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Pioneer Woman Statue, Ponca City, Oklahoma. Wikimedia Commons.

Paper

Divided by Distance, United in Purpose

A Comparative Examination of Mormon Women after the Manifesto, 1890–1904

Natalie Larsen

ANNOUNCING AN END TO THE TEACHING OF POLYGAMY IN SEPTEMBER 1890, LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff heralded the dissolution of the peculiar marital practice that had demarcated the “Mormon problem” for over half a century.¹ “The Manifesto,” as Woodruff’s declaration came to be called, announced the intention of the LDS Church to submit to US law by ceasing to solemnize new polygamous marriages.² However, this declaration did not mention what would become of polygamous wives who had already entered into such arrangements or the families created thereby. Between 1870 and 1890, the percentage of adult Mormons living in a polygamous household had declined sharply to about fifteen percent, though many members of the Church found a source of common identity because of this denominationally differentiating practice.³

1. C.P. Lyford, *The Mormon Problem: An Appeal to the American People* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1886), 4–5. Here, it should be noted that “Mormon” is a colloquial term for a Latter-day Saint (LDS), and for our purposes will be used interchangeably.

2. Wilford Woodruff, “Official Declaration,” *Deseret Evening News*, September 25, 1890, Utah Digital Newspapers <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=1547736>.

3. Lowell C. Bennion, “Plural Marriage, 1841–1904,” in *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History* ed. Brandon S. Plewe (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2013), 122–25.

After reading the Manifesto, prominent Mormon suffragist Emmeline B. Wells privately mused, “There are some who will be very much tried over the affair; but we must wait and see what the Lord has in store for us—we do not always know what is for our best good here & hereafter.”⁴ In later entries, Wells made it clear that “we” referred specifically to the women of the Church. Prior to the Manifesto, Mormon women had distinguished themselves by their intense involvement in the public sphere to defend their names and religion. Eliza R. Snow stated that under polygamy, Mormon women “occupied a more important position than was occupied by any other woman on earth.”⁵ With the end of polygamy in the United States, the new role of Mormon women became less certain.

Objects of gross ridicule and punitive federal harassment, many Mormon women in the decade prior to the Manifesto lived in fear and hiding because of their respective status as a “plural wife” or as criminals for merely accepting the practice as true.⁶ Condemned by contemporary commentators as “credulous and ignorant people . . . from the lowest classes in the Old World,” Mormon women were accused of turning Utah into “A National Brothel.”⁷ To denounce such scurrilous charges, the Relief Society, the official women’s organization of the LDS Church, arranged “indignation meetings” in which thousands of women converged to publicly proclaim their dedication to polygamy. One such meeting of 4,500 women at the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1886 was held to protest the proposed disenfranchisement of women in the Utah Territory.⁸

These large public displays of political involvement were also coupled with small private acts of civil disobedience. Between 1882 and 1890, federal officials

4. Emmeline B. Wells, diary, September 29, 1890, MSS 510 box 1 folder 13, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

5. Eliza R. Snow in Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Mormon Women and the Struggle for Definition,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 47.

6. The 1882 Edmunds Act said that if a person “believes it right for a man to have more than one living and undivorced [*sic*] wife at the same time,” he or she could be prosecuted for “bigamy, polygamy, or unlawful cohabitation under any statute of the United States” and would be subject to prosecution.

7. Lyford, *The Mormon Problem*, 139.

8. Mary Isabella Hales Horne, Sarah M. Kimball, and R.B. Pratt, *Mormon Women’s Protest: An Appeal for Freedom and Equal Rights* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Co.), 1886. Eliza R. Snow Smith: “Although absent in body, I am one with you in faith and spirit and a hearty approval of this movement whereby to give free expression to your sense of the injustice heaped upon us.” 67. Eventually, the women failed to keep their suffrage, which was stripped from them in 1887 by the US Congress.

imprisoned thousands of Mormon men and women on charges of bigamy, and by fracturing countless families they made it difficult for the remaining spouse to care for children or provide economic reprieve. To escape such conditions and live peaceably together as families, nearly 4,000 people fled to northern Mexico between 1885 and 1900. A comparison of the core population in Utah and the outlying periphery in Mexico lends itself to an examination of the broad trends concerning the social, economic, and political roles of women in their separate but parallel development after the Manifesto. Taken in whole, this juxtaposition reveals that within the limitations of nineteenth-century gender expectations, Mormon women acted cohesively to protect the privileges ceded to them before the Manifesto. The franchise, expanded freedom to pursue vocational opportunities, and social cohesion were a few of the most prominent privileges afforded to Mormon women before their non-Mormon counterparts.

Since 1938, many amateur historians and genealogists have attempted to document life in the Mexican colonies, but few professional historians have done so. In the study of Mormon women after the Manifesto, there is a divergent quantity and quality in the historiography dealing with women in Utah versus women in other regions of the Church.⁹ Social historian Janet Bennion argues that after the Manifesto, Mormons in the colonies paid little heed to the changes in Church policy.¹⁰ In Bennion's estimation, defiance to the Manifesto was demonstrated by an increased zealotry to "bear as many children as possible" in addition to all of the other responsibilities of a frontier woman.¹¹ Her view is that women in the colonies were victims of an oppressive patriarchy, but this thesis has received little academic scrutiny. Few Mormon women in the colonies at that time would have perceived their position as worse than their male counterparts. Instead, they carefully positioned themselves to new stations in the public sphere as they reassessed the needs and requirements of the new social system outside of their native country.

Without responding directly to Bennion, George Ryskamp's study of transnational immigrant identity demonstrated that women in the colonies avoided political and bureaucratic situations in the event that "Mexican officials should decide to prosecute polygamists."¹² In Mexico, Mormon men behaved according

9. Annie Richardson Johnson, *Heartbeats of Colonia Díaz* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1972).

10. Janet Bennion, *Desert Patriarchy: Mormon and Mennonite Communities in the Chihuahu Valley* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004).

11. Bennion, *Desert Patriarchy*, 48–49.

12. George Ryskamp, "Mormon Colonists in the Mexican Civil Registration: A Case Study in Transnational Immigrant Identity," in *Just South of Zion: The Mormons in Mexico*

to the customs of the region, thereby shedding the slightly more egalitarian customs of the United States. As Mexican women were already excluded by civil law from voting and direct political involvement, the patriarchal oppression discussed by Bennion cannot be considered a feature exclusive of the Mormon colonies but rather a result of conformance to the procedures entrenched in the Mexican identity sought by the colonists, men and women alike.

While the historiographical literature on women's life in the Mexican colonies is limited, the subject of Mormon women in Utah is a more diverse and vigorous field of study. Both groups provided important comparisons and contrasts in the aftermath of the Manifesto. Prominent Mormon women's historian Carol Cornwall Madsen argued that Utah women continued to assert themselves in the public sphere after the Manifesto. Both before and after the Manifesto, the Relief Society represented "a vehicle by which their voices could be heard, their capabilities utilized, their contributions valued."¹³ In other words, their political involvement did not disappear, but was transformed into increased religious involvement. Whereas Madsen focused on the efforts of women in religious life, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher emphasized the historical agency of Mormon women outside of the Relief Society.¹⁴ Instead, she argued that even after 1890 "in the more or less controlled environment of Mormon Utah, women were decades ahead of their sisters in the American East in terms of economic and professional opportunity."¹⁵ In contrast to Madsen's glowing evaluation of women's spunk and religiosity, Beecher emphasized that Utah women were products of their era, not necessarily the modern twenty-first-century feminists that many imagine them to be. Beecher noted, "What is overlooked is that those acts of spunky initiative were most probably taken on unwillingly," a result of the economic difficulties associated with depolygamization and the rural nature of Utah.¹⁶ Though conflicting in certain minutia, both confirm that women did not simply disappear from the public sphere after the Manifesto; they instead altered their position according to necessity's dictates.

and its Borderlands, ed. Jason H. Dormady and Jared M. Tamez (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015), 45.

13. Madsen, "Struggle for Definition," 43.

14. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, "Women's Work on the Mormon Frontier," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 49 no. 3 (Summer 1981): 276–290.

15. Beecher, "Women's Work," 277.

16. Beecher, "Women's Work," 278.

As the unequal nature of the historiography of Utah and Mexico demonstrates, there are significant gaps in scholarly understanding about Mormon women's experiences after the Manifesto. One non-LDS scholar noted, "Neither women's historians nor American religious historians have seemed interested in including Mormon women in their narratives," an omission that is guilty of "implicitly suggesting that they should not be considered as serious historical actors."¹⁷ However, an examination of evidence validates the vitality of Mormon women in the public sphere throughout the core of population and in the periphery between 1890 and 1910. As Mormon women navigated the effects of the Manifesto on their respective communities, they generally worked together to protect the privileges of the franchise, vocational opportunities, and unity as a bloc attained by women during the height of polygamy.

Diaspora and Declaration

Though Mormon women enjoyed certain privileges as consequences of polygamy, the difficulties were unmistakable. As the federal prosecution of polygamists escalated in the final years before the Manifesto, life became unbearable and even dangerous for Latter-day Saint women. Because physicians were required to report polygamous situations to federal marshals, one plural wife described having to bear children in secret without the help of a midwife. "Never a doctor or a nurse did I have for my ten children," she recalled. Underscoring the difficulty of her situation living in Utah, "It was a miracle that I lived and that the children lived . . . I couldn't live like a normal human being. I had to hide in the granary out there all day long and when my baby cried I had to feed it and try to cover its head."¹⁸ Such experiences became common throughout the polygamous populations of the Utah territory. Despite all political instruments employed to stop the punitive measures, federal marshals could not be held at bay, and they continued to harass Mormon families throughout the western United States.

Despite fears of imprisonment and even death, many—though not all—Mormon women continued to willingly support the practice of polygamy. Eunice Harris illustrated that predicament: "My husband and I both believed

17. Catharine A. Brekus, "Mormon Women and the Problem of Historical Agency," *Journal of American History* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 58–57.

18. Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* (New York: Holt & Co., 1954), 390.

this principle and both desired to practice. . . . We both felt within our very souls that the time had come when it was our duty to obey that principle not mattering what results might follow.”¹⁹ In the spirit of civil disobedience, Eunice claimed that she was the instigator of her husband’s first plural marriage. Nearly five decades after the fact, she insisted that it was not only her idea, but it was based on her desire to live a commandment of the LDS Church, saying, “I want to bear testimony to my children, my grandchildren, . . . that I know to the very depths of my being that this order of marriage [a euphemism for polygamy] is true and that it was revealed from God, and I thank my Heavenly Father for this testimony.”²⁰ In light of this serene assurance of moral correctness, women like Eunice continued to defiantly support the principle of polygamy, regardless of federal law.

Meanwhile, Mexico continued to be seen as a viable alternative for polygamous wives who were tired of living in fear in the United States. In Utah, Eunice and Dennis Harris were constantly kept apart by federal marshals who were scouring the small towns looking for husbands in hiding. Eunice also lived in constant fear that she would be arrested and her three young children left to fend for themselves.²¹ Aware of the consequences, she wrote that there were only two courses they could take: “One was to go to Mexico where all of the family could go, or go to Canada where a man could take only one wife.” Emphasizing that it was ultimately the wives’ choice, Eunice explained that they “chose Mexico where we could all go and live in peace, the principle which we had entered at so great a sacrifice together.”²² While other accounts do not emphasize so strongly the opinion of other women regarding Mexico, the case of Eunice and the second wife, Annie, suggest that at least some Mormon women preferred foreign colonization to separation from their husbands. When relatives tried to dissuade Eunice, “I told them that the inconvenience and privations of a new country, no matter how hard they were, would not be half the hardships to me that life without the companionship of my husband would be.”²³

19. Eunice Stewart Harris, “*Autobiographical Sketch*” of Eunice Stewart Harris (wife of Dennison Emer Harris), 1932. L Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo UT. 21.

20. Harris, “*Autobiographical Sketch*,” 22.

21. Harris, “*Autobiographical Sketch*,” 23.

22. Harris, “*Autobiographical Sketch*,” 26.

23. Harris, “*Autobiographical Sketch*,” 27.

Women in Utah

Notwithstanding the determination of their pioneering sisters, most Mormon women in Utah stayed put after the Manifesto. However, they found themselves in a strange moment of flux with regards to the Church's doctrinal expectations and the social expectations that they had set up for themselves. Whereas the ideal Mormon woman prior to the Manifesto was expected to be a bold advocate for her sex (through women's organizations and suffrage activism), the post-Manifesto woman in Utah was taught to be more like her contemporary Protestant counterparts.²⁴ Church leaders—men and women alike—vigorously reasserted the importance of female docility, meekness, and acquiescence to her husband's authority in the home.²⁵ Church magazines encouraged young Mormon women “to focus their ambitions on finding and marrying a suitable Mormon mate, having children, and setting up housekeeping,” unlike their mothers who “directly engaged in political movements such as suffrage and had the approval of Church leaders to pursue professions such as medical training, telegraphy, and publishing.”²⁶ Within the boundaries of acceptable behavior, Mormon women resisted changes to their unique advantages. After so long a battle for suffrage and self-determination, Mormon women would have struggled to reverse the tradition of female activism.

Where Mormon women had previously asserted their collective voice to champion their own causes, following the Manifesto they instead channeled that energy into protecting male virtue. In theory, plural marriage made it possible for every woman to have a husband and gave a man several choices in satiating his appetites. In this way, “polygamy took care of various potential social problems and forestalled prostitution.”²⁷ Without the safeguard that polygamy offered against the temptations of vice, women appointed themselves to fulfill that obligation in the home before seeking outside fulfillment. At Brigham

24. Amy Hoyt and Sara M. Patterson, “Mormon Masculinity: Changing Gender Expectations in the Era of Transition from Polygamy to Monogamy, 1890–1920,” *Gender & History* 23, no. 1 (April 2011): 72–91.

25. Natalie Kaye Rose, “Courtship, Marriage, and Romantic Monogamy: Young Mormon Women's Diaries at the Turn of the Twentieth Century.” *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 1 (January 2016):166–198.

26. Kaye, “Courtship, Marriage, and Romantic Monogamy,” 180.

27. Christa Marie Sophie Ranglack Nelson, “Mormon Polygamy in Mexico,” (Master's Thesis, University of Utah, 1983), 10.

Young Academy's commencement exercise in May 1891, Julia Farnsworth admonished the young graduates (about half of whom were women), to watch the men of the Church. She exclaimed, "In school as at home in religious, social, and civil society, girls hold an equal position with their brothers in maintaining order and discipline." She defined those parameters as, "to a greater degree, the character, the status of good breeding, intellectual culture and refined dignity, the moral purity and high standard of society" all of which "depends more largely on us, than our stronger brothers."²⁸ This focus on moral rather than civic virtue suggests that Mormon women were concerned about the spiritual welfare of their brethren given the fact that the number of federal marshals continued to dissipate after the Manifesto. Physical security guaranteed, women became the self-appointed protectors of social morality.

While most Mormon women did defend morality and used their voices for smaller causes, a small but powerful group of women continued to advocate for women's causes on a larger stage. As a bloc, women took advantage of the changes to expand their own political power. Utah women had been disenfranchised in 1887 for their continued support of polygamy, so their power at the ballot box was eradicated until 1896. Therefore, women had to resort to other methods of exercising their political will. The Relief Society continued to sponsor "indignation meetings" which worried many proponents of Utah statehood. Abraham H. Cannon recorded the minutes of a fascinating meeting during which the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles discussed the women's political activities at length. Upon discovering that a rogue ecclesiastical leader in Logan, Angus M. Cannon (Abraham H. Cannon's uncle), had barred politically active women from holding any calling in the Church, the apostles each voiced their own opinion on the matter. Some of them claimed that women should not be involved in politics anyway; others said that the sisters could not stop now. President Woodruff made the final decision. Though he "regretted the course the sisters had taken," he decided that it would better to not stop them. It was "therefore decided to give freedom to the men and women of the Church to finish this campaign [for statehood] as they think best, and yet the general counsel is that the leading men take no very active part in the political arena."²⁹ Given the consternation that the women caused the leading body of

28. Julia A. Farnsworth, "Woman as Wife, Mother, and Friend," *The Woman's Exponent* (Salt Lake City), June 15, 1891.

29. Abraham H. Cannon, July 30, 1895 in *Candid Insights*, 704.

the Church, it is clear that the women's political efforts were successful in calling attention to their cause.

In 1896, when statehood was finally approved and women once again enfranchised, they used their political clout at the ballot box to promote each other. The aforementioned Angus M. Cannon exemplified the women's power to endorse their own sex. Cannon's wife, Martha Hughes Cannon, was able to not only open her own medical practice after the Manifesto, but also became politically involved. Appearing before a congressional committee in Washington, D.C., in 1893, she advocated for women's suffrage in Utah by citing examples of their political achievements prior to 1887. For this, she was "considered one of the brightest exponents of women's causes in the United States."³⁰ In 1896, she was elected to the Utah State Senate as a Democrat, defeating her own husband, who ran as a Republican. Martha became the first woman ever elected to a state senate. Her incredible victory was made possible by overwhelming support from other women who promoted their own sex. That same year, moreover, the powerful female bloc elected Sarah A. Anderson of Ogden and Eurithe LeBarthe of Salt Lake City to the state House of Representatives in addition to "other women who won races for county treasurer, auditor, and other offices."³¹ While women did not suddenly have parity with the number of men in elective office, Martha Cannon's achievement continues to inspire not just Mormon women, but Utahns of many persuasions.³² Her ascension to high elected office is just one evidence that once permanent suffrage was enshrined in the state constitution, Mormon women in Utah not only sought but won representation. With the power of their elected positions, women upheld each other's interests in a political world dominated by men.³³

30. Constance L. Lieber, "'The Goose Hangs High': Excerpts from the Letters of Martha Hughes Cannon," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1980), 49.

31. Doris Weatherford, *Women's Almanac* (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 296.

32. Taylor Stevens, "Senate approves replacing Utah's D.C. statue of TV inventor Philo T. Farnsworth with Martha Hughes Cannon," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 January 2018. Accessed 14 March 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2018/01/29/bill-to-replace-utah-statue-of-tv-inventor-philo-farnsworth-with-martha-hughes-cannon-passes-senate/>.

33. Colorado had elected two women to the state house of representatives in 1894, but they were quickly voted back out of office. The next time a state outside of Utah elected a woman to the legislature was in 1913.

Women in Mexico

This mutual support was also necessary among the Latter-day Saint women who eventually went to Mexico to practice polygamy. These women descended from a long line of pioneers accustomed to picking up and moving on when the necessity demanded or the opportunity presented itself. Janet Bennion, one of the few scholars to discuss women in the Mexican colonies, has asserted that those who ended up in the colonies were not only unprogressive, but they also blindly followed the Mormon patriarchy.³⁴ Though they were enthusiastic about their religion, the colonizing women were not ignorant. Indeed, each woman was an individual, complete with a distinct background, motivations, and talents that were useful in her new home country. As one example, Eunice Harris was a teacher and graduate from Brigham Young Academy.³⁵ Her husband's plural wife, Annie Wride, was also college educated. Catharine Cottam Romney, another colonist, was taught at home, but was an active proponent of education in addition to traditional homemaking skills.³⁶ While the population of women in the colonies was probably no higher than 2,000, the need to survive fomented unity among these women. In the foreign conditions of their new country, Mormon women employed their unique talents and education to work towards a preservation of their robust roles in both public and private life.

Unlike most of their counterparts in Utah, women in Mexico continued to participate in polygamy for more than a decade after the Manifesto. In his study of the vital records of the Mormon colonizers, George Ryskamp estimated that "at least 37 percent of the women mentioned as mothers practiced polygamy. . . [This] statistic. . . is a higher rate than reported in any area in Utah at practically any time."³⁷ Many Latter-day Saints outside of Utah disregarded the Manifesto because they believed it only applied in the United States. This attitude is consistent with the pattern of new and continuing plural marriage documented by many of the colonists themselves. Colonist Orson Pratt Brown was asked to "not introduce Mormon girls to outsiders" because leaders feared the women would "not be inclined toward polygamy."³⁸ Though the motivations for each

34. Bennion, *Desert Patriarchy*, 7.

35. Harris, "Autobiographical Sketch," 14.

36. Catharine Cottam Romney, *Letters of Catharine Romney*, ed. Jennifer Moulton Hansen (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

37. Ryskamp, "Mexican Civil Registration," 45.

38. Orson Pratt Brown, interview by Silvestre Gustavo Brown, 1932, folder 1, page 35, "Bishop Transcript" James O. Klein Brown Collection, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

woman was different, the continuation of the practice sustained the tradition that had given women so many advantages: suffrage, educational opportunities, professional development, and kinship with other women. The perpetuation of polygamy in Mexico even after the Manifesto was one way Mormon women held on to the gains of the past without inviting the arrival of an alien future.

Notwithstanding the secretive nature of polygamy in Mexico, most Mormon women were not opposed to the practice. This did not mean, however, that women who defended the principle in theory were necessarily thrilled to support it in practice. The case of Orson Brown's wife Mattie illustrates the difficulty for the first wife to accept another wife into the household. In early 1896, Orson was attempting to court Jane Galbraith, but Mattie was not pleased. When Jane exclaimed her love for Orson, he went home and told his wife what she said, to which Mattie replied, "Yes, that damn thief wants to steal my husband, let her get a husband on her own!"³⁹ By that point, Orson had already been told that the Church would not solemnize any more plural marriages. However, Brown had been promised some years before that God would provide him with a second wife, so he continued undeterred. In Orson's autobiography, he recorded a miraculous vision given to Martha in which an angel commanded her to accept the practice.⁴⁰ However, this claim seems to be a later fabrication by Orson himself.

Orson married Jane on March 28, 1896. On that same day, Catherine Romney wrote that Mattie's sons, Roy and Clyde, were sick with diphtheria while Mattie herself "was taken very sick for about twelve days" and it "seemed doubtful which way she would turn [between life and death]."⁴¹ Fearful of what Mattie would say under the circumstances, Orson had been away for several weeks in order to consummate his clandestine marriage to Jane.⁴² With the undercurrent of such intense personal complexity among the women, the unique dynamics created by the continuation of polygamy in Mexico provides an important backdrop to examining the contributions of women within the public sphere.

The social sphere of the Mormon colonies in Mexico was distinctively marked by female involvement. Nearly ten years after the establishment of the first colonies, Mormon Apostle George Teasdale reported that members

39. OBP, "Bishop Transcript" folder 1, p. 35.

40. OBP, "Bishop Transcript" folder 1, pp. 36–37.

41. Catharine Cottam Romney to Thomas C. Romney, March 28, 1896, *Letters*, 229.

42. Orson Brown went on to marry 5 wives total, for which he was excommunicated by the LDS Church in 1917.

of the Church had developed a perfect Mormon community. He stated, "With scarcely an exception the people observe the Word of Wisdom, and not a single case of forced marriage has occurred. One great cause of this purity is that the people have refrained from round dancing, and have not used spirituous liquors."⁴³ Like in Utah, the women in Mexico were expected to be guardians of virtue. But, as Elder Teasdale briefly alluded to, the physical purity of men was still guarded by the existence of polygamy as a preventative measure against vice. Whether polygamy actually worked that way is inconsequential: Teasdale and other men believed that the continuation of polygamy kept the colonists morally pure. Unwilling to run the risk of appearing to be in favor of immorality, many women accepted the continuing role of polygamy in their community. The small population of women made it even more difficult to voice dissent precisely because of their geographic isolation and need for local unity.

However, the women colonists did informally discuss communal affairs in a casual atmosphere markedly different from official women's organizations in Utah. Eunice Harris recorded that plural wives got along very well in the colonies because cooperation was necessary to their overall success and survival. When Annie Wride gave birth to her first child, Eunice recounted that "we named him Barry Wride, in honor of his grandfather."⁴⁴ In the colonies, kinship became the most powerful tool for social progress and individual advancement. Eunice's patriarchal blessing received in Colonia Diaz stated, "Thou shalt become a woman of renown among thy sex for the wisdom and good counsel with which thou shalt be filled . . . Thou shalt become a queen in heaven and reign in connection with thy husband in celestial glory."⁴⁵ In such a small community of believers, the promise of wisdom translated to a significant assurance of social power, allowing Eunice to provide counsel and aid at crucial moments in the community. Since grief was so common an ailment in the colonies, women were relied upon to be the means whereby sorrow was overcome; women kept the community going after tragedy struck. When colonist David Stout lost his fourth child in one year, he wrote that "Sisters Jackson, Elizabeth Galbraith, Charletta Johnson, and Elmer Johnson's 2 wives made the clothes . . . Sisters Adams and Delmar Adams dressed the lovely little body. . . . Mary Jane

43. As quoted in Abraham H. Cannon, April 2, 1895, in *Candid Insights*, 624. The "Word of Wisdom" prohibited members from drinking tea, coffee, alcohol or consuming tobacco in any form.

44. Harris, "Autobiographical Sketch," 29. Underline is original.

45. Harris, "Autobiographical Sketch," 28.

accompanied the little body . . . and Sister Little spoke on the general features of salvation.”⁴⁶ More of Stout’s entries reflect the preeminent role of women in the colonies’ dark moments as they provided more than just comfort in times of affliction.

Within circles comprised exclusively of women, there also existed the need for the women to counsel and strengthen each other, an action historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has called “huddling together.”⁴⁷ As opposed to idle gossip, “huddling together” denotes strategic planning and discussion of events, people, and actions to be taken. Shortly after the marriage of Orson Brown to Jane Galbraith, Catharine Romney wrote to her son, “Orson is not back yet,” but suspecting that he had acquired a new wife, Catherine spent much of her day counseling the still-bedridden Mattie.⁴⁸ The resulting letter from Mattie to Jane contained the counsel Catharine shared with her dear friend. The brief letter said, “My husband has spoken to me about you joining our family and I assure you that you’ll be made perfectly welcome to be a member of our family.”⁴⁹ This exchange highlights the conciliatory roles women assumed.⁵⁰ Any hostilities between community members would weaken the project of unity so desired by colonists who had originally fled to Mexico to avoid conflict. The historical record probably does not contain details of the interpersonal drama that certainly occurred between women in the colonies, but the story of Catharine Romney and Jane Galbraith illustrates important elements.

For women in the colonies, the Relief Society and the local schools provided the most clear route to exercising social influence. In daily life, women were expected to constantly occupy themselves with useful employment, so formal organization outside of the home or business offered respite from menial tasks. Relief Society callings presented women the opportunity to become influential in the religious life of the various communities. In June 1903, the Relief Society president, Sister Eyring, and Eunice Harris, traveled together to visit all of the

46. David Fisk Stout, April 10 and 11, 1902 in “The Diaries of David Fisk Stout,” ed. Byron David Stout, Merle Viola Stout Budd, and Joseph David Stout (unpublished book: 1995), 259.

47. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “‘Huddling Together’: Rethinking the Position of Women in Early Mormonism” (lecture, Brigham Young University, March 14, 2017).

48. Catharine Cottam Romney to Thomas C. Romney, April 17, 1896, *Letters*, 231.

49. OPB “Bishop Transcript,” folder 1, p. 37.

50. Divorce was also an acceptable option in polygamous communities, including those of the Mexican colonies. Separation and divorce provided an easy way out for women no longer comfortable with the system. Mattie, however, did not choose that path.

colonies in the Juarez Stake. Sister Eyring addressed not only the sisters in these meetings but the men as well.⁵¹ Because women were excluded from Mexican political life, the Relief Society afforded women the chance to speak their minds about important issues of the day in front of a larger general audience. David Stout was impacted enough by one woman's talk to merit its inclusion in his log of daily activities. "Sister Louise Haws lectured on the Book of Mormon and Sis. Martha Cox spoke on 'Sowing Wild Oats,' a powerful testimony to the efficacy of keeping the Word of Wisdom and personal purity."⁵² With the power to speak authoritatively in front of men, women chose to represent topics of interest to both sexes, just as their female forebears had done prior to the Manifesto.

In a secular sense, the schools became the other outlet for broad social authority. Women directed school affairs, particularly the Juarez Academy, in order to render a service to the community. Women constituted about half of the teaching force of the schools, and soon girls were graduating from the Academy at a faster rate than boys. Eunice and Annie Harris both taught at the school while their husband Dennis was the principal. In addition to teaching, women were in charge of student activities. Eunice recalled, "I was very busy those days. The activities of the Academy were very interesting and I attended as many of them as possible. We had a lot of social functions in those days."⁵³ Adding that this increased her responsibilities in the Relief Society and household duties, she constantly planned how to best accomplish what was expected of her as a Mormon woman in Mexico.

Though established for religious purposes, the survival of the colonies depended upon women's efforts to keep them economically viable. Unlike women in Utah, however, the colonist women usually had the support of a nearby husband. Three of David Stout's wives, Henrietta, Julia, and Sarah Lucretia (Sadie), lived in the same house while Mary Jane, another wife, lived with and cared for a blind young woman named Cecilia Acord.⁵⁴ The support system created by these spouses and friends was especially important considering the circumstances under which they arrived to Mexico. Far away from established Mexican towns, the railroad, and supply stations, life was bleak for the first settlers. Eunice Harris commented that, "After our long separation I was so happy to be reunited with my husband I did not notice that our floors

51. Harris, "Autobiographical Sketch," 42–43.

52. Stout, February 9, 1902 in *Diaries*, 255.

53. Harris, "Autobiographical Sketch," 42.

54. Stout, February 22, 1902 in *Diaries*, 256.

were bare, that our furnishings were so meager, or that our woodwork was without paint. There was a dearth of these conveniences in most of the homes in Colonia Díaz.”⁵⁵ If it was painful enough for her to put it in her autobiography forty years later, the situation must have indeed been serious. While the men battled drought and floods in attempts to grow a profitable crop, women were expected to build a paradise out of nothing.

Nevertheless, the economic hardships of the colonists worked to the advantage of academically-inclined women, who helped each other to pursue vocations inaccessible to many monogamous women. Though nearly all wives in the colonies had many children to look after, sister wives aided each other by providing child care while one wife would leave the home and pursue a profession. Plural wives often traded time between being active in the public sphere and being housekeepers. Orson Brown’s second wife, Jane Galbraith, was able to attend medical school in the United States while Mattie and the third wife, Bessie, took care of Jane’s children.⁵⁶ A similar phenomenon was at work in the Harris family as well. At the beginning of the school year of 1890, Dennis Harris opened the first school in Colonia Díaz. Annie became a teacher and assistant principal while Eunice kept the home. The following year, the women traded places: “At the beginning of the school year I again became assistant teacher. Annie kept the home.”⁵⁷ The cooperation between women allowed for not only greater opportunity for education but also for the prospect of professional advancement. For wives who ultimately decided to leave polygamous situations in later years, they had valuable experience that differentiated them from other female applicants who did not have the luxury of supportive sister wives.

Though women were privileged to have professional opportunity in the colonies, Mexican civil law and the conservative nature of the small towns did not encourage political engagement, so unlike women in Utah they participated little in affairs of state importance. The president of the Juarez Stake, Anthony W. Ivins, was actually pleased that so little political discourse occurred between colonists and the Mexican government. Ivins reported to the general LDS Church membership that, “the few Saints who are there (they now number thirty-seven hundred souls) have accomplished a great work. . . . We keep entirely out of politics; we mind our own business, and are left in peace—thank

55. Harris, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 29. And obviously, she did notice all of that or it wouldn’t be in here.

56. OPB, “Historical Transcripts,” folder 2, p. 41.

57. Harris, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 31, 34.

heaven for that!”⁵⁸ As a general rule, women tried to stay out of sight when it came to Mexican politics. Upon arriving, many of the polygamous wives were afraid of being discovered by the local authorities, for fear that persecution would begin again: “We women remained under cover while they were investigating our condition.”⁵⁹ Despite the dearth of female political activity outside of the colonies, women still found ways to be civically engaged and continue to defend the civic privileges gained before the Manifesto.

Mormon women took advantage of the unique political situation of the colonies in order to be participants in society. Unlike their sisters in Utah prior to statehood, the colonist women retained their right to participate in community decisions. As already mentioned, women took special interest in the school system and found a political voice by advocating for education. In the spring of 1895, Henry Eyring began campaigning for an income tax to pay for the school. After Eunice voted in favor of the successful measure, she reflected, “We did not have much money in Mexico, but we did have a progressive people and good schools; those are the most essential things in a community that is swarming with growing children.”⁶⁰ In the interest of her children and her profession, Eunice felt free to use the democratic system established in the colonies to represent her interests.

Conclusion

In 1904, LDS Church president Joseph F. Smith issued what is now known as the Second Manifesto as an addendum to Wilford Woodruff’s 1890 version. The Second Manifesto absolutely prohibited any new plural marriage—without regard to international borders. Any Church member who attempted to ignore the new doctrine would “be deemed in transgression against the Church and [would] be liable to be dealt with according to the rules and regulations thereof and excommunicated therefrom.”⁶¹ In Utah, the Second Manifesto did not usher in its own set of consequences, but in Mexico, the effects were visible.

58. Anthony W. Ivins, “Report on the Juarez Stake,” *General Conference Report of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1904):53–56.

59. Harris, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 33.

60. Harris, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 37.

61. Joseph F. Smith, “Official Declaration,” *Deseret Evening News*, April 6, 1904, Utah Digital Newspapers <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/details?id=2490677>.

Ryskamp summarily stated, “Recognizing the challenge for the identity of the Mexican colonists, President Smith went immediately to Mexico to explain the change.”⁶² For women, the Second Manifesto presented a radical departure from the lives they had been leading, along with a half century of their religious history.

Eunice Harris’ family decided to split up in light of the Second Manifesto; Annie was sent to Provo while Eunice and Dennis attempted to begin again in Canada. The toll this separation had on Eunice was nearly debilitating. Reflecting thirty years later, she wrote,

In Mexico some of my dearest and most treasured friendships were formed—friendships which to me are sacred, and which I hope will lapse over into the future life and be eternal. Such true, noble women as Margaret Cannon, Dora and Victoria Pratt, Maggie and Gladys Bentley, Elizabeth Ivins, Hannah, Catherine, and Annie Romney, Mary B. Eyring, Olive and Rhoda Stowell, Theresa Call, Elizabeth Walser, and many other were among my close friends. They are certainly among the finest and truest of earth’s noble women.⁶³

The treasured friendships established in the Mexican colonies are a testament to the vitality of the feminine bonds that strengthened and fortified the enterprising sisters who had embarked to preserve their families and their social stations. The few hundred families who remained in Mexico did so on borrowed time. In 1912, the events of the Mexican Revolution drove them out and back to the United States. Given that few of the colonists returned to Mexico, the history of the Mormon women on both sides of the border once again synced after the Exodus.

Following the Manifesto, the core population of Utah and the periphery of the Mexican colonies, Mormon women acted in conjunction to protect the gains of their polygamist past while moving into an unfamiliar future. The comparison of the two reveals the broad trends of two united sisterhoods. Although they went about achieving their purposes in different ways, women in both locations defended their role in late-nineteenth-century Mormon culture. Suffrage was protected in Utah by women who raised their own sex to elected office. Votes in Mexico were freely cast in local community decisions. Professional opportunities were supported by sister wives in Mexico. As a bloc,

62. Ryskamp, “Mexican Civil Registration,” 50.

63. Harris, “Autobiographical Sketch,” 47.

Mormon women worked together to defend their collective interests and their collective voice.

Despite the two momentous decades in Mexico, the women who established and maintained the colonies have not yet received the accolades due to them. Academic study of their lives and contributions to both public and private spheres is needed in order to more fully understand the influence of those women beyond the immediate impact of their lives and work. However, their examples of unity and courage in the face of an unfamiliar future remains a heritage that cannot easily be ignored. As they worked together to protect each other, they built a legacy upon which future research will undoubtedly continue to build.

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