



4-1-1981

*Sisters and Little Saints: One Hundred Years of Primary Carol*  
Cornwall Madsen and Susan Staker Oman

Ida Smith

Lynne Smith Partridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

---

**Recommended Citation**

Smith, Ida and Partridge, Lynne Smith (1981) "*Sisters and Little Saints: One Hundred Years of Primary Carol Cornwall Madsen and Susan Staker Oman*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol21/iss2/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## Book Reviews

**MADSEN, CAROL CORNWALL, and SUSAN STAKER OMAN.**  
*Sisters and Little Saints: One Hundred Years of Primary.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979. xviii and 230 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Ida Smith and Lynne Smith Partridge. Ida Smith is director of the Women's Research Institute at Brigham Young University. Lynne Smith Partridge, a graduate from BYU-Hawaii and active Primary worker for over sixteen years, is currently a Primary president in Cody, Wyoming. They are sisters in a family long associated with Primary. Their mother was on the Primary General Board under three presidents, their grandmother and great-grandmother were on the Primary General Board under Louie B. Felt (first president of the Primary), and their grandfather (an Apostle) served as advisor to the Primary.

In *Sisters and Little Saints*, Carol Cornwall Madsen and Susan Staker Oman have delineated the growth of the Primary from a single Primary unit in Farmington, Utah, in 1878, into a worldwide organization in 1978. Moreover, they chart the noteworthy history of female administration in a Church program.

A Primary organization was initially conceived in response to Aurelia Spencer Rogers's query, "Could there not be an organization for little boys and have them trained to make better men?" (p. 1). Eliza R. Snow, to whom the question was put, secured "the approbation of John Taylor . . . presiding officer in the Church in 1878," wrote to Farmington Ward Bishop Hess for his approval, and then told Aurelia that she "might consider herself authorized to proceed." Aurelia did organize the first Primary, and although the participation of girls had not been discussed, she included them in order that the singing might "sound as well as it should" (p. 5). Eliza simultaneously organized a Primary in Salt Lake City in the Eleventh Ward.

The Primary grew under the direction of Eliza R. Snow and the Relief Society from then until Eliza's death in December 1887. In the first nine-and-one-half years, Eliza organized Primaries all over the Territory, having been given authority to call and set apart ward and stake Primary presidents. At seventy-six years of age, Eliza "traveled over a thousand miles by train and wagon and established thirty-five

Primaries, while conducting the business of the other women's auxiliaries" (p. 11). Eliza was central in choosing Louie B. Felt to be the first general Primary president and, assisted by Precindia Kimball and Zina D. H. Young, she called Louie to the position, giving her "a grand blessing" (p. 29). Eliza also prepared materials specifically for Primary use, including "a hymnbook, a tune book, . . . a catechism of Old and New Testament questions and answers . . . and a series of books containing recitations and dialogues" (p. 16). Eliza's death in 1887 was "a blow both to the Primary organization and personally to Louie B. Felt, who had relied almost exclusively on her advice" (p. 30). Under Eliza's direction the Relief Society/Primary relationship had been one of mother/daughter as the women of those organizations worked closely together.

Despite shyness, illness, and a preference for remaining in the background, Louie B. Felt, supported by "her growing friendship with a young English convert, May Andersen," proved equal to her stewardship (p. 35). She, as Eliza had done, gave blessings to board members before sending them on assignments to stakes throughout the Church.

Several notable Primary projects took root in Louie's fifty-year tenure as general Primary president. These included the magazine *The Children's Friend*, for which Louie put up her own home as collateral (the First Presidency instructed the women that they might have a monthly publication—provided they paid for it and kept it out of debt), the idea of a hospital, the nickel fund and the idea of encouraging children to give to worthy endeavors, and the divisions into classes by age groups. The Church's current magazine for children—*The Friend*—though now separate from the Primary organization is still financially independent of Church funds.

From the inception of Primary, sharing has been a focal point in Primary emphasis. By the end of World War I, "children and officers of the Primary had shipped over 100,000 articles to the Red Cross" (p. 63). In addition, "at the end of World War II [Primary children] were invited to gather toys and clothing for the children of Europe, collecting 122,794 articles that were packed into 3,451 cartons" (p. 132). Primary children have contributed to the Armenian and Syrian Relief Fund, to the building of the "This is the Place" Monument, and to the construction of the Primary Children's Hospital with the "Buy a Brick" program. It was the Primary, as well, that commissioned Arnold Friberg "to paint the Book of Mormon series as a commemorative feature of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Children's Friend* in 1952" (p. 121).

Almost from the beginning, Primary administrators have concerned themselves with promoting “legislative movements to secure enactment and enforcement of proper educational and health laws” (p. 70). The Primary supported the 1918–1919 Children’s Year, sponsored by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. Primary women pioneered Church education for the handicapped when they opened their first Primary for the handicapped in 1960. They anticipated the family home evening program with their “Family Hour” section in *The Children’s Friend*, beginning in 1954.

In light of the present women’s movement, it is interesting to note that it was LDS women who made the first inroads into Scouting by women, as a result of the decision by Church leaders to give responsibility for the first year of Scouting to the Primary. Sister LaVern Parmley was the “first woman to participate in many aspects of scouting,” including sitting on numerous national Scouting committees and receiving Scouting awards. “Today there is no distinction between the service of men and women in Scouting” (p. 141).

Perhaps one of the largest impressions we derived from reading *Sisters and Little Saints* (beyond the dedication, intelligence, and obedience of the women who worked in Primary) is the fact that Primary was administered for the first sixty-five years by women who had no children of their own, but who had clear vision of what it means to be a “mother in Zion.” They teach us that the nurturing of children is not, and ought not to be, restricted to mothers—or even to women, for that matter, as we see in the Savior’s example—for it is central to building the kingdom. These women include:

*Eliza R. Snow*, who taught that ““the very best talent in our midst should be employed to preside over the Primary Associations,’ women who loved children and had ‘the faculty of drawing them to them’” (p. 13).

*Louie B. Felt*, who said, “The care of children is women’s special charge” (p. 45).

*May Anderson*, who was not only childless but unmarried, and who, if she “was convinced that a course of action was best for the children,” was unconcerned with the inconvenience, however great (pp. 94–95).

*May Green Hinckley*, who had no previous Primary experience before her call to be general Primary president at age fifty-five, after just eight years of marriage, and who made D&C 68:28 the theme of Primary: “And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly

before the Lord.” In her patriarchal blessing May was promised that her fame would go forth as a “Mother in Israel.”

These women exemplified the obedience yet independence described in the words from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

led in fight, yet Leader seem’d  
Each warrior single as in Chief, expert  
When to advance, or stand, or turn the sway  
Of Battle, . . . each on himself reli’d,  
As only in his arm the moment lay  
Of victory. . . .<sup>1</sup>

They were not looking from side to side for direction, but to their file leader: the Savior. They asked for and received the light they needed in order to act—and then moved. They were truly companions in the battle—not followers of their fellowmen. They set the example that women have not only a right but an obligation to seek for their own light in helping to build the kingdom. They did so and were blessed.