Growing Up in Early Utah: The Wasatch Literary Association 1874-1878

Ronald W. Walker

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

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol43/iss1/7
Growing Up in Early Utah: The Wasatch Literary Association, 1874–1878

One day in early February 1874, Jim Ferguson, sensing the forlorn hope of advancing his courtship with Minnie Horne, suggested to Ort (Orson F.) Whitney and another of the boys that they organize a reading society. Ferguson “had heard, no doubt, of fond couples ‘reading life’s meaning in each others eyes,’” Whitney later mused, “and that was the kind of reading that most interested him.” Since the seventeen-year-old Whitney found himself “in the same box with Ferguson on the girl question,” the suggestion found a ready response. Whitney immediately invited those who “would make desirable members” to meet at the home of Sister Emmeline B. Wells, his motherly confidante. It was there on Salt Lake City’s State Street that the Wasatch Literary Society was born⁴ (illus. 4-1).

From such modest roots flowered one of territorial Utah’s most lively and far-reaching adventures with culture. Whitney confessed that he and his friends had a long-standing interest in the highbrow. “As for essays, declamations, and musical renditions, we had been doing that all our lives.”² Prior to the Wasatch, Whitney and Ferguson had drawn up constitutions for several cultural societies. Indeed, Whitney and a dozen of the subsequent “Wasatchers” had previously affiliated with the intellectually stimulating and controversial Zeta Gamma, Dr. John R. Park’s debating society at the University of Utah and reputedly the first Greek-lettered group in the Intermountain West. Some also had joined the short-lived Delta Phi, a literary society that had flourished in 1873.³
The 1870s were ripe for cultural societies. From the beginning the Latter-day Saint settlers had fostered as much culture as their pioneer economy would permit. They had sponsored the “Polysophical,” “Philo-mathian,” and “Universal Scientific” societies; they listened to the literary and scientific “Seventies’ Lectures”; and they built the Social Hall and the Salt Lake Theatre to stage drama. The 1870s brought new wealth and a cosmopolitan spirit to this foundation. The Union Pacific Railroad, the antagonistic Salt Lake Tribune, the Tintic Mining District, the one-thousand-seat Godbeite Liberal Institute each in its own way increased Utah’s diversity and prosperity. The result was significant. Mormon cultural traditions mixed with the new pluralism, and the stage was set for unprecedented creativity and ferment.4

The Wasatch Literary Association drew from both Mormon and wider American legacies. With few exceptions, the sixty who eventually came to enroll in the society were first generation, native-born Utahns. Many were scions with the bluest of Mormon blood. (Nearly one-sixth were Brigham Young’s children, grandchildren, nephews, or nieces, while seven were sons and daughters of Daniel H. Wells, Brigham’s counselor.) However, an appreciation of culture, not wealth or position, was the common denominator in the background of its members. Many of their parents were longtime mainstays of the territory’s Chautauqua programs and amateur theater.5

The “Wasatchers” proved very much the children of their heritage. According to its constitution and bylaws, the Wasatchers desired “the social advancement and the improvement of its members in general literature, music and drama”—no small task for unsupervised youth in a semirural community of less than twenty-five thousand. To fulfill the society’s mission, the usual complement of officers was put in place. A president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and chairman of the program committee were elected at first monthly
and later every six weeks. A marshal and janitor were subsequently added to provide much needed decorum—and probably a touch of humor given the ignominy of such positions. The original ceiling of twenty-five active members was once raised to thirty-two, but all efforts to increase it still higher were soundly defeated. The bylaws called for the society to meet every Wednesday evening in one of the members’ homes.  

The society, while dedicated to culture, had too much youth and wit in the group to admit either pretension or gravity. Most members entered the Wasatch when in their late teens or early twenties. While occasional leeway was extended to venerability, as in the brief membership of thirty-three-year-old Will Woods, exceptions were usually on the side of precocity. “Hebe” Wells was fifteen when he joined, Bud Whitney sixteen, and Dick Young just over seventeen. With a “disposition to sacrifice everything for a laugh,” the Wednesday evening programs were unpredictable. “[John] B. Read, Janitor, assumed the chair,” one meeting’s minutes began. “By overwhelming majority vote of those present, Mr. Read was fined 50¢ for this assumption of authority.” Normally the president—not the janitor—called for a quorum and approved the minutes. A general reading of literature began after the reading of the minutes. Each member was required to participate. They studied the Mormons’ favorite Wordsworth ode, “Intimations of Immortality,” several times, and they read the life or works of Byron, Goldsmith, Gray, Longfellow, Pope, Scott, and Shakespeare, often drawing the selections from school readers.  

Group reading proved too staid, however, so this portion of the weekly program was soon abandoned in favor of spelling matches and an expansion of the next portion of the meeting, individual cultural exercises. (The first was apparently based upon genuine need, for the secretary misspelled two words in the sentence recording the motion.) Individual exercises were assigned to members in turn a week or two prior to the scheduled performance. These might include declamations, lectures, debates, and remarks; original essays, parodies, and poetry; vocal or instrumental renditions; and dialogue, dramatic readings, and even small scale theatrical productions.  

The best exercises were remembered as “ambitious and meritorious,” a judgment that seems fully warranted at least on the first
account. Without the light touch and quick humor of his friends, H. J. Grant twice lectured on “Insurance” and backed up his remarks with the solid credentials of owning, despite his youthful nineteen years, one of the territory’s leading insurance agencies. The half sisters Emily and Emmeline Wells, known as “Little and Big Em of the Wasatch,” once debated “which has had the more ground for complaint, the Indian or the Negro.” Ort Whitney, also versatile with flute and guitar, whistled an obbligato to the “Poet and Peasant” overture as Lena Fobes “brilliantly” performed the piece on the piano. And Stan Clawson’s violin butchered the “Crystal Schottische” with such great finesse that the performance became an unforgettable memory.

Bud Whitney’s “The Desereted Village,” an extended parody of Goldsmith’s “The Desereted Village,” also became a Wasatch legend. Though subsequently lost, the text was partially reconstructed from collective memory and passed in later years from member to member like a Homeric epic. Telling of the hearth of Billy Dunbar and the mien of Emily Wells, his belle, it captured the meter and idyll of Goldsmith’s original:

Removed from Brigham Street a league or two,
The estate stands whereon our hero grew.
Not large the lands, nor spacious are the halls,
No costly chattels hang the simple walls.
No shimmering font the sportive eye delights,
No grassy lawn the travelers toil invites.
Far far from these, the vain display of wealth
Is here exchanged for free and rugged health.

....
Each Sunday morn to visit Mrs. Sears,
The lovely form of little Em appears.
Unconscious, half of all her blooming charms,
Yet well inured to love and loves alarms.
White gauzy skirts pinned backward hard and tight,
Still other charms afford the eager sight.

The spell of the gaslights seemed to excite members most of all. Their cultural exercises, filled with scenes and staging, soon required a new Wasatch officer called “dramatic manager.” Popular dramas became common. So did original productions that at times were directed to the intrigues of the society’s current social situation.
“The whole [of next weeks’ program is] to conclude with a scene from the ‘fowl’ tragedy, Waiting for the Verdict—the Court Scene,” the minutes read with apparent reference to an impending matrimonial decision “by Messrs R. W. Wells, O. F. Whitney, Rud Clawson, Stan Clawson, H. M. Wells, H. G. Whitney, Jno Horne, Lorenzo Young and Miss Cornelia Horne.” The Wasatch’s devotion to Shakespeare was more decorous. Dialogues and sometimes whole acts were performed from Hamlet, Henry IV, Julius Caesar, King John, the Merchant of Venice, Othello, and Richard III.11

The quality of the cultural exercises varied widely, according to the society’s candid minutes. “The regular exercises were . . . very poor,” one entry declared. On another occasion they were “only tolerably well rendered.” The members’ busy schedules seemed to be the chief difficulty behind failures to prepare and sometimes to perform. The society’s talent was sufficient to sponsor periodic public exhibitions at the Social Hall, which generally were well received. For example, an exhibition opened in February 1876 with the society’s orchestra playing an overture, assisted by the cultured schoolmarm Ida Cook and the budding vocalist B. B. Young. Wasatch President John Caine then spoke. Next, Harry Culmer, May Wells, and Bud Whitney read essays. The Wasatch chorus sang “Joy! Joy!” after which Cornelia Clayton, Mattie Horne, Libbie Beatie, Bud Whitney, Harry Emery, and Mary Ferguson provided several musical numbers. The evening concluded with dialogue from the second act of Libbie’s Marble Heart.12

This performance was an embarrassment, however, at least in the dour judgment of President Caine. “Our leader, the Grand, Infallible, John T. Caine, is dissatisfied with our last,” Heber Wells reported to Dick Young, then teaching school in Manti. He “has willed that we must do something to redeem ourselves. . . . Of course, the girls all melted at the sight of their ‘beau ideal,’ and of course they all voted in the manner which ‘Johntee’ prescribed.” Caine in fact called a special meeting of the Wasatch to insist that a redeeming exhibition be scheduled, and, with the girls voting as a block, secured the authority to manage the new production personally.13

No Wasatch gathering was ever complete without good-natured wrangling and practical joking. When the forgetful H. J. Grant asked one Wednesday where the society was meeting, Jim Ferguson
sent him to Kittie Heywood’s home high on a Salt Lake City hill. “It was a good joke on me walking so far for nothing,” Grant admitted after the wild-goose chase, “and I think I shall try & get even with James for playing me so.”

Immediate recourse was always available through the society’s celebrated “budget box,” the *piece de résistance* of each meeting. This “budget box” was a box in which members could anonymously place any composition, serious or most often otherwise. Edited and selected by a reader appointed at the previous meeting, the box’s contents were read following the general culture exercises. The idea was not original. Will Woods, President Wells’s nephew from Iowa, had suggested the society appropriate the plan from a club to which he had once belonged.

The budget box “used to fairly scintillate with the brilliance of its articles,” the *Salt Lake Herald* judged a decade after the Wasatch Literary Association’s demise, “many of them—but for their rather personal character—would adorn the pages of any of our brightest periodicals of current literature.” After a Wastacher memorized but badly executed the role of Claude Melnotte in Bulwer’s *The Lady of Lyons*, the budget box began with what at first seemed a compliment:

> Now Claude was well committed, too,  
> And doubly done—ay, this is true;  
> You first commit the part, to prove it,  
> And then commit the murder of it.

Spicy rumors of members’ social lives were a budget box staple. Several squibs detailed an alleged hugging incident involving Rob Sloan and the popular yet coquettish Emily Wells on her distinguished father’s front porch (illus. 4–2). They graphically continued with the reactions of her distraught admirers Ort Whitney and H. J. Grant threatening vengeance and Billy Dunbar, suicide. “I would [have] given a dollar if you could have been there to hear them,” Grant said when reporting the episode to a friend in the East. The budget box pieces “were too good for anything.”

On another occasion B. B. Young must have thought otherwise. Young apparently earned Wasatch displeasure by first affiliating with and then openly censuring the society. The budget box responded with a torrent of abuse. Bid Young, his half-brother, disclosed that B. B.’s “regular morning exercise was to run a chicken...
until it sweat, so that he would extract an egg without much difficulty for his morning drink.” Members refused to let the lampoon die. A week later they staged a mock trial, with B. B.’s chicken-running prosecuted as a crime with “malice prepense.” Not understanding legal jargon, “the defendant denied chasing the chicken with ‘a mallet prepense,’ maintaining that ‘it was a stick with a nail in the end of it.’” Rule Wells, the judge, swept the distinction aside and sentenced the criminal to death. Still later the society fired another fusillade. Responding to B. B.’s complaint that his calculus studies were “using him up,” the budget box wondered if the problem did not lie more realistically in his “getting drunk.”

New members in particular were subject to attack. “Harry Culmer,” Heber Wells reported to Dick Young, “is now a member and on the next evening he may prepare to be slandered, laughed at, abused, and culumniated at the pleasure of the budget box writers.” The eighteen-year-old Wells could hardly still his enthusiasm—nor keep his metaphors consistent:

He must go through the “kinks.” I have, and you have, and why should he be exempt? Let us rally! and pour such hot words into his burning ears as will scorch his very inners, and make his blood run cold with fiery indignation. I will ransack the remotest corner of my cranium for wit, and coupling this with all the eloquence my soul posesses, I’ll “let him have it,” loud and long, egad I will!

More and more, the budget box determined a meeting’s success. The gathering at the Hornes’ was “‘way up,’ one [of] the best (if not the best) we have ever had,” reported one member. “There was nearly (if not quite) 50 budget box [pieces].” Contributions were vigorously
solicited from out-of-town members ("Attack anybody, me if you like"). Other members hatched a budget box conspiracy. Using Emily Wells as amanuensis, signing themselves as Gax, Ginx, Iago, Pard, Uebec, and Yoric, and further disguising their trail by occasionally attacking themselves, they embroiled the society week after week not only with their calumnies but by the aura of mystery surrounding their true identities.

While intended as "innocent merriment," the Wasatch barbs occasionally inflicted wounds upon the sensitive. For example, H. J. Grant, a widow's son without the opportunity for formal schooling, remembered shedding "many bitter tears when my grammatical errors & other mistakes were laughed at" and at times felt "the least beloved and respected of any of the members of the Club." Unfortunately, many were not as resilient as Grant. After running the verbal gauntlet, probably a tenth of the society's incoming members quickly dropped out. Realizing the excesses of the budget box, the fun-loving Wasatch old-timers finally adopted a formal resolution declaring "personalities" a misdemeanor and banned them, subject to fines, from all proceedings.

However, the fines themselves became a source of amusement. Assessed each meeting after the budget box reading, the fines often touched most members' pockets, as the minutes of October 21, 1874, testify:

Fine of 5 cents were imposed of Kate Wells, R. S. Wells, and Kittie Heywood for not contributing to [the] B[udget] B[ox]. Fines of 20 cents were imposed on Kittie Heywood, H. G. Whitney, C. B. Swift, Jote Beatie, Emily Wells, Nellie Whitney, R. S. Wells[,] Emmie Wells & O. F. Whitney for disorder. It was moved and seconded that O. F. Whitney behave himself during the remainder of the evening. Mr. Swift was fined 25 cts for rudeness. Moved that Messrs Swift, H. G. and O. F. Whitney be fined for disrespect for president, 10¢. H. G. Whitney was fined 15¢ for disorder. Jote Beatie, Emily Wells & R. S. Wells were fined for whispering.

The fines, added to the club's dues, proved an ample revenue source. During its four-year history, the society met expenses and maintained a burgeoning account at Zion's Savings Bank.

The Wasatch's prosperity occasioned an alleged letter from John R. Winder, Salt Lake City's Collector of Taxes. Members had
not realized that their money was subject to levy. Concerned, the society appointed a committee of Ort Whitney, John B. Read, and D. C. Young to negotiate a settlement. Week after week passed with the committee temporizing or making partial reports. Realizing he could spin the matter out no further, Whitney finally admitted the truth—the letter was a hoax.23

The critic’s report, the final Wasatch agenda item, attempted to conclude meetings on a decorous note. The “critic,” appointed weekly at the outset of each meeting, judged both the culture exercises and budget box reading. His animadversions could be delivered “very sarcastically” and at times were “very plain and to the point.” Once the budget box was judged to contain a number of meritorious pieces “but its wit and interest were not equivalent to its length.” After the Wasatch’s burlesque of B. B. Young, critic Emma Wells, Emily’s half-sister, so railed at the abuse of “our friends” that participants felt “like a Mexican dollar with seventy cents deducted.” John Caine was equally scathing when ill-timed laughter marred a dramatic dialogue between Iago and Othello. “You who have laughed at these gentlemen and their commendable efforts to entertain us this evening,” Caine opened, “have applauded worse acting upon the boards of the Salt Lake Theatre.” Such a high-tone demeanor, however, was not always maintained. Once when John Read’s critique was called for, he sardonically refused any response—and was fined 25¢ for neglecting duty.24

Not surprisingly, given the society’s impetus, socializing played an important role. Members might meet informally at the home of Emmeline Wells or of the popular Beaties, where the parlor bulged each Sunday evening with “the crowd.” On weekdays, members pared apples or danced the slightly disreputable waltz. If the conversation lagged, Carl Young would play the William Tell Overture or Ort Whitney would sing “Thoughts.” With autograph albums the rage, swains vied to be sentimental and witty. Harry Emery, quoting Othello, wrote in Jote Beatie’s album: “Excellent wench, but I do love thee / And when I love thee not, chaos has come again.” The charm was lost when he indelicately penned the same lines in rival albums.25

A year after its organization, the society officially started sponsoring social activities. There were weekend outings to City Creek
Canyon, Wells's Farm, and Black Rock House on the Great Salt Lake. On one occasion big, buff Harry Emery swam from the beach house to Black Rock and back despite a raging storm—to the ladies' admiration but to the dismay of several men who nearly drowned trying to also complete his feat. At Calder's Park, now Nibley Park, the Wasatchers alternately ice-skated or boated as the seasons permitted. One time Mary Jones's skiff capsized and she was rushed to the shore to dry out. As her teeth chattered and body quivered from coldness, Bud Whitney asked with more nervous sympathy than forethought if she cared for ice cream. "Her reply," a member recalled, "was an Artie glance that 'froze the genial current of his soul.'"

Members approved proposed social events only after "a lively and lengthy discussion," and there were times when their caution appeared wise. In January 1876 the young women, supported by John Caine and Harry Emery, hoped to stage a grand ball at the Wasatch Hotel. The proposition had been approved and a committee on arrangements appointed when the men began to question the plan's feasibility. "The boys all know that we girls want to have a party and we think it is mean in them to predict that it will be a failure," an impassioned Mary Jones declaimed. "We know that if the boys want it to be a failure and do all they can to make it one of course it will be one." Despite her forensics, the project was voted down on basically straight male-female lines. The matter did not end there. Although men and women usually shared leadership positions in the Wasatch, at the next election of officers the women vigorously exercised their franchise. An entire distaff slate was elected—with four of the men receiving fines for disorderly conduct during the election.

As the ladies' reaction indicated, socials were serious business—especially when directed toward courting. Victorian romance and sensibility exaggerated emotions and stylized behavior. Wasatch men openly pledged their troths. In turn, the girls' flirtatious glances and carefully phrased letters dropped telltale hints of reciprocated affection. Final marital decisions brought extravagant misery to rejected parties. There was mock (and perhaps some real) fear that Bud Whitney was suicidal when Alice Young eloped with Charlie Hopkins. Luella Cobb plunged several Wasatch beaux into despair by becoming the fifth plural wife of middle-aged John W. Young.
Some pains did not heal quickly. In later years when members recalled their Wasatch experience, memories of “heartaches” and “upsetting love affairs” remained to taint their otherwise happy nostalgia.28

Church leaders and parents understandably had some misgivings about the association. Its activities were unsupervised, and its spirit seemed too secular, carefree, and at times bruising. Too few men within the society accepted mission calls. Others, like Ort Whitney, appeared to postpone “real life” for prose and drama. Many members rejected polygamy, the nineteenth century’s badge of total Latter-day Saint commitment, and when they did marry, some chose spouses who were lapsed Saints or not even Church members.29 When prominent Wasatcher John Read joined the staff of the Salt Lake Tribune, the Mormons’ strident journalistic foe, the worst fears of the older generation seemed confirmed.

“The Wasatch has already, through the gab and energy of certain mischief makers, attained in the eyes of our parents, the unenviable notoriety of an institution for the promotion of infidelity and sacriligiousness,” Heber Wells noted. But he insisted parental concerns were overdrawn. Most of the Wasatch nonbelievers were “of that cast... before they were Wasatchers. It is simply absurd to think that an association where nothing of... [a religious nature] is discussed but where a few persons meet and go through exercises for literary culture, could be the means of turning out nothing but infidels.”30

In truth, in matters of behavior and religion the society left its members largely as it found them. Certainly there was little outward piety. When it was suggested that meetings be opened and closed with prayer, the motion evoked so little support it never came to a vote. Another suggestion that the society tithe its revenue met a similar fate. Yet there were no carping complaints about the Church either. For example, prior to Ort Whitney’s planned departure for a New York dramatic career, the society staged a farewell benefit at the Social Hall. When a mission call intervened, they cheerfully gave Whitney another testimonial in the Fourteenth Ward Hall. When Rule Wells left on a mission, the group secured a private railroad car and traveled to Ogden to see him off on the Union Pacific31 (illus. 4-3).
Whatever its religious failings, the Wasatch excited “the admiration and envy of the literary, dramatic and musical portions of the town” and presumably the young social set as well. Its imitators were numerous. Some youth organized a “reading association.” Others formed the Azalea Society, a cultural group that divided its membership into the “Democrats” and “Republicans” more than a decade before national political parties entered Utah. Each of the latter groups then competed against the other in presenting cultural exercises. Still more imaginative was the all-male Decennial Philadelphian Society. It planned to meet each decade, “renewing and perpetuating the friendship of early life.” Finally, the Church-sponsored Mutual Improvement Associations (M.I.A.) began in the middle 1870s. Sensing an obvious vacuum and wishing to avoid the Wasatch’s excesses, Brigham Young called Junius Wells to rein­vigorate the previously organized youth Retrenchment Societies and commence Churchwide M.I.A. activity.  

The organization of the M.I.A. was a death knell. With young Salt Lakers being drawn into Church youth activities, the Wasatch no longer had a pool of potential new members. For a time the two rival organizations existed side by side, but by the winter of 1877–78 the Wasatch was losing momentum. Meetings were abbreviated so members could leave to make “Lasser Candy” or canceled in lieu of the St. Mark’s Cantata or the “Kellogg Cary Combination” appearing at the Salt Lake Theatre.

Illus. 4-3. Rulon Wells (seated, center) and Orson Whitney (standing, right) leaving for their missions, ca. 1875.
As members married they resigned, and those who remained seemed changed by time and new experiences. When Ort Whitney returned from his mission, there was a new, unfamiliar gravity about him. “Yes, I have been down East for the past year and seven months and have not felt very well,” he typically replied to all inquiries with un-Wasatch seriousness, “but I hope soon with the help of Heaven and the mountain air to . . . regain my native health.” This was not the stuff from which the society had been built and was a sign both of the members’ growing maturity and of the Wasatch’s consequent decline.

For a time, the beleaguered association tried to regroup. Not having met for several months, members in late spring 1878 drafted a new constitution, pledged biweekly meetings, and elected new officers. Ort Whitney, who had been the first Wasatch president and—despite his several absences from Salt Lake City—once again assumed the chair. But old enthusiasms could not be relit. The final session of the Wasatch Literary Association met at the Wells’s South Temple Street home on May 29, 1878.

Yet, it was not the last meeting. Twelve years later, in June 1890, members held a reunion. Amid rose bowers, Chinese lanterns, refreshment-filled tables, and wafting melodies of the band, the Wasatch met at a familiar gathering place, Frank and Kittie Heywood Kimball’s home on Heywood Hill. The intervening years had not extinguished the Wasatch spirit. “It is to be hoped,” read the ludicrously printed formal invitation, that “the same rigid decorum which formed so conspicuous a feature of the Wasatch in other days will be observed at this meeting.”

Members were called to order by Ort Whitney. The roll was called and the minutes of the May 29, 1878, meeting were read. Then Whitney imposed wide-ranging fines and introduced the general exercises, which included Stanley Clawson’s celebrated “Crystal Schottishe.” The budget box contained “a host of humorous skits, poems and allusions to the status of the members and their adventures, loves, courtships, etc., of a dozen years ago.” Reportedly it was “immensely enjoyed by all—even those who were hardest hit.” Sometime before 2:00 A.M. the party concluded and the Wasatch adjourned sine die.

The reunion must have occasioned moments of personal reverie and appraisal. In the past lay their youthful exuberance, when their
exaggerated words and consciousness of style had become the foundation for many members’ subsequent able prose. Likewise, the Wasatchers must have realized that their amateur theatrics had borne fruit. Nine former Wasatch members had formed the core of the Home Dramatic Club, a stock company that contributed largely to late nineteenth-century Utah drama. Looking at the reunion’s guest list, members must have also understood the importance of the association’s socializing. Almost half of the society had married fellow Wasatchers.

More dramatically, the Wasatch’s legacy was the success its members enjoyed in adult life. The list is impressive. Art and architecture: J. Willard Clawson, portraitist; H. L. A. Culmer, civic booster, editor, and landscape painter of the grandiose; and Don Carlos Young, Church architect. Public Affairs: Heber M. Wells, Utah’s first state governor and treasurer of the U.S. Shipping Board; William W. Woods, Idaho legislator and magistrate; and Richard W. Young, attorney, U.S. Commissioner of the Philippines, and Utah’s first general of the U.S. Regular Army. Education: John T. Caine Jr., proponent of “scientific” agriculture and Utah State College professor of history and English; and Joseph Toronto, University of Utah professor of mathematics and history. Journalism: John B. Read, editor of the Butte [Montana] Miner; Robert W. Sloan, Democratic State Chairman, broker, editor of the Logan Journal; and Horace G. Whitney, managing editor and nationally recognized dramatic and lyric editor of the Deseret News. Businessmen: Charles S. Burton; Laron A. Cummings; James X. Ferguson; John F. Horne; Frank D. Kimball; and Herbert M. Pembroke.

In spite of their earlier unruly and profane reputation, Wasatch members made their most distinguished contributions in the field of religion. Kittie Heywood Kimball found a satisfying faith in Christian Science, and she became Salt Lake City’s first practitioner of the religion and its most forceful organizer. Wasatch bete noir Bicknell (B. B.) Young worked in the same movement on a broader scale. Abandoning a promising career as a baritone vocalist, Young delivered Christian Science lectures in Australia, England, and the United States, taught the denomination’s prestigious Normal Class, and later served as First Reader of the Mother Church in Boston.
Not surprisingly, Wasatchers were called to Latter-day Saint ecclesiastical positions more than perhaps anyone, including themselves, foresaw. Cornelia Horne Clayton and Minnie Horne James served on the Primary and Relief Society General Boards. Martha Horne Tingey labored forty-nine years in the presidency of the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association, including twenty-four years as president. Richard W. Young and Brigham S. Young led the Ensign Stake and the Northwest Mission, respectively. Four Wasatchers were called as General Authorities: Rulon S. Wells as Senior President of the First Council of Seventy; poet and historian Orson F. (Ort) Whitney as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve; Rudger Clawson as President of the Quorum of the Twelve; and Heber J. Grant served twenty-seven years as President of the Church.

The Wasatch Literary Association obviously played a role, however modest, in the remarkable achievement of its members. Probably its members were ordained for “success” long before Jim Ferguson talked to Ort Whitney on a Salt Lake City street. But the society schooled its members in culture and trained them in public speaking and writing. And during their careers, like the graduates of British public schools, Wasatchers often turned to each other for professional or financial help. In fact, in later years the association became something of an alma mater, a halcyon time, “the happiest days of my life,” wrote one Wasatch octogenarian. Heber Wells, who usually said things best, albeit with hyperbole, admitted his Wasatch days touched his senses like “the almost forgotten fragrance of burning sagebrush.” Or perhaps his memories were better expressed by “the odor of the honeysuckles that used to grow in Uncle Brigham’s upper garden.”

Notes

This article was originally published in Sunstone 6 (November/December 1981): 44–51.

Qualities That Count

Having a longtime interest in the Wasatch Literary Association of his own, he nevertheless graciously made many useful suggestions, which improved my essay.

2. Orson F. Whitney to Heber J. Grant, January 27, 1921, General Correspondence.

3. Orson F. Whitney to Heber J. Grant, January 27, 1921, General Correspondence. The names of the first Zeta Gamma members can be found in “The Original Zeta Gamma Society,” Deseret News, January 4, 1902.

4. The impulse was manifold: the evangelical and private school movement; the historical writing of Edward Tullidge and T. B. H. Stenhouse; the increasingly public and active role of Latter-day Saint women; the commencement of the publication of the Woman’s Exponent and its male counterpart, the Contributor; the Latter-day Saint auxiliary movement; and the itinerant ministry of the free-thought spiritualists at the Liberal Institute are examples of these new cultural currents.

5. The minutes of the association suggest a little more than sixty members, although a listing prepared for the 1890 reunion has only fifty-six names. See the Wasatch Literary Association Minute Book (hereafter Wasatch Minutes), Church Archives.

6. Wasatch Minutes, May 29, 1878, pp. 174–75, see also pp. 6, 17, 24, 36, and 47.

7. Whitney, “Wasatch Literary Association,” 1019; Wasatch Minutes, November 7, 1877, 157; italics added. For examples of the general reading exercises, see October 14 and 21, November 11, December 23 and 30, 1874, January 6, 20, and 27, February 3, April 7 and 21, 1875, pp. 1, 2, 5, 11–12, 16–17, 19, 21, 32, and 33.

8. Marba C. Josephson, “President Grant and the Wasatch Literary Club,” Improvement Era 44 (November 1941): 659, 690; Wasatch Minutes, June 2, 1875, p. 441.


10. Heber J. Grant to C. Bryon Whitney, November 17, 1920, General Correspondence; F. D. Kimball to Heber J. Grant, December 15, 1937, General Correspondence. Whitney’s poem even became the object of literary criticism by Wasatcher H. L. A. Culmer, Wasatch Minutes, December 6, 1876, p. 120.

12. Wasatch Minutes, January 27, March 10, 1875; February 2, March 1, and June 28, 1876, pp. 19, 28, 78–79, 84, and 105.

13. Heber M. Wells to Richard W. Young, March 4, 1876, typescript, Richard W. Young Papers, Western Americana; Wasatch Minutes, March 8, 1876, p. 86.

14. Heber J. Grant to Feramorz Young, March 26, 1876, General Correspondence.


16. Orson F. Whitney was even more laudatory: “Some of the [budget box] sketches, by such writers as Horace G. Whitney, Heber M. Wells, and John B. Read—wits of the first water—rivaled Goldsmith, Dickens and Mark Twain. This is positively no exaggeration, and it constituted one of the main reasons for the society’s popularity.” Whitney, “Wasatch Literary Association,” 1020–21; “Wasatch Redivivus: Reunion of the Old-Time Literary Society,” Salt Lake Herald, June 22, 1890, 5.

17. Heber J. Grant to Feramorz Young, fragment about 1876, Grant Papers.

18. Lorenzo D. Young to Richard W. Young, April 9, [1876?], typescript, Grant Papers; Whitney, “Wasatch Literary Association,” 1021.


20. Heber J. Grant to Feramorz Young, September 25, 1876, Grant Papers; Wells to Young, December 18, 1877; Orson F. Whitney, “Verbatim Report of Funeral Services in Honor of Emily Wells Grant,” May 27, 1908, Frank W. Otterstrom, reporter, Church Archives.

21. Heber J. Grant to Heber M. Wells, January 29, 1892, Heber J. Grant Letterpress Copybook, 12:170, Grant Papers; Heber J. Grant to J. Golden Kimball, April 23, 1903, Grant Letterpress Copybook, 36:83; Wasatch Minutes, March 10, 1875, p. 28.

22. Wasatch Minutes, October 21, 1874, May 12, 1875, pp. 3 and 40.

23. Wasatch Minutes, March 24 and 31, April 7, 14, and 21, 1875, pp. 30–31, 33, and 35.


27. Heber J. Grant to Richard W. Young, January 29, 1876, General Correspondence; Wasatch Minutes, June 30, 1875, January 12 and 26, 1876, pp. 50, 74–75, and 77.
28. Heber M. Wells to Richard W. Young, February 10, 1876, General Correspondence; John T. Caine to Heber J. Grant, May 3, 1939, General Correspondence.

29. The marriages of Alice Young to Charles Hopkins and Melvina Whitney to William Woods were examples of children of prominent Latter-day Saint families finding spouses outside their faith. For information on Ort Whitney and John Read, see Orson F. Whitney to Richard W. Young, February 13, 1876, typescript, Grant Papers; and Heber M. Wells to Richard W. Young, December 18, 1877, typescript, Richard W. Young Papers. The Wasatch opposition to plural marriage is recorded in Heber J. Grant, Diary, November 28, 1881, Grant Papers.

30. Wells to Young, December 18, 1877.


32. “Wasatch Redivivus,” 5. Reading Association: Horace G. Whitney to Richard W. Young, July 15, 1874, typescript, Grant Papers. Azalia: Heber J. Grant to Feramorz Young, March 26, 1876, General Correspondence. Decennial Philadelphian Society: M. M. Young to Richard W. Young, February 7, 1876, typescript, Grant Papers. Some “Wasatchers” had little doubt that their association had occasioned the Mutual Improvement Association movement. See Whitney, “Funeral Services in Honor of Emily Wells Grant.”

33. Wasatch Minutes, October 29, November 7 and 26, 1877, January 30, 1878, pp. 155, 158, 161, 169; Heber M. Wells to Heber J. Grant, December 4, 1920, General Correspondence.


35. “Wasatch Redivivus,” 5. For a copy of the reunion program, see Wasatch Minutes, p. 179.


38. I obtained marriage data by examining the obituaries of club members printed in Salt Lake City newspapers.

40. Other members of the association not listed in the last several paragraphs include Ellen Richardson and Hampden S. Beatie, Josephine Beatie Burton, Agnes Sharp and Albion Caine, Birdie Clawson Cummings, James L. Clayton, Mary Jones Clawson, Stanley H. Clawson, Belle Clayton, C. Q. U. Irwin De Vere, Harry Emery, Francis Fox, Emily Wells Grant, Joseph L. Heywood, Alice Young Hopkins, Mattie Hughes, A. B. Kimball, Mary Ferguson Keith, Joseph Pitt, Carl D. B. Swift, Edna Clawson Tibbits, Ned Wallin, Catherine Wells, Emmeline Wells, Elizabeth Beatie Wells, Susan Annette Wells, Rose Sipple Weighman, May Wells Whitney, Nell Woods, Allibo [Alice?] Young, Luella Cobb Young, Lorenzo D. Young. Those often attending meetings but not actually enrolled were Annie Wells Cannon, Martha Paul Hughes Cannon, William Dunbar, Fergus Ferguson, William A. Morton, George D. Pyper, John D. Spencer, Feramorz Young, and Mahonri M. Young.

41. Frank D. Kimball to Heber J. Grant, March 1940, General Correspondence; Heber M. Wells to Heber J. Grant, October 3, 1925, General Correspondence. Even the staid Rudger Clawson found that the Wasatch “more than justified its existence.” See Rudger Clawson, “Autobiography,” manuscript, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.