

THE FIRST MORMON MISSIONARY WOMEN IN THE PACIFIC,

1850 - 1852

By

Maria S. Ellsworth

Louisa Barnes Pratt and her sister, Caroline Barnes Crosby stood on the deck of the brig Jane A. Hersey with other missionaries from Utah gazing at the island Tubuai in the Society Islands. It was the 19th of October, 1850. Both women having suffered with sea sickness for the entire voyage now looked longingly at the lush green island, thinking of fresh fruit. However, because of adverse winds, they could not land for more than a day giving them time to speak again of the unusual events that had brought them and their families half way around the world to this island mission.

How and when did it all begin? Was it when Caroline, a Canadian married Jonathan Crosby, a Mormon, and was herself converted? Or did it begin later when the couple, enroute to live at Kirtland, stopped near Lake Erie to visit Louisa and family and introduced them to their new religion? It was the Crosbys who converted the Pratts! Still later while both families were in Nauvoo, Addison, Louisa's husband, a former seaman having spent six months in Hawaii, asked the Prophet Joseph Smith about the islanders. That question from Pratt prompted the first mission call to Addison and three companions in 1843. Now his family with others had come to sustain the mission he began seven years earlier.

Here on Tubuai, the first converts among the natives of the Pacific were made and a branch of the church organized by Pratt. Later, Pratt and Benjamin F. Grouard brought hundreds of natives on other islands into the church. In 1846, Pratt, worried with no word from his family returned to America via California and found his family in Salt Lake Valley after a five years, four months separation. Elder Pratt was called at once to return to the Islands. Another separation was more than Louisa could endure and she used her influence with Brigham Young to have herself and her sister and husband called to go with them. Several others were called to the island mission also. But because there was a special urgency to get missionaries back to the islands, Pratt and James Brown were sent ahead. Louisa and others followed the next spring. When they arrived at Tubuai their joy at completing a successful voyage was greatly dampened by learning that Pratt and Brown were on Tahiti, restricted by the French from preaching until certain questions were answered.

It had been seven years since Louisa and Caroline had seen Elder Grouard. Much had happened to each. Later there would be time to spend in days of talking. Now Grouard came aboard the brig to take them ashore, giving each a Tahitian name as he introduced them to the saints gathered on the beach. First came Louisa and her daughters Ellen, Frances, Lois and Ann Louise, ages 19 to 12. Then Caroline and Jonathan and their fifteen year old son, Alma. Then followed three couples, the Tompkins, Busbys and McMurt^{ys}trays, special friends of the Pratts with interest in

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the islands. And there were three single elders, Sidney Hanks, Simeon Dunn and Julian Moses.

In writing of their arrival, Caroline said,

Our hearts were all revived and comforted by a welcome reception from the natives who met us to shake hands and say your honor meaning peace be with you, until our hands and arms were actually tired. ... their curiosity was as much excited to see us as ours would have been to have seen a caravan of animals.¹

Louisa in describing the island was pleased with its picturesque appearance.

The beach being skirted with ito and burau trees, also with bananas and coconuts and a variety of shrubbery of the most livid green. ... The buildings though far from elegant, have an appearance of romance. Little white cottages in the woods, shining through the great trees, away from the bustle of the busy world, far over the mighty ocean. The buildings are low, but very long, plastered inside and out with lime made from the coral rocks; there cannot be a purer white.²

A feast was prepared, "Every dish entirely new, except fowl and fish. ... It was all delicious to my taste," wrote Louisa. "Evening drew near, the singers came in to sing. Long grass was laid for a floor, on which they were seated. The music was delightful! Their voices loud and clear, and no people can excel them in keeping time.³ Of their singing, Caroline said, "such perfect harmony I never heard before; especially from those who never learned rules of music."⁴

The following day, housing arrangements were made. Only then was it possible for each to share experience of the past years and for Grouard to learn of the changes that had taken place in the church during his long absence. Louisa had an interesting story to tell of her years caring for a family in the

absence of her husband. In Nauvoo, she had tailored a suit of clothes for Joseph and Hyrum Smith, taught school and while at Winter Quarters had suffered with scurvy. Finally on September 28, 1848, she was joined in Salt Lake Valley by her husband who had come from California with members of the Mormon Battalion. Then, how after only a few days Addison's second call to the mission had come, and how she arranged to be called with her family.

Much of Grouard's story was known from Elder Pratt's report. That he had been a seaman from an early age and had been married to a "Moll Flanders" type in Philadelphia, all before joining the church and receiving a mission call. Louisa remembered Grouard as handsome and merry while in Nauvoo. Now she described him as "having acquired the air of dignity and sobriety, simulating him with a Catholic monk."⁵ Grouard told the missionaries of the death of his first native wife who left an infant daughter and of his marriage to Nahina, also a Chain Island lass who had just given birth to a second son.

After learning personal stories the talk turned to the changes seven years had brought to the church. The practice of polygamy must have shocked Grouard and likely he smiled as he remembered his spirited letter to Brigham Young defending Grouard's action in taking a wife in the islands when he was not divorced from the one in America. The exodus had brought many other changes to the church in Utah.

While waiting Addison Pratt's release from Tahiti and his

arrival at Tubuai late in January, the new missionaries settled at the village of Mataura living almost like natives while trying to learn the language. Discouragement and ill health caused some couples to leave the mission. This left Louisa and daughters, the Crosbys and three single elders.

Of Pratt's arrival Louisa wrote,

the news flew like lightening over the village. The whole population assembled at the landing to greet and welcome their old friend and missionary.

He had been three years absent from them, and great was their declamations of joy on seeing his return to their Island. Notwithstanding their eagerness to grasp his hand, as they crowded to the water's edge they parted to make an opening for his wife and children to salute him first; showing more consideration than many persons would in more civilized life. It was a great day for us all. ... The natives hastened to make a feast, and a great one it was, for the vast amount of food that was cooked.⁶

One of the major problems of the mission was that of inter-island transportation of missionaries. This was solved with the construction by the missionaries of a ship called Ravaai (the Fisherman). But to get it launched required all hands on the island. Descriptions of the event are unique in literature.

Louisa wrote,

As soon as the accustomed ceremonies were over, the building of the Schooner, was commenced at Mahu, on the opposite side of the Island. ... Mr. Grouard was competent to construct the vessel from the keel to the topmast. Mr. Pratt could make the sails. [Jonathan, a carpenter, built the cabin.] The vessel was eighty tons burthen; with twelve double berths in the cabin. ... This was for the benefit of the mission. It was built of 'Tamara' wood, (Island Mahogany) timber of the most enduring kind.⁷ About the middle of May, 51, we were all invited over to witness the launching of the new schooner. ... The singers had long been practicing new tunes to sing on the grand occasion. The vessel had to be drawn a considerable distance by hand; it would require all the strength the island afforded. Those who were not

members of the church protested they would not lend their aid unless the king would grant them a dance. Permission was given, and great preparations were made and untiring skill to invent ornaments.

They were engaged in making native cloth from the bark of the paper mulberry trees for a long time before the launching. They made it fine, bleached to a snowy whiteness, then stamped with brilliant colors, all of home production. Shapes of birds, flowers, and fishes, were painted on their robes, letters and wheels all of the brightest tints, which contrasted strikingly with the white groundwork. Males and females were dressed in white. Their robes all the same fashion; made whole two yards in length, with a hole in the center to put the head through. These thrown carelessly over their white dresses gave them a tasteful appearance. Early Monday morning we were assembled to witness the parade ...

Band

There were two large companies each company occupying their own space of ground, in the dance. They had no music except their own vocal element so loud and clear, one might imagine himself listening to an Italian band. Their dancing was with form and order, great exactness in keeping time. To describe the different exercises, the unheard of gestures, and the scene throughout; would require the art of a sculptor and painter, and they would come short of a just delineation. The pile of food, far exceeded all the other wonders. To see provisions enough to last two hundred and fifty persons a whole week all cooked and laid in one huge pile, bound in bundles so thick with leaves not a particle of air could penetrate it no more than it can jars of fruit hermetically sealed. Pigs weighing more than a hundred weight, roasted whole, tied up in the usual style, thrown onto the heap, till it looked like a haystack of leaves.⁸

Louisa Continued,

when the first exercise of dancing was over they commenced pulling at the ropes fastened to the vessels sides, to move it towards the corral reef. ... They were obliged to take advantage of low tides, or stand in deep water. ... The king's son was Captain, stood in his place with the scarlet coat on I had make him, with a glittering sword in his hand. ... Four successive days it was moved a short distance each day. The labor continued till the food was all consumed. The work was suspended to cook more. We returned to our homes. ... About the middle of may the Schooner Ravaai [the Fisherman] was brought round to the village where we lived. Great rejoicing was manifest when she was seen under full sail. ... Preparations had been made for a voyage to Tahiti, and the chain islands. Mr. Grouard was appointed

Captain. Alexander first mate, Mr. P. and our eldest daughter took passage on board."

All of the elders except Hanks went on this voyage leaving Louisa and Caroline and their children rather lonely. However, they picked up their routine of teaching, writing and sewing.

"Every day found me at the old 'Fare Burora,' Prayer house," wrote Louisa, "teaching native children in their own language to read and write. My own and the half breeds in English. The remainder of the time I devoted to my journal and letter writing together with studying that language and translating. The whole time was entirely occupied." ¹⁰

While the Ravaai was on its first voyage, Louisa had time to read Mr. William's history of the English missionaries, Enterprises in the South Sea Islands. She gave those missionaries great credit for publishing the Bible and hymn books in Tahitian. She found that the grown people were all fond of reading their Bibles and considered them a prize possession.

Louisa Spent most of her time at what the natives called "The House of Prayer." She described it as the most comfortable place on the island:

Built as it is over the water, six large windows on each side, with slots instead of glass and sash thrown open or closed to suit high or low breezes. In that the heat is never oppressive. There I teach the children at an early hour in the morning. A long class of boys, a few little girls. ... Above all do I endeavor to teach them to hold themselves erect on their seats, a habit they are almost as unacquainted with as our domestic animals. They seem to writhe and twist themselves in all manner of positions. ... And yet they seem intelligent and shrewd, as other children, having a desire to learn."¹¹

Caroline, herself a teacher, wrote of Pratt beginning to

teach arithmetic to the natives after his return in July. "As for myself, I do not understand their language well enough yet to assist them much in that branch, but can teach the younger ones to read."¹²

Caroline and Louisa along with Ellen, Frances, and Lois tutored promising native children in reading, speaking English and in social skills. Louisa took the French governor's native daughter as a special charge. She found her beautiful and intelligent. Caroline had little Luna Williams the daughter of a ship's captain whom she described as running wild with no clothes on. Ellen and her sisters, Frances and Lois made great progress with the children in their care. Fifteen year old Lois taught the boy to be obedient and the girl to stop telling falsehoods. Queen Pitomia became impressed with the progress of the native children and asked Caroline to take her son Darius who was the same age as Alma into her home to teach. Caroline wrote that Darius was so in the habit of running free that they had to keep him indoors in order to make any progress in teaching him.

There were other tasks for the women. Louisa was often called on to bless the sick.

A promising young woman is sick whom I have visited. She needs treatment of some kind, all the medicine I have is a bundle of hops, and a little sage. I used herbs and encourage them to have faith in their efficacy. ... An elderly woman came to me in the night, wished me to go and see her sister who was very sick. I arose from my bed and went with her. ... I prayed and laid my hands on the sick woman. I told her she should be better in the morning and so it proved. ... Consecrated oil which we brought with us from home, has been blessed to their use often, all on account of the faith they have in it.¹³

With the help of Ellen who mastered the language, Louisa and Caroline conducted a weekly meeting with the sisters called a "prayer meeting." Caroline wrote their teaching had been mostly by example, however, "Our female meetings are becoming tolerable interesting. Sister Ellen Pratt has obtained a sufficiency of the language to be able to act as an interpreter for her mother and myself."¹⁴ Of the meetings, Louisa wrote that Ellen had become proficient in explaining scriptures from the Book of Mormon and the Bible. Louisa started by writing a talk and having Grouard translate it into Tahitian and then read it to the sisters. On the 12th of January she wrote,

Today was our weekly prayer meeting. I spoke to the sisters twice at considerable length. Every attempt I made I speak with more ease. ... At the close I asked them if they understood me well. They replied they did, and felt great joy, that I could speak their language so well.¹⁵

The next week she recorded,

I feel gratified at the progress I am making in acquiring the language. When I am put to the test, have no interpreter, I quite astonish my hearers. It is good to be compelled to speak for myself.¹⁶

And February 26th,

Today spoke at some length in our prayer meeting. It seemed that words were given me as I needed. I could feel that I was understood.¹⁷

In March Louisa while translating a chapter from the Tahitian Bible into English wrote, "I really admire the language; it is spoken with so much ease."¹⁸

In addition to teaching the island children, holding meetings with the sisters and helping with the sick, Louisa and Caroline set an example in keeping their homes and grounds clean.

Louisa wrote of teaching the Tahitian wife of Bro. Layton to keep house.

I introduced the subject in a plausible manner so as not to give offense. The young girl readily acquiesced seeming to believe it would be a nice affair to know how to keep house like "mau tamahine papa," (or foreign girls). It was astonishing the amount of rubbish we hoed out of one room. Then a fire in the dooryard completely revolutionized the premises. After this Frances, our second [daughter] proposed occupying the room, teaching the two little boys and further instructing the girl in rules pertaining to everyday life.¹⁹

Louisa also taught the sisters to clean the House of Prayer. "The seats scoured with sand, new business to the natives, when completed they seemed delighted with its appearance. I told them it must be cleaned every month, that the Lord would be the better pleased with us for a strict observance of cleanliness. The appointed time is Saturday preceding the sacrament of the Lord's supper."²⁰

The missionary families showed great interest in the daily activities of the natives. Because food was prepared for a week in advance, it gave free time for the natives to earn money by preparing arrowroot and lime juice for the Tahitian market.

Caroline described the process,

The natives have gone to dig Arrowroot leaving the old and the very young. ... The natives come home occasionally with a boat load of pear, which some of those who remained at home commence scraping and preparing as we do Irish potatoes for making starch, only on a larger scale - - they strain it into canoes, let it settle then spread it out to dry. After which it is used similar to flour. It is very saleable at Tahiti. The natives use but very little of it themselves being under the necessity of selling it to buy their clothes.²¹

Louisa was impressed with the vast amount of taro drying in

the sun. She enjoyed making "delicate dishes" by using eggs and milk of the young coconut. Of their preparations of cash crops, she wrote:

All the while this labor was going on, the "dancers" kept up their exercises. The members of the church did not mingle with those in their dancing though their labor was preformed in common. It is their custom to make amusement of nearly every kind of labor.²²

While preparing lime juice, she wrote,

They make a frolic, all get together and sing while gathering the limes. They must have a new song at every tree, all their own make, no matter whether it rhymes by rule or not, they can twist the tune to fit the metre.²³

The missionaries also made their own music and found ways to be entertained. Usually at the Crosby home they with friends gathered to sing and listen to their own band, as they called it. Jonathan with violin or flute, Ellen with her accordion and at times Alma with his violin. At holiday times their homes were decorated. The second Christmas, Louisa recorded,

In the center of the room a large pillar supports the roof. By the side of it I placed two small ito trees of the most livid green, extending almost to the roof. To these I attached the long yellow tea leaves of which the females make wreaths, on account of their bright color and pleasant flavor. I added to these the bright fresh flowers of the burau scattered about among the branches, forming a pleasing contrast of lively green and yellow. In the same manner over head and around the entire room I hung boughs, flowers and branches of the lime tree with the fruit on. For our most intimate friends we prepared a splendid dinner, to which they were invited, bringing the food to the mission house. I told them the object was to celebrate the birthday of our Savior. ... After dinner we held a prayer meeting. At evening illuminated the house with all the glass lamps in the village. The brilliant lights threw over all a mantle of romance, exceeding anything I had ever seen. Brother Crosby and Ellen made the instrumental music.²⁴

Caroline, in commenting on the day wrote, "We all dressed

ourselves in our Sunday clothes, and treated the day with that respect which we had been accustomed to in our childhood."²⁵

Other forms of recreation for the families were excursions around the island, searching the beaches for shells and specimens of coral or hikes into the mountains. Once sixteen members went to a nearby island and spent the night. Shelters were made to sleep in and fish caught to eat along with the tarrow and papoi they took with them. They found fruit and coconut and had a feast.

It is not surprising that the monotony of island life began to affect Louisa and especially Frances. They longed for the social life they were missing in the Salt Lake Valley. Louisa longed for stimulating company and complained when there was only the sound of the old women pounding tapa cloth. She called it, "dull, dull, dull." However, Caroline confided in her journal,

One would certainly imagine that persons so much accustomed to company as we are ... would be very lonely in so retired a corner of the earth, but this island is so pleasantly situated, such a calmness and serenity pervading it, together with the great variety of fruit with which it is loaded, that a calm, contemplative mind could not in my opinion be unhappy.²⁶

Several factors combined to bring an end to the mission. not only were Louisa and her daughter Frances unhappy, but the missionaries had difficulty keeping their promise to the French government that the mission would be self-supporting and not rely on the natives for help. (The couples that left early to return to Utah failed to enlist financial support for the mission.) The most difficult problem, however, was the action of the French

government in no longer prohibiting the "heathen" dances, and allowing the sale of liquor to the natives. It became obvious to the missionaries that they could not continue to be successful under the changed circumstances and they determined to return home with the hope of a future return.

Caroline was concerned for the personal safety of the families in this situation, writing, "Yesterday they had the greatest dance and pow wow that I ever heard but as they had no intoxicating drink among them we were not in the least afraid of their doing mischief."²⁷ Another time, she wrote, "Ellen returned from her fathers after we were all in bed, and her father and Br. G. accompanied her. Her father proposed that she and I should lodge together (Jonathan was in Tahiti) and that Br. G. should sleep in the middle of the room as a Tiai, or watch, on account of the drunkards who were carousing about."²⁸

Of the native's response to the new situation, she wrote,

Those who do not belong to the church say that it is not because they do not believe the gospel, and respect us, that they are not baptized, but that they have been so long kept under restraint by the English missionaries, and now the law of the French permits them to sing and dance as much as they please, and they wish to enjoy it a little longer, but in addition to that they also wish to have now and then a drunken frolic, as they have today.²⁹

Once the decision had been made to leave the mission, events moved swiftly. It was agreed that the schooner would have to be sold and from the proceeds the part owed the missionaries would be used to help pay to transport the families to the states. Jonathan went to Tahiti and built a house under contract to help with finances. Caroline determined to accomplish a number of

things in the time remaining. She would speak to the sisters in their own language, make a quilt as a gift for the queen and make new clothes for her family. Of her attempt at speaking Tahitian, she confided, "I felt it quite a cross. I however succeeded better than I had anticipated."³⁰ Louisa reported, "Today Sister Crosby spoke to the native sisters in their language for the first time. She has not devoted so much time to study as I have."³¹

On the 9th of March, Caroline cut the pieces for the quilt she planned to give to the queen. By working on it steadily she finished the top, made the lining and attached it to the quilting frames. With help from Louisa, Ellen and even Grouard, it was quilted and finished by the 20th. Caroline sent it to the queen "Pitomai vahine" by Darius. Louisa said the pattern was of the rising sun and that the queen would be delighted with it as it was really beautiful! Then to celebrate having finished the quilt both Caroline and Louisa went bathing in the ocean that night at low tide.

The native saints were troubled over the missionaries' plan to leave. Louisa wrote that the chief, Hatau, with thoughtful looks, said, "When you are gone, the children you have been teaching will go back to the state they were in when you came; and all your labor will be lost."³² At the weekly prayer meeting Louisa told the sisters, "the work of the Lord is great, and requires us to work fast; we must not stay too long in one place."³³ The missionary families found it hard to part with

special friends. Telii, who with husband had kept house for Pratt on his first mission and Haametua, his wife and children had become especially dear to them. Early in March Louisa wrote that Telii came to talk with her about going to California.

She cannot be reconciled to have us go and leave her. We told her we would do all in our power to provide a way for her to go. When I see the people look sad I feel grieved that means cannot be had to take them all with us. But many of the church members have relatives who would oppose their going.³⁴

On April first the women held their prayer meetings.

Caroline wrote,

I felt quite affected with the idea of its being the last of our assembling with them, ... After they had all ceased speaking and praying we (sister P, Ellen, and myself) went to each of them separately, laid our hands upon their heads and blessed them in the name of the Lord. The good spirit accompanied us, our meeting continued quite late.³⁵

Of the final meeting, Louisa wrote,

I said many things with a view to console them. It grieves me that means cannot be had to take them all with us. But many of the church members have relatives who would oppose their going. It grieves me to the heart to leave the children we have taught so long. ... We appointed Telii their guardian, and Hoatau, the good old chief to assist her in counsel. Oh! that I could take them with me to the church.³⁶

On Tuesday the 6th of April at about four in the afternoon the families sailed. Of their leave-taking Caroline recorded,

The natives almost universally called to say eaorano, and bring some little present. I knew not the day before whether we should have sufficient food brought to last us to Tahiti but when the day for our departure arrived, the food was brought in so bountifully that Br. G. said I had plenty to go [to] California with. ... I was truly affected with the kindness and attention of the brethren and sisters, and the regret seemed to experience at our leaving them. ... The evening was remarkably pleasant, we could distinctly hear them from the shore (after we got well underway) shouting ea orana outou, which is 'peace be with you.' I

have no doubt, but that the dear creatures³⁷ felt very lonely and will continue to feel so for sometime.

We can be sure that the saints on Tubuai missed the women missionaries and their families. As to the influence of Louisa and Caroline we can only surmise. We do know that though contact with missionaries was cut off for forty years, the Saints on Tubuai stayed much closer to church teachings than did the saints in other areas of the Society Islands. Today saints there take great pride in Tubuai having been the first organized branch of the church in the Pacific. We are told today that members when moving to other islands give strength to their new wards and stakes and carry with them the reputation of hard workers. We also know that there is a tradition on Tubuai of saints keeping their yards clean, going beyond their own property into the street and down to the ocean. Then there is the unusual practice on Tubuai of making and giving quilts to important visitors as parting gifts. A tradition that was begun by Caroline making a gift of a quilt to the queen. There may be other examples of the lasting influence of these two women who spent eighteen months living with and teaching the saints on Tubuai. Today their example is followed by the church in sending couples to live with the saints in remote areas of the world.

Today we have both written and oral record of the effect the mission had on the lives of the Pratt and Crosby families. The journals kept while on their missions (Louisa's was bound in tapa cloth), are full of their island experiences. Later writings in both journals and letters have Tahitian words and phrases

reflecting memories of the mission. Oral tradition comes from descendants of Lois Pratt Hunt, ^{the mother of eight children. —} Stories are told of her speaking Tahitian and singing songs as well as teaching some phrases to her children. Shells that she brought back from the islands were treasured by her children and grandchildren. The shells I inherited from great-grandmother are prized.

Among the Pratt family papers are letters with Tahitian expressions and one written entirely in Tahitian that was sent by Haametua to Louisa. Frances Pratt Dyer, while living apart from her family in California often closed her letters with, "I send much love to the 'Fetii atoa'."

In a letter Frances wrote in 1864 to her sister Ellen from San Francisco she spoke of the heat keeping her awake,

Every thing seems to bring so visibly to mind, as I sit here looking out, those warm nights in the Islands, when you and I used to get up and put on our native dresses and go and walk up and down the beach, how pleasant that was! it makes me feel cool to think of it. Don't you remember the night that old "Pahatilo" (was that his name?) followed us? Only think of his making you an offer! ³⁸

On leaving the islands Louisa wrote in her journal,

I bid farewell to the beautiful islands, never do I expect to greet them again. Could the desire of my heart be granted I would make a request; that the lovely island of Tahiti might someday in the unknown future belong to the poor Saints; who have suffered and endured great tribulations, patiently for the Gospel of Christ. ³⁹

Sources and Endnotes

This essay is based exclusively on the contemporary writings of Louisa Barnes Pratt, Caroline Barnes Crosby, and the Addison Pratt Family Papers (cited APFP).

Louisa Barnes (Mrs. Addison) Pratt (1802-1880), Journal, holograph in Church Historical Department Archives, is cited as follows with references to pages in the complete typescript. LBP Journal.

Caroline Barnes (Mrs. Jonathan) Crosby (1807-1884), Journal, holograph in Utah State Historical Society, is cited as follows with references to pages in the complete typescript. CBC Journal.

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