told an Indian, who admired me, that he would trade me for a pony. He thought no more about it, but the next day here came the Indian with the pony and it was no joke to him. Never was I so frightened in all my life. . . . There was no place to hide and we did not know what to do. The captain was called and they had some difficulty in settling with the Indian without trouble (9:9).

In 1848, John Alger "started in fun to trade a sixteen year old girl to a young Sioux chief for a horse, but the Indian was in earnest. We got things settled," reported Mosiah Hancock, "and were permitted to go on without the loss of Lovina" (Aug. 1848).

The wife of Captain Sextus Johnson must have been especially appealing for a chief in 1861 offered *twenty* ponies for her — the highest price I noted (Linford 1861, 2).

Perhaps these Indian offers were not perceived as serious, for F. W. Blake recorded in 1861: "Two Indians met our train yesterday. They were mounted on ponies. One of them enraptured I suppose, with the sight of the girls offered to barter his pony away for one of them. He wanted one with dark hair. Poor chap he was doomed to disappointment, he might have struck a bargain with some poor henpecked fellow" (9 Aug. 1861).

Still kidnappings did occur on the trails; and by word of mouth, the Mormons learned of them. Of ten references to captured white females in more than 700 Mormon trail accounts, only six are specific enough to identify the persons.

The earliest of these accounts concerns seventeen-year-old Jane Grover. In 1846 or 1847, while she was picking gooseberries near Council Bluffs, Iowa, some Indians, probably Potawatomie, suddenly appeared. She immediately ran for her grandfather's wagon. She reached it and he whipped up the horses, but the Indians stopped the wagon and she was nearly pulled out. During the mêlé Jane prayed, and suddenly began berating the Indians in their own tongue, shaming them into letting her go (Parr 1977, 49–54). This is the only example of a miraculous intervention of this kind I have ever come across.

At about the same time near Mount Pisgah some other Indians, also probably Potawatomic, stole nine-year-old Clara Walton. As soon as her disappearance was discovered, about fifty men on good horses set out in the direction of the Indian camp. They waited until the camp had quieted for the night, then sent in one man to try to find Clara. He listened carefully at each tent. At one he heard sobbing. Peering in, as he later reported, he saw a child. "This must be Clara and she had gone to sleep . . . bound hand and foot." Trusting to Providence, he cut her loose, held her tight, and worked his way back to his companions. She did not wake up. It was later assumed that she had been alone in one wigwam because her crying disturbed her captors (J. Evans 1905).

In 1859 Sarah Alexander wrote that she had heard of a young girl in "one of the companies" who was carried off by Indians and "lost to them forever" (1859, 7). She does not state, however, whether it was a Mormon company or provide enough documentation to substantiate the incident.

A popular and widely publicized account involved Olive Oatman (Dillon 1981). (Although it is not widely known, Olive and her family were Nauvoo Mormons who later joined the Church of Christ-Brewsterite, a schism organized by James Colin Brewster in 1848.) In 1851 the Royce Oatman family followed Brewster to New Mexico Territory where, for a variety of reasons, including a bad case of gold fever, Oatman foolishly tried to take his family alone to California. On 18 February 1851, at what is known today as Oatman Flat on the Gila River twenty-six miles west of Gila Bend, Arizona, a band of Yavapais Indians attacked, captured thirteen-year-old Olive and seven-year-old Mary Ann, and killed the rest of her family except for Lorenzo, a young brother who was scalped and left for dead, but survived.

Mary Ann starved to death during the drought period; but Olive, who was secretly given food by an Indian woman, lived to be ransomed five years later. She was eighteen years old and had borne at least two children to a Mohawk chief's son. By at least one account, she had to be weaned "from all savage tastes or desire to return to Indian life" (Dillon 1981, 51). Her biography became a best seller, she married a white man, and lived to be sixty-five.

To some extent, Olive can only be regarded as a Mormon by accident, but three other kidnapping incidents are more directly connected.

Two of the accounts are linked with the 25 September 1856 murder of Almon W. Babbitt, secretary of Utah Territory, who was returning to Utah from official business in Washington, D.C. When Babbitt reached Fort Kearny, on the Oregon, not Mormon, Trail, he was advised that a band of Cheyennes some distance west of the fort had recently attacked a small party, killed some people, and kidnapped a woman. He disregarded the advice not to go farther west and was killed along with two men and a child. A third man was wounded, and a "Sister Williams" was captured and never heard of again.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>There are thirteen partial and conflicting accounts of this event: JH, 1 Oct., 9 and 30 Nov. 1856; Savage, 8 Sept. 1856; Attley 1856; Openshaw, 23-24 Sept. 1856; Woodward, 8 Sept. 1856; Woodruff 4:480; Jones, 2 Sept. 1856.

In the telling and retelling of these attacks both (and perhaps even a third) are confused, but the first incident seems to have involved Thomas Margetts and his wife, and James Cowdy and wife and child. Mrs. Cowdy was captured and the others were killed.<sup>3</sup> On 1 October 1856, the *Deseret News* reported that "Margarett and Cowdy were on their way back to England by their own counsel," a euphemism for having apostatized.

The third and most dramatic Mormon captivity story, however, involves a young Danish convert couple, Frants Christian and Jenssine Gruntvig. By 31 July 1865, they had survived the Atlantic crossing and escaped cholera on the Mississippi between New Orleans and Wyoming, Nebraska, some forty-five miles downstream from old Winter Quarters. Their company consisted of 400 people and forty-five wagons captained by Miner G. Atwood and followed the main Oregon, not Mormon, Trail past Fort Kearny, towards Fort Laramie.

On 17 September, while camped east of the fort, a band of Indians unsuccessfully tried to steal some cattle. On the 19th, the company passed the fort and three days later nooned on Cottonwood Creek. The Gruntvigs, somewhat heedless in view of the previous attack, were lagging on foot about one-half mile behind the camp and had stopped to rest.

Fifteen Indians suddenly attacked, driving off some cattle. Seven Danes were wounded. Frants and Jenssine started running for the relative safety of the wagon train when Frants was shot by four or five arrows. Two Indians grabbed Jenssine, one by each arm and rode off. Frants raised up long enough to see her thrown across one of the horses, then crawled into camp. He carried part of the arrow head in his right hip for nearly two years. Although the Mormon company and soldiers from Fort Laramie searched for Jenssine, she was never heard of again. He hoped that she had died of merciful shock.<sup>4</sup> Later, he wrote in his autobiography, "All the bodily suffering I passed through for nearly two years was but small compared with the anguish and sorrow for the loss of my wife. I have often stood by the work bench with tears running down my cheeks" (Gruntvig 1865).

Some years later when Frants went to the Endowment House to be sealed to her, a clerk asked if she were dead. Frants said he did not know and related the tragedy. "The clerk went into an adjoining room and spoke to President Daniel H. Wells, who followed him back to the doorway. He looked steadily at Brother Gruntvig, who returned his gaze. Then President Wells said slowly, 'Your wife is dead' " (Nibley 1957, 65).

These twenty reports of Indian attempts to trade for or kidnap white Mormon women indicate a remarkably peaceful record, since over 30,000 Mormon women crossed the plains. These incidents were randomly distributed in time and place, suggesting no pattern.

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<sup>3</sup> Archer 1856, 63-64; J. Heywood 1856; Ridd 1953, 75-83.

<sup>4</sup> Gruntvig, 17 Sept. 1865; Hegsted, Aug. 1865; JH, 22 Sept. 1865; Carter 1966, 9:47-50; Nibley 1957.

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