

Women Alone: The Economic and Emotional Plight of Early LDS Women

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EVEN UNDER THE BEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES, life in the mid-nineteenth century was not easy for Mormon women. Often repeatedly uprooted from their homes, they left behind family, friends, neighbors, and community to pursue their new religious beliefs and, often once they reached Utah, to resettle in new areas. In addition to losing the support of what was familiar, many of these women also stayed behind, most often with children, while their husbands served missions, marched with the Mormon Battalion, explored new areas, or lived with polygamous wives. Death and divorce left still other women to fend for themselves.

This essay is not meant to be an exhaustive study of Mormon women's plight but rather an introduction to circumstances and situations that affected many women. Between 1830 and 1899, for example, 12,825 missionaries, most of them married, were set apart (*Deseret News* 1981, 214); their service, inevitably far from home, lasted from a few months to as long as six years. In 1846-47 approximately 500 men started the long march from Iowa to California with the Mormon Battalion, leaving behind their families. Add to this during the same period the 20 percent of men who eventually set up polygamous households and the women who were widowed, divorced, or never married. While Utah had a lower percentage of never-married women than the nation

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at large, its divorce rate between 1870 and 1900 was two to three times higher (Scadron 1988, 162–63). Ninety-six percent of plural wives either fully or partially supported themselves and their children. A woman left alone had to face much more than loneliness. An absent husband usually could not provide for his family. Women—who were used to producing goods for the family in addition to caring for children—now had the husband’s responsibilities thrust on them. They also struggled with the Church’s attitude toward families alone, which tended to vacillate, with their own and their husbands’ feelings about the long absences, and with the reality of their living conditions.

From its founding, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encouraged an aggressive missionary program. Even before the Church was officially organized in 1830, Joseph Smith received a revelation (D&C 4:3–4) commanding missionary work. Fired with religious zeal, early converts were not shy about pursuing new members. The first missionaries canvassed areas close to their homes but soon began traveling to other states and foreign lands.

While Protestant churches during the period usually financially supported their missionaries, early Mormon elders traveled without “purse or scrip.” And unlike missionaries from other faiths, who often traveled as a family, Mormon missionaries traveled alone or with a male companion.

The early missionary program was a far cry from today’s sophisticated operation. According to historian George Ellsworth, “It was not uncommon, in the earliest days of the movement, for a man to hear Mormonism preached one day, be baptized the next, be ordained an elder on the following day and the day after that to be preaching Mormonism” (1951, 38–39). Designed to promote faith on the part of the missionaries and sacrifice amongst those they visited, traveling without “purse or scrip” was undoubtedly a test for both.

As more and more men left their homes, it became apparent that families left behind were struggling. The problem was prominent enough to be addressed at the 1831 general conference: “Brother Frederick G. Williams enquired if it were the business of this conference to take into consideration the situation of the families of the absent Elders. Br. Sidney Rigdon said that he supposed that it was, saying, I bear testimony that God will have a pure people who will give up all for Christ’s sake and when this is done they will be sealed up unto eternal life.” Joseph Smith responded “that the Lord held the Church bound to provide for the families of the absent Elders while proclaiming the Gospel” (in Cannon and Cook 1983, 21, 23).

Even with the Prophet’s support, however, families were still left destitute. In 1837, when they left for their missions to England, mem-

bers of the Twelve left their families in "the most trying circumstances"—many ill with malaria, and in rough cabins (Ellsworth 1951, 225).

Between 1846 and 1847 members of the Mormon Battalion marched westward, leaving their wives and families behind on the plains. In his diary, William Hyde recorded the conditions of Mormon Battalion families:

The thoughts of leaving my family at this critical time are indescribable. They were far from the land of their nativity, situated upon a lonely prairie with no dwelling but a wagon, the scorching sun beating upon them, with the prospect of the cold winds of December finding them in the same bleak, dreary place.

My family consisted of a wife and two small children, who were left in company with an aged father and mother and a brother. The most of the Battalion left families, some in care of the Church and some in the care of relatives, with some in their own care. When we were to meet with them again, God only knew. Nevertheless, we did not feel to murmur. (in Tyler 1969, 128)

Fanny Parks Taggart, wife of a Mormon Battalion member, was perhaps more tempted to murmur. In her autobiography she noted that when she arrived in Council Bluffs, she had no money and no one to look after her. The midwestern wilderness was a hard place for a woman alone. She wrote:

I went to President Brigham Young for council and he told me to look up some of my acquaintances and get in with them until I could get me a house.

My husband had written to me in a letter that I received before leaving Nauvoo that there would be some provisions made for the families of those that went in the Mormon Battalion, and this had kept up my courage on the way, but the answer I received from President Young made me feel like bursting into tears, and to hide them I turned quickly away and walked a few steps, and on looking up I saw a woman standing in the door of a tent, I wiped my eyes and went to her and inquired for Asa Davis, and she showed me his house and I went there and was made welcome to such accommodations as they had. (n.d.)

Sarah Beriah Fiske Allen Ricks was left alone in Musketol, Iowa, while her husband served with the battalion. In her autobiography she noted:

Before leaving, my husband made arrangements for me to draw provisions from the store of a trader . . . but for some reason the provisions never reached me. . . . The company now prepared to move to a better location. Having received no means, I thought it best to remain where I was. My goods were put into a small shanty; my cow was separated from the other stock, and the company moved away. . . . My cow seemed determined to follow the herd and shortly she broke through the corral and ran after them. I could not leave my babe and little girl to follow her. Overcome by the desolate situation that confronted me alone and in a wilderness, and unprotected, I wept bitterly.

For nearly two years, Sarah managed and in the spring of 1848 began looking forward to her husband's return, when "his strong arms would lift these burdens of care from my shoulders. I gathered grapes from the lowlands near the river and made wine, and prepared such dainties as I could that would please him." She waited at home, watching and "listening to the sound of every footstep that approached" her door. After several days, she learned that someone was bringing her a leather purse, stained with blood and containing \$120 in gold dust, found on the body of her husband, who had been killed by Indians in the California mountains. She wrote, "Thus were my hopes and expectations blasted in a moment. What could I do now but trust in God? I had no relatives in the Church, two small children, and a journey of a thousand miles before me. For some time I felt as if I would sink under my burden of grief and anguish of heart" (n.d., 4-5).

But she didn't sink. In time she pulled herself together, exchanged the gold dust for cash and goods, hired a wagon made, and with the help of another couple made the journey to Salt Lake City.

After Utah was settled, a letter from "Box B" or a call to serve a mission from the pulpit at general conference usually left a family feeling ambivalent. While most men felt it a duty and an honor to serve the Church, they knew it meant leaving their homes, families, farms, and businesses for an indefinite period of time. Departing missionaries were not given a release date upon leaving and could return home only when they received a letter from the First Presidency.

Even with their abundance of religious zeal, many men had difficulty leaving their families. Curtis E. Bolton reported that after he was called on a mission, his wife felt it unfair that she would be left "destitute" in Salt Lake City. She later recanted and told him to go, that she would take care of herself (in Bitton 1982, 114). We can only wonder what tone of voice she used when she said that. Unfortunately I can find far more men's accounts of leavings than women's. John Farr reported that when he left for his mission, his wife stood "not saying a word, with great streams of tears rolling down her cheeks. Of course, my tears came also, notwithstanding I tried so hard to hold out. A mission, for a man with a large family was a tough assignment" (1957, 81). John Farr also wrote:

In the early days, there were but few conveniences for the family left at home: hard work and lonesome hours for the wife, care and sickness all hours of the night for the wife and children. There was fuel to be gathered in, the cows to milk and feed, the pigs to slop and bed, chickens to tend, and water to carry. There was the churning and butter molding; yes, and a thousand other chores to be done, not counting the daily washing for the kiddies. The family was often deprived of necessities—all this to make it possible to keep the husband in the mission field. (1957, 81-82)

Even with a husband, a pioneer woman's work was hard. She cleaned, cooked, gardened, sewed, cared for livestock, chopped wood, hauled water, as well as caring for children. In the husband's absence, she added to her tasks the responsibility of holding the family together with meager resources. Martha C. Browning Middleton's husband, C. Y. Middleton, left for a mission in 1856, leaving her in Ogden in an unfinished house with two small children. Her biography notes that "with no door to keep out the cold of winter, she bravely kept willow fires burning in the fireplace while nursing to health her sick child" (Middleton n.d., 3).

Most missionaries attempted to make arrangements for their families before leaving. Whenever possible they placed their families in the care of another family member. But this too was often a difficult situation, and women must have felt keenly the burden they were on another family. William Kimball asked his father, Heber C. Kimball, to help his family while he was on a mission. In a letter dated 13 April 1856, Heber C. Kimball wrote to his son:

My family, with yours, have only one half a pound of bread stuff to a person, a day. We have vegetables and a little meat. We are doing first rate, and have no cause but to be very thankful; still I feed hundreds of others, a little, or they must suffer. . . . I shall be very glad when you return home to take a little of my burthen [sic] off my shoulders, for it has been extremely hard for me and your mother, to calculate, devise, and administer to near one hundred that are dependent on us, besides hundreds of others that are teasing us constantly for something to eat. (Kimball 1856, 476)

Andrew M. Israelsen noted in his autobiography that when he was called on a mission in 1883, "it was decided that my wife should go back and live with her parents while I was away" (1938, 44). Other men placed their families in the care of a business partner. Carl A. Carlquist, who did this, returned to find that not only was his wife ill, but

that the business I left two years ago in a prosperous condition had all gone to pieces. We then had about \$5,000 monthly sales together with some \$8,000 outstanding good accounts, which brought good monthly returns. Now there were less than \$1500 monthly sales, . . . When I pressed my old partner for an explanation he did not know. He said: "Partner, all I know is that \$20,000 have slipped through my hands in two years, but I do not know how it happened." Thus I had lost every dollar I had in the business, I was in debt on my home, my wife was sick and I was destitute, without income of any kind. (n.d., 19)

Adding to this problem was the fact that most families only had a short period of time to get their affairs in order before the husband had to leave. Benjamin F. Johnson, who received his mission call in 1852 and had only ten days to prepare, wrote:

At first I could not believe it, but when I found it a reality I was dazed. How could I be prepared in ten days—or even ten months—to leave my family, now separated 100 miles; with a U.S. mail contract, and unsettled business almost everywhere, from north of the city to Manti. . . . All this, and only ten days to rent out my farms, gather up my family, dispose of my mail contract, settle all business, and get ready for a start. Reason said, “No, you cannot go; it is not just to require it under such circumstances.” Three wives with eight small children—to be increased by two in my absence; and what a loss of means! Such a needless sacrifice! (1947, 193)

Women were probably even more distressed. Louisa Barnes Pratt wrote in her journal:

In 1843 Mr. Pratt was called to go on a mission to the South Pacific Islands; . . . I had greatly desired that he might be sent to our kindred in the eastern states, but never had such a thought entered my mind that he would be sent to a foreign land. My four children had to be schooled and clothed, and no money would be left with me. In those days nearly everything was trade; making it more difficult for a mother to be left to provide for herself and children. (in Carter 1947, 189)

Sophronia Moore Martin wrote in her autobiography:

In the year ‘53 my husband was called to go on a mission to England. In two weeks after he left for his mission another little baby girl came to stay with us. . . . So you see I was left with three babies to take care of while he was gone. He was gone four years and four months from the time he left. . . . The Lord blessed me with health and strength and I was able to work at anything I could get to do, and I was able to get food and clothing we needed. When he came home from his mission, about the first thing he did was to get another wife. (n.d., 3)

Most missionaries did all that they could to provide for their families in their absence, but the problem of indigent families and needy missionaries continued to concern Church leaders. Church policy regarding the support of missionary families fluctuated. Missionaries often spent their time begging not only for their own, but for their families’ support as well. In April 1843 Brigham Young, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, called a special conference to ordain elders and call them as missionaries. During the conference Young instructed the elders on the care of their families. He told them “not to go from church to church, for the purpose of [getting a] living [for] themselves, or begging for their families.” He also said:

It is wisdom for the elders to leave their families in this place, when they have any thing to leave with them; and let not the elders go on their mission, until they have provided for their families. No man need say again “I have a call to travel and preach,” while he has not a comfortable house for his family—a lot fenced, and one year’s provisions in store, or sufficient to last his family during his mission.

The Lord will not condemn any man for following counsel, and keeping the commandments; and a faithful man will have dreams about the work he is engaged in. If he is engaged in building the Temple, he will dream about it; and if in preaching he will dream about that, and not, when he is laboring on the temple, dream that it is his duty to run off preaching, and leave his family to starve; such dreams are not of God.

When I was sick last winter, some of the sisters came and whispered in my ear, "I have nothing to eat." "Where is your husband?" "He is gone a preaching." Who sent him? said I, *for the Lord never sent him to leave his family to starve.*

When the twelve went to England, they went on a special mission, and by special commandment; and they left their families sick and destitute, God having promised that they should be provided for; but God does not require the same thing of the elders now, neither does he promise to provide for their families when they leave them contrary to counsel. *The elders must provide for their families.* (*Times and Seasons* 4:1 April 1883, 158-59)

Once the Saints were well settled in the West, Church leaders attempted to get Church members to support both the missionaries and their families. In 1860 Brigham Young stated:

I will now inform the Latter-day Saints in this Territory that I wish them to fit out our Missionaries, who are going into the world to preach, with means to go to their fields of labor, and then sustain their families while they are gone. . . . I was with the Bishops last Thursday evening, and I requested them to notify the brethren to come here prepared to donate their half-eagles, eagles, fifty dollar pieces, horses, mules, waggons, wheat by the twenty and hundred bushels, and other available means, that we may send these brethren away rejoicing; and then we will give them a promise that we will provide for their families after they are gone, so far as they are unable to provide for themselves. (*Millennial Star*, 24 November 1860)

At the April 1863 general conference, George A. Smith asked members to donate cotton, wool, and flax to the families of the absent elders—"some of whom had been absent six out of eight years in foreign land"—so that they could make some homespun clothing (JD 10:144). At October conference that year, Orson Hyde reiterated that missionaries were not supposed to beg for support while serving, and whatever money they gained from voluntary contributions over and above their needs should be used to help new members immigrate. He also told the congregation:

Their families are here, and have not harvested in abundance of the temporal comforts of the earth, but they have managed to live along from hand to mouth. There were contributions and subscriptions made last year to aid the families of our absent missionaries, but how many of them have been faithfully and frankly paid in and how many remain yet unpaid, I am not prepared to say, but it has been suggested to me that there are still many delinquents who did really feel liberal, but have not since found a convenient time to honor that liberal feeling by paying in what they have subscribed. (JD 10:262)

By 1876 it appears from an address given by John Taylor in Logan that the missionary families were still being left without means. Taylor chastised the local Saints for not supporting absent missionaries' families, saying:

My feelings are, never to ask the Lord to do anything I would not do myself. If I were a woman—but then I am not, you know, and I do not know much about it; but if I were a woman, the wife of one of our missionaries abroad, I would much rather have a sack of flour; a little meat, some butter and cheese, a little fire-wood or coal, and a little cloth for myself and family, than all the prayers you could offer up for me. And if you want to see these folks taken care of, you must see to it yourselves. And you sisters of the Relief Society, do not give your husbands any rest until these families are all provided for. And do not spare the Bishop if they are not provided for but go after him and “ding” it into him; and perhaps by your continued teasing and worrying him, he may harken to your prayers. And I will risk it if the sisters get after him. (20:47)

But the fact is, the Church only sporadically offered aid to these struggling women. Most likely it simply could not consistently afford to support the families of missionaries and so had to rely on the local communities to do so.

Though not all women left their stories, we can discover how they fared by reading their husbands' accounts of what they found when they returned home. After long absences, many men's young children did not recognize them or had died, plural wives had left them, and debt was accumulating, pushing them to return to work immediately to get their affairs in order.

Lorenzo Hill Hatch reported in his journal that his children were afraid of him when he arrived home. Within a few days of his return, he planted peas and on the following Monday “hunted up . . . [his] bench, ground some of . . . [his] rusty tools and plowed some for corn” (in Hilton 1958, 61). It appears from his account that his family did not plant crops while he was gone. We can only wonder what they did for food.

Appleton Milo Harmon, on the other hand, wrote to his wife, Elmeda, just before he came home from his mission and instructed her how to prepare for his return:

No doubt you will be wanting to know what arrangements to make for the coming summer, but my long absence will prevent me from giving any instructions, but you must do the best you can. If you can manage to get some grain growing it will be well. And any arrangements you can make about building us a good snug house, and I shall try to take some nails, glass, a stove, a carpet, and clock, and if I can't get half of them I will be satisfied. (in Stringham 1970, 176-77)

Women in polygamous marriages were sometimes left alone for long periods of time. In *Dear Ellen*, S. George Ellsworth writes about the forty-six-year marriage of Hiram B. and Ellen Clawson:

During twenty-six of those years he was gone from home some part of each year—sometimes as near as Provo, sometimes to both coasts visiting New York and San Francisco the same season, and for periods varying from one to eight months. Besides these business trips he sometimes accompanied Brigham Young's company in visiting the settlements, from Logan on the north to St. George on the south. (1974, 54)

Mormon women continued to support themselves into the twentieth century. Ruth May Fox, married polygamously to Jesse Williams Fox, Jr., on 8 May 1873, was forced to run a boarding house in 1900 because of financial setbacks in her husband's business. In 1914 she moved in with one of her sons, Feramorz Y. Fox, and worked as a typist for the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association. She resumed housekeeping only to nurse her husband through illnesses in 1921 and from 1927 until his death in 1928 and lived with her children until she died on 12 April 1958 (Thatcher 1981, 242).

Perhaps the best known example of a Mormon woman left alone is Annie Clark Tanner. Married in 1883 to Joseph Tanner as his second wife, she bore ten children by him before they eventually became estranged. She wrote:

One Sunday morning as my husband and I stood on the front porch of our home together, he informed me that he would not come to Farmington to see us any more. There had been no previous differences between us except the children's education to which no reference had recently been made, so that statement was a great shock to me at the time. . . . Yet, I am aware now that the years of the preceding struggle to live polygamy had helped to steel me for whatever may come. I thought in those few moments before he departed: "I'll be equal to whatever must come," though I did not for a moment suppose that he intended to contribute no more to our support.

As he stepped from the porch to the walk, he turned to add: "You must look to your brothers for help." (1973, 236)

Hoping to better their situations, some widowed women looked for husbands and married. Clarissa Wilhem wrote in her diary: For awhile I found it hard to get wood and a few other things so I thought to better myself by marrying a man whose name was David Lewis. He promised me to be a good father to my children but he was not. . . . My . . . children were kicked from pillar to post. Finally I decided to get them home and run my own shebang" (1888).

American women participated in the western migration for various reasons, often accompanying husbands upon whom they depended for livelihood, support, and identity. LDS women were little different,

with the added dimension of strong religious beliefs. Marrying to form an eternal family unit, many Mormon women most likely looked forward to a better life in heaven when their earthly support did not fully materialize. It is difficult to know whether they felt bitter and resentful or whether they made the best of difficult circumstances.

In a variety of ways, women struggled and survived. Left on their own for long periods of time, they added to the day-to-day affairs of running a home and performing farm labor the long-term problems of obtaining support for the family.

Most men who left to perform missionary service acted responsibly toward their families, attempting to provide for their needs in their absence. But Church leaders' addresses indicate that some missionaries must have had difficulty finding the means to take care of both their families and themselves, and perhaps some did not act responsibly. The call to serve the Church in any capacity, whether from inner zeal or from Church authorities, was, and still is, an important part of the Mormon lifestyle. Men faced with the choice of serving the Church or providing for their families appear in more than a few instances to have chosen the Church first. Women, often left behind with their children and in a sense sacrificed by this service, seem to have faced their situations with wit and determination.

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