

DISCOVERING THE WOMAN'S EXPONENT

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As a sixth-generation Latter-day Saint, I've grown up with Church history—it was a frequent topic of conversation whenever our extended family gathered. My second-great-grandfather, George Whitaker, wrote of working as a teamster for Parley P. Pratt when Nauvoo was abandoned in February 1846. Essentially, he'd crossed the ice with a load of Brother Pratt's wives. The story of George Whitaker is well known. Carol Madsen used his story as an introductory chapter in her book *Journey to Zion: Voices from the Mormon Trail*.¹ Other family histories whetted my appetite for more information about Church history.

While I was at the University of Utah (BA Elementary Education 1962), I took a Mormon history class from T. Edgar Lyon. He was a marvelous teacher whose enthusiasm for Church history was contagious. After admiring my own pioneer ancestors and their stories, I now began reading the stories of others. During the five years (1962–67) that I lived near the University of Chicago with my husband, I found a trove of aging library books on the theme of LDS history that I read with great interest. Among them I read Vardis Fisher's *Children of God* and novels by Virginia Sorensen.² I read as many books as I could find. Another book that I read at this time that altered my world was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.³ In those years I literally felt surrounded by

1. Carol Cornwall Madsen, *Journey to Zion: Voices from the Mormon Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997).

2. Vardis Fisher, *Children of God* (New York: Harper, 1939).

3. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

important current events. We lived in a neighborhood just blocks from a lovely LDS chapel that had been sold to a black congregation during the “white flight.” As a result my family had to drive many, many miles to attend a ward in a white suburb. Many of my students in the *de facto*–segregated elementary school in Hyde Park where I taught had older brothers who were being drafted into the Vietnam War. And I voted for Margaret Chase Smith in the 1964 Republican primary. She was a long time senator from Maine who was the first woman to be placed in nomination for the presidency. That year I served as a poll watcher at the request of the Chicago political machine as one of the only registered Republicans in my neighborhood.

In 1969 I moved with my husband and two small sons to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where my husband joined the chemistry faculty at Harvard University. As a faculty wife, I had access to the vast collection of books at Widener Library. The stacks at Widener were open and a paradise for someone who loves books but doesn’t know what she’s after. There on the lower shelves were these large, bound volumes of the *Woman’s Exponent*. The first issue was dated June 1, 1872, a time when my great-grandparents were living in Salt Lake City. Dragging a large volume into an unused carrel at the end of the corridor, I began by looking for family names. Every article I read was fascinating. I couldn’t stop reading. The *Woman’s Exponent* amazed me. These articles were written by articulate, opinionated women about a broad spectrum of women’s issues. These women were feminists! They seemed so forthright, so sure of themselves, so liberated! I couldn’t believe my good fortune. Furthermore, these volumes weren’t stashed away in Widener’s Rare Books Department; they could be checked out and taken home and pored over. I couldn’t wait to share what I’d discovered with my sisters. Here we had a treasure trove of early LDS documents, a bi-monthly newspaper issued from 1872 to 1914 that promoted the points of view of LDS women and discussed issues of current interest to them. The early editors, Lula Greene Richards and Emmeline B. Wells, supported

universal women's suffrage. Their feminist newspaper provided valuable source material and inspiration for us LDS sisters in the Boston area to examine the enormous contribution made by our LDS foremothers. For us all, it was a very stimulating find. Almost a century after the *Woman's Exponent* began publication, the women's movement in our country was just taking off again. Our interests led to the presentation of a series of classes on LDS women's history at the LDS Institute and ultimately to the publication of *Exponent II* in 1974. All of us who participated in *Exponent II's* creation benefited from the experience. I learned from the ground up what it takes to create a sustainable organization: incorporation papers, a bank account, a mailbox, and "clients." I learned the give and take of group discussions and the importance of making decisions. I loved participating in all the *Exponent* activities: managing the subscription list, helping with typing or "paste-up," loading the car with bundles of newspapers to take to the post office. I was also exposed to other points of view and took pleasure in sharing ideas and experiences that resonated with others. I met fascinating people—Leonard Arrington and Juanita Brooks, just to name two—whom I never would have otherwise. However, I was truly blindsided by the negative reactions we began to receive. I couldn't see how anything we were doing in Boston wouldn't be pleasing to our sisters and brothers who lived in other parts of the mission field or in Zion itself. The idea that the phrase "women's liberation" was threatening or insulting was unimaginable to me. My grandmother, Gertrude, was so proud to be in the first generation of American women to vote for a president. That was a right, she reminded me, that was hard fought for and to be taken seriously. She definitely identified with "women's liberation." After her husband left for a two-year mission in 1901, my grandmother, Clara, the mother of an infant child, ran for county recorder in Beaver, Utah, and won. The idea that educated women should be limited to housework at the expense of contributing to broader community interests seemed unreasonable to

me. Why not equal pay for equal work? Why not “women’s liberation”? Why not the ERA?

It was glorious to be in the midst of articulate women who didn’t see themselves as hindered by pursuing education, careers, or motherhood. But in 1975, after seven glorious years in Boston, our family moved to settle in Connecticut. My active involvement with *Exponent II* ended. What a golden period that was!