



1-1-1972

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### Recommended Citation

Palmer, Spencer J. (1972) "Eliza R. Snow's "Sketch of My Life": Reminiscences of One of Joseph Smith's Plural Wives," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol12/iss1/13>

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ELIZA R. SNOW'S "SKETCH OF MY LIFE":  
REMINISCENCES OF ONE OF JOSEPH SMITH'S  
PLURAL WIVES

Spencer J. Palmer

The subject of plural marriage among the Mormons may seem like an exotic one to historians, but, when correctly understood, it is also a topic that can help one evaluate the peculiar nature of the Mormon faith as well as the deep sensitivity of many of its adherents. During the 1880s Hubert Howe Bancroft spent considerable time in Utah, gathering material for his important *History of Utah* and for the vital collection of Mormon documents which is now located in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley, California. One of the people he became acquainted with was Eliza R. Snow, who had once

been a plural wife of Joseph Smith. Before leaving Utah, Bancroft asked her to write an autobiographical sketch of her life to add to his collection. This she agreed to do and the narrative, entitled simply "Sketch of My Life," was finished in 1885.

While only a few passages in this document refer to the matter of Eliza R. Snow's marriage to Joseph Smith, there are several things about these passages that are interesting and of some importance to the historian. Even though this famous Mormon woman continued to use the name of Snow, possibly because during Joseph Smith's lifetime she was not publicly acknowledged as his wife, she signed this document "Eliza R. Snow Smith." Her defense of the principle of plural marriage is interesting in that it shows, for one thing, the need felt by many participants to defend themselves against the bitter and often vicious attacks of critics. But Eliza R. Snow defended the principle not only because it was criticized but also because she genuinely and wholeheartedly believed it. While her reflections here may seem somewhat pleading or sensitive in nature, it must be remembered that they came from the pen of one who had a flair for poetic writing and, at the same time, an unshakable faith in the truth of what she was writing about. Regardless of what one may say about polygamy in general, he cannot doubt the sincerity of Eliza R. Snow's commitment to it as an eternal principle.

In 1957 the Nicholas G. Morgan, Sr., Foundation published a book entitled *Eliza R. Snow, An Immortal: Selected Writings of Eliza R. Snow*. About half of this book is a reproduction of selected pages from the "Sketch" and from her 1846-49 pioneer diary. It is intriguing to note that in the excerpts from the "Sketch" the editors pointedly deleted Eliza Snow's references to plural marriage and her repeated affirmations of marriage to Joseph Smith (see page 12 and compare with the excerpts below).

Although Eliza R. Snow's marriage to Joseph Smith as a plural wife is certainly not unknown to Church history students, readers of "The Historians Corner" will be intrigued with the following excerpts from her "Sketch," for this document is generally unknown to members of the Church. We include here the major references to her marriage, as well as enough additional material to give it some perspective.



It is well known that Eliza R. Snow became one of the important women of pioneer Utah and that she was especially noted for her deeply sensitive religious poetry. The words to "Oh, My Father," a hymn which has become a Mormon tradition, are among her permanent contributions to Mormon culture. It is also probable that she authored the words to "Praise to the Man," a hymn of tribute to the martyred Joseph Smith.<sup>1</sup> If so, one can get new meaning from these words as he compares them with the reminiscences below and realizes that they were also a tribute to a fallen husband.

### Sketch of My Life<sup>2</sup>

I was born in Becket, Berkshire Co., Mass. Jan. 21, 1804. My parents were of English descent—their ancestors were among the earliest settlers of New England. My father, Oliver Snow, was a native of Massachusetts—my mother, Rosetta L. Pettibone, of Connecticut.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the Autumn of 1834<sup>3</sup> I heard of Joseph Smith as a Prophet to whom the Lord was speaking from the heavens; and that a sacred ~~history~~<sup>Record</sup> containing a history of the origin of the aborigines of America, was unearthed. A Prophet of God—the voice of God revealing to man as in former dispensations, was what my soul had longed for, but could it possibly be true—I considered it a hoax—too good to be true.

In the winter of 1830 and 31, Joseph Smith called at my father's, and as he sat warming himself, I scrutinized his face as closely as I could without attracting his attention, and decided that his was an honest face. My <sup>adopted</sup> motto, "prove all things and hold fast that which is good," prompted me to investigation, as incredible as I was; and the most impressive testimonies I had ever heard were given by two of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon, at the first meeting of the believers in Joseph Smith's mission, which I attended.

On the 5th of April, 1835, I was baptized by a "Mormon" Elder, and <sup>in</sup> the evening of that day, I realized the baptism of the Spirit as possibly as I did that of the water in the stream.



On the 5th of April, 1835, I was baptized by a "Mormon" Elder, and in the evening of that day, I realized the baptism of the Spirit as sensibly as I did that of the water in the stream. . . .

In the Spring of 1836, I taught a select school for the young ladies, and boarded with the Prophet's family: at the close of the term I returned to my parental home, where friends and acquaintances flocked around me to enquire about the "strange people" with whom I was associated. I was exceedingly happy in testifying of what I had both *seen* and *heard*, until the 1st of Jan. 1837, when I bade a final adieu to the home of my youth, to share the fortunes of the people of God.

By solicitation, on my return I resided in the family of Joseph Smith, and taught his family school, and had ample opportunity to mark his "daily walk and conversation," as a prophet of God; and the more I became acquainted with him, the more I appreciated him as such. His lips ever flowed with instruction and kindness; and, although very forgiving, indulgent, and affectionate in his temperament, when his God-like intuition suggested that the welfare of his brethren, and the interests of the kingdom of God demanded; no fear of censure—no love of approbation could prevent his severe and cutting rebuke.

\* \* \* \* \*

To narrate what transpired within the seven years, in which we built and occupied Nauvoo, the beautiful, would fill many volumes. That is a history that never will, and *never can* "repeat itself." Some of the most important events of my life transpired within that brief term, in which I was married, and in which my husband, Joseph Smith, the Prophet of God, *sealed his testimony with his blood!*

Although in my youth I had considered marriage ordained of God; and without vanity can say, I had what was considered very flattering proposals, I remained single; and why, I could not comprehend at the time; But, when I embraced the fulness of the Gospel, in recalling to mind the events of my past life, I felt, and still feel to acknowledge the kind, overruling hand

<sup>1</sup>Morgan Foundation, *Eliza R. Snow*, pp. 234-238.

<sup>2</sup>Permission to reproduce is granted by the Director, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, and is sincerely appreciated.

<sup>3</sup>Here she undoubtedly means 1829.



in the providences of God in that circumstance, as fully as in any other in my mortal existence; I do not know that one of my former suitors have received the Gospel, which shows that I was singularly preserved from the bondage of a marriage tie which would, in all probability, have prevented my receiving, or from the free exercise of the religion which has been, and now is dearer to me than my life.

In Nauvoo I first understood that the practice of plurality was to be introduced into the church. The subject was very repugnant to my feelings—so directly was it in opposition to my educated prepossessions, that it seemed as though all the prejudices of my ancestors for generations past congregated around me: But when I reflected that I was living in the Dispensation of the fulness of times, embracing all other Dispensations, surely Plural Marriage must necessarily be included, and I consoled myself with the idea that it was far in the distance, and beyond the period of my mortal existence. It was not long however, after I received the first intimation, before the announcement reached me that the "set time" had come—that God had commanded His servants to establish the order, by taking additional wives—I knew that God, who had kept silence for centuries, was speaking—I had covenanted in the waters of baptism to live by every word He should communicate, and my heart was firmly set to do His bidding. As I increased in knowledge concerning the principle and design of Plural Marriage, I grew in love with it, and to-day esteem it a precious, sacred principle—necessary in the elevation and salvation of the human family—in redeeming woman from the curse, and the world from concupiscences.

I was sealed to the Prophet, Joseph Smith, for time and eternity, in accordance with the Celestial Law of Marriage which God has revealed—the ceremony being performed by a servant of the Most High—authorized to officiate in sacred ordinances. This, one of the most important circumstances of my life, I never have had cause to regret.<sup>4</sup>

From personal knowledge I bear my testimony that Plural Celestial marriage is a pure and holy principle, not only tending to individual purity and

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elevation of character, but also instrumental in producing a more perfect type of manhood mentally and physically, as well as in restoring human life to its former longevity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Eliza R. Snow was apparently married to Joseph Smith on June 29, 1842. See Andrew Jenson, "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record*, Vol. VI (May, 1887), p. 238. The same article also contains a testimony from Eliza R. Snow, previously published in the *Deseret News* (weekly) of October 22, 1879, regarding her marriage to Joseph Smith and the reaction of Emma, Joseph's first wife.

<sup>5</sup>This line of reasoning was not an uncommon argument in support of plural marriage. Heber C. Kimball declared, for example: "I would not be afraid to promise a man who is sixty years of age, if he will take the counsel of brother Brigham and his brethren, that he will renew his age. I have noticed that a man who has but one wife, and is inclined to that doctrine, soon begins to wither and dry up, while a man who goes into plurality looks fresh, young, and sprightly. Why is this? Because God loves that man, and because he honours His work and word. Some of you may not believe this; but I not only believe it—I also know it. For a man of God to be confined to one woman is small business; for it is as much as we can do now to keep up under the burdens we have to carry; and I do not know what we should do if we had only one wife apiece. *Journal of Discourses*, Vol. V, p. 22.