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# Life in Utah as an Apostate Plural Wife

TO AN OUTSIDER, LIFE IN UTAH DURING THE NINETEENTH century may seem to have consisted of homogeneous culture and little variations in human experience. Upon closer examination, it quickly becomes evident that even individuals existing within the predominant Mormon culture experienced life in diverse ways. This paper will provide an overview of the ways of life, values, and ideologies of polygamous wives in Utah, as well as the perspectives of individuals who were unhappy with the teachings and culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during the mid-nineteenth century. I will specifically draw upon the experiences of Ann Eliza Young. Before she apostatized from the church, she was a plural wife of Brigham Young. Ann Eliza Young published her experiences in the 1875 account entitled *Wife No. 19*, which doubles as both an autobiography and an exposé of Mormonism. She wrote an account of her life in Utah, both as a child and as an adult, after her apostasy and during her public campaign against polygamy. Her purpose in writing this account of her life was to convince the Eastern states and the government of the evils of polygamy. Her bias does not necessarily discount her experiences, and she is entitled to her views. While describing life in Utah during the nineteenth century, this paper will consider the emotional bias with which Ann Eliza likely remembered her experiences, as well as her motivation for writing them down in the first place.

Ann Eliza Webb was born in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1844 to two Latter-Day Saint converts. Her parents soon moved across the country to the western deserts of Utah, along with thousands of other Mormons from 1847 to 1853 (Alexander, 2003, p. 99). She documents her memories as a child—supplemented by her later historical and genealogical research—of the Mormon migration, the Mormon Reformation, the Utah War, the

hand-cart company crossings, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and the United Order, among other things. Before leaving Nauvoo, her father entered into polygamy. Ann Eliza references her parents' relationship, struggles with polygamy many times throughout her account, and compares her parents to other polygamist families. As a child in Utah, she spent time playing with the children of Brigham Young and fantasized about romance. Swearing to never become a plural wife, she married James Dee in 1863 at nineteen years old (Young, 1875, p. 387). She had two sons by him, although it was an unhappy, abusive marriage. At the advice of her family, as well as Brigham Young himself, they were divorced in 1865 (1875, p. 409).

Ann Eliza records that the years after her divorce from her first husband were her happiest in a long time (1875, p. 411). She spent the next four years living with her parents, helping her mother with the housework, and raising her children. She wrote, "I was royally happy,—happier than I ever was in my life before, circled about as I was by clinging baby arms, and held by tiny baby hands" (1875, p. 411). Oblivious to her own future, she swore she would never remarry and would instead devote her life to her children. In her account, Ann Eliza remembers the day the prophet proposed to her parents for her to become his plural wife. Outraged by the idea, she immediately refused. Brigham Young continued to pursue her, and Ann Eliza accused him of using his position of power to coerce her into an unwanted union. Coupled with pressure from her parents and fear of being damned, she relented. In 1869, Ann Eliza was married to the prophet as his plural wife at the Salt Lake City Endowment House (1875, p. 456). The marriage sparked a chain of events that led to Ann Eliza Young's later divorce from Brigham Young, the accompanying court case, and the development of her public career campaigning for women's rights.

## Social Institutions

As someone who was raised in Utah and entrenched in Mormon culture, Ann Eliza's life was shaped by the existing social institutions of the territory. The institution of marriage and its accompanying social norms had a profound effect on Ann Eliza's life. Nineteenth-century Utah had surprisingly lenient divorce laws, making it especially easy for both monogamous and plural wives to obtain a divorce (Alexander, 2003, p. 189). Ann Eliza had little trouble divorcing her first husband, James Dee (1875, p. 410). When it came to divorcing Brigham Young, the court battle was primarily over alimony and not the divorce itself, and the court ruled in her favor

(Young, 1875, p. 555). The availability of divorce was important to have for women in Utah primarily because of the practice of polygamy. Plural marriage strained even the most faithful LDS families, and it was necessary to provide a release from the practice for the wives if they desired it. They often did, as the divorce rate of polygamous marriage was three times as high as that of monogamous marriages (Alexander, 2003, p. 191).

The marriage institution in Utah was also characterized by many offers of marriage to women. Of marriage proposals, Ann Eliza wrote, "A moderately prepossessing woman in Utah is sure not to be long without them" (1875, p. 423). There was actually a shortage of single women available for marriage, largely due to the practice of polygamy and the relatively equal ratios of men to woman (Alexander, 2003, p. 188). As a result, men would often go on missions to places like England or Scandinavia and bring home wives they met there (Young, 1875, p. 493). These women were generally impoverished and were willing to enter into polygamy both for religious reasons and for security (Alexander, 2003, p. 189).

Utah Mormons during the mid-nineteenth century enjoyed a variety of entertainment activities. Ann Eliza mentions her love of dancing and singing hymns several times throughout her account (Young, 1875). The Mormon Tabernacle Choir performances were well attended, along with other musical performances (Alexander, 2003, p. 151). The Salt Lake Theatre was completed in 1862 (2003, p. 149), and when she was eighteen, Ann Eliza spent time acting there just as it opened. To be nearby, she lived at the Lion House with Brigham Young's family while at the theatre, at the prophet's invitation (Young, 1875, p. 377). The theatre was especially popular among the Mormon people, and Ann Eliza wrote, "Theatricals have always been largely patronized by the Saints, and rank with dancing as an amusement" (1875, p. 378). Though she had little training or experience, Ann Eliza wrote that she enjoyed her time at the theatre and as well as living at the Lion House in the company of the prophet's children, who were near her own age (1875, p. 382).

By the 1870s, there were many churches of many different denominations in Utah (1875, p. 603). The members of these Protestant and Catholic churches came from the East and often established schools in the territory. It was Ann Eliza's opinion that the education they provided was superior to the other schools in Utah (1875, p. 603). It is not surprising she harbored this belief because these religious organizations often founded their schools with the intention of 'saving' Utah children from Mormonism and converting them to their own religion (Alexander, 2003, p. 18-34). It is also likely that Ann Eliza was correct in asserting that the

Catholic and Protestant schools provided a superior education because the Utah schools during this time period were of a poorer quality than Eastern schools, staffed by poorly paid, young teachers (2003, p. 183).

## Plural Marriage

Plural marriage was undeniably the most impactful social institution existing in nineteenth century Utah. Its existence distinguished the people of Utah from nearly every other territory or state during the time period. Ann Eliza Young spent a great deal of time writing about the institution of polygamy and how it affected her life course and beliefs. The following paragraphs will explore her experience living within the system of polygamy both before, during, and after she married into it.

As previously mentioned, marriageable women were in high demand in Utah (Young, 1875, p. 423). Some Latter-day Saints of the time believed that the more wives they had, the larger their inheritance would be in the next life. Having plural wives was often a prerequisite for a man to hold a higher office in the church, and the minority that held many wives were considered elite members of the church and Utah society (Alexander, 2003, p. 189–190). Ann Eliza noted the occurrence of several unconventional pairings, such as the marriages of mothers and daughters (from a previous marriage) to the same man (1875, p. 320), or the wedding of individuals vastly different in age (1875, p. 323). She explained that young girls were advised to select older men to marry, as their position in the church as well as their finances were more secure. They would have a greater chance of both earthly contentment and eternal salvation if they did so (Young, 1875, p. 323). Ann Eliza reported that one man married a girl of eleven years old, and that there had been marriages of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls, although this was uncommon (1875, p. 323). There were also cases of men marrying women much older than themselves, whether out of charity, to increase their eternal reward, or to gain access to wealthy widows' funds (1875, p. 416).

Ann Eliza Young wrote her account of her life in Mormonism in retrospect and with the intention of showing the Gentile society the evils of polygamy. As a result, much of her writing focused on the negative ways the practice affected women's and families' lives. One of her main points was that rivalries, jealousies, and general feelings of contention were created between the plural wives, especially towards the newest additions to the family. Ann Eliza noted that she was kindly received by some of Brigham Young's wives, such as Emmeline Free and Zina Huntington, but

others refused to speak to her and treated her badly (1875, p. 460). Often, wives that previously acted as rivals would later join together in truce against a newcomer, as Ann Eliza noticed in her situation (1875, p. 324). She gave accounts of multiple families in which the rivalries between wives caused them to act in outrageous manners, sometimes feigning illness for attention or acting violently. Ann Eliza notes that the men suffered in polygamy as well, though to a lesser degree, as they attempted to keep the peace between warring wives (Young, 1875, pp. 413–15). Indeed, the psychological strain caused by sharing such intimate relationships between multiple people resulted in comparatively high rates of divorce in polygamous families (Alexander, 2003, p. 191).

Ann Eliza also gave accounts of polygamist families that existed in peace, though she devoted much less coverage to these circumstances. While she described her mother's suffering as a result of living in polygamy, there were few outright confrontations. Her parents maintained an atmosphere of civility through the equal treatment of wives and deference to the first wife, Ann's mother, when necessary (Young, 1875, p. 419). Because polygamists were often high-ranking members of the church, the wives' desire to emanate a sense of dignity and maintain social standing resulted in a relatively peaceful coexistence among members of the family (1875, p. 391). Ann Eliza characterized the outwardly peaceful living situation of the Young family as a result of that motivation. However, there were still awkward situations. When a polygamist with a multitude of wives, such as Brigham Young, was to select a wife to accompany him to a dance or other social event, it was inevitable to not offend one or more wives in the process (1875, p. 324). Favoritism was a perpetual issue amongst polygamist families and was the source of much contention and jealousy.

A core argument of Ann Eliza's account is that all women inwardly hated polygamy, even if they outwardly expressed support of the principle. Her mother admitted to harboring such feelings, and her mother later followed her daughter in leaving the church (1875, p. 336). Although many women may have disliked the practice, it is inaccurate to say that every one of them hated it because of the mass "indignation meetings" that were held across Utah in the 1870s (Alexander, 2003, p. 178). Many times Ann Eliza writes that her heart goes out to the women she left behind in Utah, for she largely feels pity rather than contempt towards them (1875, p. 600).

The existence of polygamy within the social structure of Utah also made life difficult for some Mormon women married monogamously. They faced

the perpetual fear that should their husband become displeased with them or succumb to societal and religious pressure, their husbands would take a second wife (1875, p. 396). Ann Eliza had this experience while she was married to her emotionally and physically abusive first husband. When they had disagreements, he would begin giving attention to other women, sometimes Ann Eliza's friends (1875, pp. 390–91). An additional challenge that polygamy brought upon Utah society is that ill-intentioned men could take advantage of the blurred lines between adultery and plural marriage. Flirting with women who were not your wife could be easily construed as intent to take a second wife, which was looked upon with approval. Of women in monogamous marriages in Utah, Ann Eliza wrote, "The sword above her head is suspended by a hair; it is a miracle if it does not fall at last," with the sword being, of course, plural marriage (1875, p. 397).

## Values

An analysis of the values held by an individual who not only left the religious culture in which she was born into, but who created a career out of actively opposing that religion, gives some insight into the values of subversives from Utah and beyond. Interestingly, many of Ann Eliza's values, as demonstrated by her writings, reflect the Mormon culture in which she was raised. For example, family relationships are of extreme importance to her. She writes many times, "My best comfort was to keep my mother. I could not live without her," (1875, p. 538). After her first divorce, she wrote of her children:

I had lost my girlish gaiety and vivacity, but I had gained the poise and assurance of womanhood, and was, I hoped, better fitted to be a good mother to my children. I dreamed for them, I planned for them, lived in them; and I am only regretful that anything ever divided my interest with them. (1875, p. 411)

This focus on family was characteristic of many Mormons at the time. Another characteristically Mormon value Ann Eliza held was her love of community and compassion for others. She wrote, "And why should I not love [Salt Lake City]? I had grown with it, and there is not a building in it that I have not watched as it arose, not an improvement that I have not rejoiced in," (1875, p. 600). In addition to the city itself, she felt a fondness for the friends she grew up with, despite their aversion to her chosen life path. Like many members of the LDS Church, Ann Eliza believed strongly in destiny and that God had a specific life path designed for her. She wrote:

Meanwhile, my destiny was working itself out in a way I knew not, turning my feet into unexplored paths; and I did not yet see where I was straying, nor what the near future was holding in store for me. (1875, p. 541)

While Ann Eliza held several values that reflected her Mormon upbringing, she certainly had values that conflicted with those of the existing culture and social order in Utah. It is likely that other apostates from the Mormon religion during the nineteenth century held similar values. First, Ann Eliza held an aversion to authority figures. In her writings, she is deeply critical of Brigham Young—which is to be expected given her history with him—but also more generally of Mormon men in high church positions such as apostles, bishops, and even ward teachers (1875, p. 582). While other members of the church viewed their prophet as God’s messenger on earth, Ann Eliza believed that Brigham Young overstepped his authority through manipulation and coercion, especially in financial matters. She believed their obedience was blind, and, as a result, they became limited in independent thought (1875, p. 518). The key values that she felt her native Utah culture lacked were open-mindedness and the ability to think for oneself.

The principal value Ann Eliza held that pushed her away from the church was her belief in women’s rights. Utah in the nineteenth century afforded women rights unavailable in other areas, such as suffrage in 1870 and a relatively high degree of participation in the labor force and political organizations (1875, p. 178–81). However, Ann Eliza focused more on the lack of women’s rights within a marriage and family context. She believed that because men had the option of marrying multiple women, women were less valued than they were in societies without plural marriage (1875, p. 589). She recounts that Brigham Young often made statements reducing the role of women to having children and he chastised them for feeling unfulfilled or neglected in their marriage relationships. This sentiment from many of the male leaders of the community was reflected in the way the men of the territory treated their wives, and this was the primary reason Ann Eliza turned from the church.

## Conclusion

Despite her later excommunication from the church, Ann Eliza’s account *Wife No. 19* accurately communicates some of the daily struggles and hardships women living in a polygamist society faced. Her complaints about Mormon culture in Utah during the nineteenth century reflect

views of those who chose to leave the church and why they might have done so. While her accusations are, at times, designedly sensational, her underlying motivation was to improve the lives of women she genuinely believed to be suffering. She claimed she did not begin her public campaign against Mormon polygamy for financial gain, but because she felt it was her duty to help those who were continuing to suffer the same trials she previously had (1875, p. 568). Ann Eliza wrote, “The voices of twenty thousand women speak in mine, begging for freedom both from social and religious tyranny” (1875, p. 601).

Today, the existence of polygamy in Utah history continues to act as a blight on the Church. People continue to lose their faith over their inability to reconcile the doctrinal allowance of plural marriage with their modern values, along with other controversial aspects of church history. Delving into the history of nearly any religious institution in the world will reveal similar controversial practices and events. It is important we come to understand and accept the darker aspects of our local history and our history as a human race in order to examine what problematic issues may exist in our current society. It is only by doing so that society will be able to continue becoming a better place.

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