

# Relief Society's Golden Years: *The Magazine*

Jean Anne Waterstradt

MY MOTHER WAS AN ENTHUSIASTIC, devoted member of the Relief Society—the old Relief Society, the pre-block-meeting-schedule, pre-Correlation Relief Society. She belonged to a Relief Society that LDS women chose to join by paying a small annual membership fee; that had its own meeting day and its own budget; that organized bazaars; that sponsored Singing Mothers choruses; that published its own songbook;<sup>1</sup> that held its own conference each autumn in the Salt Lake Tabernacle; that built its own headquarters in Salt Lake City on the southeast corner of Main and North Temple Streets; that published its own magazine.

For my mother, who, I think, was a typical member, the *Magazine* was indispensable because it was a tangible reminder in her home of all that Relief Society offered and accomplished. And, this magazine had an influence beyond its Relief Society constituency. For example, my teacher, friend, and colleague Ralph Britsch has written that when he was a youngster, the women whose names appeared on the masthead of the *Magazine* and as authors of various features “ranked only a little lower in my mind than the General Authorities.”<sup>2</sup> The context for his remark was a memoir honoring Alice Louise Reynolds, a BYU professor, a member of the Relief Society General Board, and an associate editor and then editor of the *Maga-*

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1. I had two, copyrighted 1919 and 1942, now in Special Collections, Stewart Library, Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.

2. Ralph A. Britsch, “Alice Louise Reynolds: A Remembrance,” in *They*

zine.<sup>3</sup> Like Professor Britsch, I early discovered the pleasures of the *Magazine* and was delighted when I found my mother's hoard of back issues.

When the *Magazine* ceased publication with its December 1970 issue, a ward representative visited my mother to inquire about transferring her subscription to one of the new Church journals. She was adamant: "If I can't have the *Relief Society Magazine*, I don't want any Church publication." And she held fast to her decision. When she died several years later, she still had not succumbed to a replacement for "her" magazine.

My mother's collection of the *Relief Society Magazine* comprises forty-nine years, beginning in January 1922 and ending in December 1970. These hundreds of issues made deciding the limits of this paper difficult, but browsing through the magazines again has brought me great enjoyment. I have been struck once more by the dedication and ability of the women who edited the *Magazine* and by the remarkable variety of its contents. It is that variety which I intend to emphasize in this brief miscellaneous survey of a journal that existed for fifty-seven years and that, over those years, entered tens of thousands of homes and influenced millions of women and their families.

In addition to the spiritual messages, which are a staple of any Church journal, and the lesson guides, the *Magazine* published articles on contemporary issues; biographical sketches; travel accounts; articles on nutrition and child-rearing; recipes; articles on home decoration and management; poems, short stories, and serial stories; articles on music and paintings; articles on gardens; and reports from Relief Societies across the United States and around the world under the title "Notes from the Field."<sup>4</sup> It was in such a report in the February 1942 *Magazine* that I discovered a picture of the North Weber Stake Relief Society Board, with my mother appearing in the second row. Finally, the *Magazine* pub-

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*Gladly Taught*, edited by Jean Anne Waterstradt (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University and the Emeritus Club, 1988), 3:141.

3. Miss Reynolds served as associate editor from 1923 until 1928 under Clarissa Smith Williams, editor and general president. When Williams was released, Reynolds became editor, beginning with the November 1928 issue. Her resignation from the *Magazine* was announced in September 1930.

4. A short list is sufficient to illustrate the variety of feature articles typical of the *Magazine*: "What Utah Is Doing for the Blind," "The Scenic West and Its Natural Resources," "Pasteur's Contribution to the Relief of Human Suffering,"

lished the society's annual report, which included cash receipts and disbursements and statistics on membership and average attendance at meetings, as well as reports on such activities as preparing bodies for burial, special visits to the sick, and days spent in temple work.

The front cover of the *Magazine* was drawn from a variety of sources: for example, sketches, landscapes, old photographs, monuments, and classical art. As photography grew more sophisticated and film technology advanced, covers in beautiful colors became commonplace. The *Magazine's* final cover, celebrating Christmas, was taken from a painting by Andrea del Sarto, *Virgin and Child with Joseph*.

A major feature in most issues was the lesson guide for each of the four subjects regularly scheduled for study. These lessons were published initially with a lead time of two months, which was later increased to three. For instance, the January issue dealt with the April lessons. In my mother's Relief Society, the curriculum was designated as "Theology and Testimony," "Work and Business," "Literature," and "Social Service." "Work and Business" later became "Work Meeting," and "Social Service" was changed to "Social Science." The "Visiting Teachers' Message" was also published. No lessons were published for the summer months. The original ten-month educational year was finally reduced to eight months, with June, July, August, and September lesson-free.

Although there was, inevitably, through the years repetition of subject matter, the lessons were varied and were often supplemented with a list of questions and problems to stimulate study and discussion. Sometimes references were included. A sampling of subject matter, all from pre-correlation years (before 1966), underlines the many-faceted concerns of that earlier Relief Society. It emphasizes the "remarkable variety" to which I have referred. In some educational years, a course of study might pursue a theme or basic idea, in others the work or life of an individual, in still others a single important book. In the sampling that follows, I have purposely used random order and have mixed one-lesson topics with year-long subject matter.

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"Dallin's Gift of Massasoit to Utah," "Diets for Some Special Diseases," "A Trip through Scandinavia," "Illustrating and Story-writing for Children," "How to Remodel a Fitted Suit," "Women in the Utah Legislature," "The Open Mind," and "Books for the Family."

Theology lessons, which were presented at the first meeting of the month, included the following: "Memorable Prayers," "Guardian and Ministering Angels," "Habits and Customs in Heaven," "The Parables of the Savior," "The Book of Mormon," "The Doctrine and Covenants," "Forgiveness," "Intelligence and Future Life," "The Agency of Men," "Prophets of the Mosaic Dispensation," James Talmage's *Articles of Faith*, "Church History," and "The Life and Ministry of the Savior."

Work and Business Meeting, later called Work Meeting, at first had no lesson guide, but eventually a topic was introduced even for that day, which had been intended primarily for activity, not for discussion. Among the topics for the second meeting of the month were these: "Health in the Home," "Personal Attractiveness, a Factor in Happiness," "Cooperation in the Home in Work Habits," "Finances of the Home," "The Eternal Family," "Children's Clothing," "Buttonholes and Fasteners," "Modern Housekeeping Methods," "Food Facts and Food Fads," "Managerial Aspects of Clothing the Family," and "Better Buymanship" (instruction on purchasing such articles as hosiery, dresses, and coats).

Because of my personal interests, my training, and my professional life, I was especially interested in examining the literary lessons. During the third meeting of each month, Relief Society sisters studied such subjects as the short story, the novel (for example, *Les Miserables*), the Bible as literature, "Poetry of Faith in God and Man," LDS authors, Mark Twain, "Literature of the *Doctrine and Covenants*," Shakespeare, Nathaniel Hawthorne, hymns written by women, "Exploring Right and Wrong Attitudes through Literature," "Periods in American Literature," Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "America as Revealed in Its Literature," "Humor in Life and Literature," Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, George Santayana, the hymns of George Careless, and *The Devil's Disciple* by George Bernard Shaw.

My biggest surprise in surveying these literary lessons came with the discovery that Ibsen's *A Doll House* had been a Relief Society topic. You remember Nora, Torvald Helmer's child-like wife; Nora, who naively believes that "a wonderful thing" will happen when her husband learns what she has done for him; Nora, who reaches toward real maturity only when she begins to understand the hollowness of her marriage and faces her lack of self-identity. I assume that Alice Louise Reynolds was responsible for including *A Doll's House* among the topics for the literary lessons. Miss Reynolds brought to the *Magazine* both her training as a teacher and

scholar and her deep, unwavering devotion to the LDS faith. She would have seen no difficulty, only advantage, in promoting discussion among Mormon women about the problems and ideas suggested by Ibsen's play.

Probably because, at times, the literary lessons could present special problems if they were used in the mission field, the *Magazine* sometimes published optional courses that mission Relief Societies could choose to study in place of literature. For example, in 1940-41, LDS history was an alternate course, and in 1941-42, LDS hymns. In 1946-47, the option was "The Gospel as a Way of Life."

Social Service, or Social Science, lessons were scheduled for the fourth meeting each month. These lessons treated such general areas as personal relationships; ideals of home and family; and community, state, and national concerns. Social Service subjects included these: "Child Welfare," "Divine Law and Church Government," "The Care of the Aged," "What Courtship Should Reveal," "Social Aspects of a Community Health Program," "Problems of Behavior," "Types of Welfare Work," "The Home and Its Material Obligation," "The Home and Its Spiritual Obligation," "Spiritual Living in the Nuclear Age," "Homeless Children," "Problem Children," "What America Means" (example: "Growth of Political Parties in America"), "Foundations of Successful Marriage," and "Personality Study: The Psychology of Conversation, Public Speaking and Writing."

A major change in lesson nomenclature did not occur until June 1966 when the *Magazine* announced:

In harmony with the Correlation Program, the lessons for the coming year are being written so they may be presented in such a way that every sister at Relief Society will become involved in the discussion. The titles of the courses, beginning in October 1966, reflect this new concept of involvement. Theology is now called "Spiritual Living"; Work Meeting—"Home-making"; Social Science—"Social Relations"; and Literature has taken on a new depth and becomes "Cultural Refinement."<sup>5</sup>

This action seems to have marked the beginning of the end of the Relief Society that my mother's generation cherished, for the Correlation Program brought a sea change to the organization, the results of which became evident in the Relief Society that emerged after the *Magazine* was abolished, the Relief Society that LDS women now know.

The same issue that carried news of the new names for the Relief So-

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5. *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1966, 460.

ciety courses of study celebrated the expansion of the *Magazine's* influence with the announcement in an article by Elder Marion G. Romney that the journal would now also be published in Spanish. In a joyful editorial in this issue, Belle S. Spafford wrote:

It was a blessed day, indeed, when, as an aid in furthering the work of this organization, the Society was given a *Magazine* of its own, "to be edited managed, and published by the General Authorities of the Society." This publication has served as the voice of the Relief Society. It has helped to unify and standardize the work. It has served as a lesson manual for the educational courses. It has been an outlet for the literary aspirations of Latter-day Saint women. Its contents have been animated by the spirit of the gospel[,] and its gospel [-] teaching articles by Priesthood and Relief Society leaders [-] have strengthened faith and built testimonies.

Sister Spafford continued:

In the centenary of Relief Society, issued on the hundredth anniversary of Relief Society, we read, "This *Magazine* belongs by right to every woman of the Church." While language barriers stand in the way of full realization of this at the present time, a great step forward has been made as the *Magazine* becomes available in Spanish for the many Spanish-speaking sisters throughout the Church. The General Board rejoices that this instrument which has proven so valuable to the English-speaking sisters and such an important factor in the strength of their Relief Societies, may now intimately touch and influence the lives of the Spanish-speaking sisters and reach into their Relief Societies as a bulwark of strength.

The advent of the *Relief Society Magazine* in Spanish is a history-making event.<sup>6</sup>

In reality, the *Magazine* had only four and one-half years of life remaining.

The inclusion of fiction and poetry in every issue of the *Magazine* encouraged women who were creative writers.<sup>7</sup> The poets received a major advantage when, in August 1923, the *Magazine* announced a memorial to Eliza R. Snow, to be known as the Eliza Roxcy Snow Memorial Prize Poem. That this competition was inaugurated only three months after Alice Louise Reynolds's appointment to the associate editorship of the *Magazine* was, I think, no coincidence. Two prizes were announced for this

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6. Belle S. Spafford, *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1966, 411.

7. Some issues carried only a few poems, but in one issue (May 1966) I counted eighteen. Up to six stories might appear in a single issue (for example, June 1959).

first year: first place, \$20; second place, \$10, both considerable sums seventy years ago. Forty-seven entries were received in that first year. The winning poems, which were announced the following year in January, Eliza R. Snow's birth month, were written by Sarah Ahlstrom Nelson and Claire Stewart Boyer. By 1969, the last year of the contest, now known only as The Relief Society Poem Contest,<sup>8</sup> the first prize was \$40; the second, \$30; the third, \$20. These final prize poems, all published in April 1970, were written by Virginia Maughan Kammeyer, Hazel Loomis, and Alice Morrey Bailey. In congratulating the winners, the *Magazine* noted that 415 entries had been received. In August 1970 the *Magazine* announced the discontinuance of the poetry contest because of the impending discontinuance of the *Magazine*.

Equivalent encouragement for LDS women fiction writers came two decades after the first poetry competition. As part of the Relief Society Centennial celebration in 1942, the *Magazine* announced in its August issue that the Relief Society General Board had inaugurated "an annual short story contest designed to stimulate fiction-writing among Latter-day Saint women, to develop greater appreciation for this type of creative writing, and to encourage high standards of work."<sup>9</sup> The following prizes were established: first place, \$25; second place, \$20; third place, \$15. Twenty-one manuscripts were submitted in this first contest. The winning authors were Norma Wrathall, Blanche Kendall McKey, and Mary Ek Knowles. By 1969 the first prize had grown to \$75; the second to \$60; and the third to \$50. The 1969 winning stories, all published in April 1970, were written by Sylvia Probst Young, Sara Brown Neilson, and Joan B. Kearl. At that time the *Magazine* noted that seventy-seven stories had been submitted. Like the poetry contest, the short story contest died with the *Magazine*.

During the years in which the *Magazine* was "an outlet for the liter-

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8. The 1966 poetry contest was announced in the June issue as the Eliza R. Snow Poem Contest. When the winning entries were published in January 1967, the notice began, "The Relief Society General Board is pleased to announce the names of the three winners in the 1966 Relief Society Poem Contest (formerly the Eliza R. Snow Memorial Poem Contest)" (19). As far as I can determine, the *Magazine* did not offer an explanation for this change, but I call attention to the announcement in June 1966 of the change in course titles "in harmony with the Correlation Program."

9. *Relief Society Magazine*, August 1942, 552.

ary aspirations of Latter-day Saint women" (Spafford), many authors became repeating contributors. These women had impressive credentials: they had published extensively, many in national magazines; they were members of authors' organizations; they were recognized in chronicles of achievement, such as *Who's Who in the West*. They were clearly well disciplined in their craft. A short list of these authors might include Mabel Law Atkinson, Alice Morrey Bailey, Claire Stewart Boyer, Elsie Talmage Brandley, Olive Woolley Burt, Annie Wells Cannon, Elsie Chamberlain Carroll, Alberta Huish Christensen, Christie Lund Coles, Vesta Pierce Crawford, Ruth May Fox,<sup>10</sup> Mabel Jones Gabbott,<sup>11</sup> Mabel Harmer, Lael Woolsey Hill, Ethel Jacobson, Bertha A. Kleinman,<sup>12</sup> Mary Ek Knowles, Rosa Lee Lloyd, Caroline Eyring Miner, Anna Prince Redd, Lula Greene Richards, Dorothy J. Roberts, Dorothy Clapp Robinson, Iris W. Schow, Helen Candland Stark, Margery S. Stewart, Ora Pate Stewart, Eva Willes Wangsgaard, Maryhale Wolsey, and Sylvia Probst Young.

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since the demise of the *Relief Society Magazine*. An entire Church generation has been born and grown up without knowing the publication, and those who were young when it perished possibly have no recollection of it. But just ask any Relief Society member who was a mature adult when the final announcement came. These sisters remember well the pleasure, the help, and the strength derived from reading the *Magazine*, and they still mourn its loss.

In her farewell editorial, Marianne Clark Sharp, who was also first counselor to the Relief Society general president, expressed the hope that the *Magazine*, which she termed "a treasure house of inspiring material," would be preserved by both members and organizations "for present and future reference." I do not believe this hope has been realized. Sister Sharp also noted that, in August of its final year, the *Magazine* had reached 301,000 subscribers, adding somewhat wistfully that the number

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10. Ruth May Fox is the author of "Carry On," *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), no. 255.

11. Mabel Jones Gabbott wrote four of the hymns in the 1985 hymnal: "We Have Partaken of Thy Love," no. 155; "In Humility, Our Savior," no. 172; "Lord, Accept into Thy Kingdom," no. 236; and "Rejoice, Ye Saints of Latter Days," no. 290.

12. Bertha Kleinman is the author of "Two Little Hands," which at one time was one of the most popular songs for LDS children.



"would have been greatly increased by the end of the year had the *Magazine* continued."<sup>13</sup>

Sister Sharp's editorial conclusion is both ironic and ambiguous. She has rendered in the feminine plural the gladiators' salute to the Emperor Claudius, as recorded by Suetonius in his *Life of Claudius*, #21: "*Moriturae te salutamus*"—"We who are about to die salute you."<sup>14</sup>

My mother's Relief Society was a semi-autonomous Church auxiliary. That it loomed so large in the lives of its women was due to its splendid central leadership, the variety of its activities, and its firm spiritual undergirding. The *Magazine* that it published for fifty-seven years was a powerful instrument, a testament to the ability and determination of its general board, to the value of Relief Society programs, and to the intellectual, moral, and spiritual commitment of Relief Society members. There is now, of course, no comparable voice for LDS women.

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13. Marianne Clark Sharp, *Relief Society Magazine*, December 1970, 895.

14. *Ibid.*