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Stories of the Relief Society and Their Quilt.* by Carol  
Holindrake Nielson

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Carol Holindrake Nielson. *The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt, 1857: Stories of the Relief Society and Their Quilt.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004

Reviewed by Jill Terry Rudy

The premise of *The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt, 1857* is both intriguing and straightforward: to recover the history of a nineteenth-century Relief Society quilt and the life stories of the women who stitched it together. The intrigue began when Carol Holindrake Nielson learned that her family would someday inherit “The Quilt,” an object her husband believed could be a picnic quilt made by his grandmother. Twenty-five years later, the quilt arrived in Nielson’s home after her mother-in-law presented it to Nielson’s husband. When the plain white backing was unfolded, the Nielsons discovered *half* of a carefully crafted quilt with individual squares decorated with birds, flowers, fruits, and geometric patterns, each square signed by its maker. Nielson learned from her mother-in-law that her husband’s great-great-grandfather, Richard Stephen Horne, won the quilt in a raffle when he was twelve years old. Oral tradition and written life stories confirm that Richard cut the quilt in half after the death of his first wife and gave half to each of his two oldest daughters. The pieces then passed from mother to daughter. Because the author’s mother-in-law had no daughters, she gave the quilt to her son (7–9).

Believing “only a man” could cut such a beautiful quilt in half, but grateful that her family, who descended from the second-oldest daughter, received any part of the quilt at all, the author set out to find the other half of the quilt (9–10). Nielson gathered information about Horne’s descendants and made phone calls asking about any knowledge of the quilt. Within days she learned that the other half of the quilt was near where she lived in the Salt Lake Valley with a distant cousin descended from Horne’s oldest daughter. Nielson describes the reunion of the quilt halves and the cousins as a “photo frenzy,” with everyone holding the two halves of the

quilt together (11). While the family history intrigue surrounding the quilt was resolved rather easily, Nielson still felt a strong desire to learn more about the quilt itself and the lives of the women who created and donated it for the raffle. Nielson explains, “The posterity of the women who sewed the quilt must see the needlework of their ancestral mothers. . . . A sense of urgency overwhelmed me. I felt compelled to learn the stories of the pioneer women, the artists, of the Fourteenth Ward Relief Society” (11). This book is the fruit of Nielson’s desire to share a knowledge of the quilt with other descendants of the women who stitched it and with anyone else who will learn from and appreciate the quilt, its history, and its makers.

The organization and layout match the straightforward purpose of the book. Starting with a brief introduction to familiarize readers with the terminology and values associated with the Relief Society sisters who made the quilt, Nielson tells the story of obtaining the quilt and starting her quest to learn about it. Chapter 2 relates the history of the Salt Lake Fourteenth Ward and of the early Relief Society. Referring to historical documents such as ward boundary maps, newspaper reports, and the *Women’s Exponent*, Nielson introduces readers to the significance of the ward, its members, and the Relief Society in the first decade of pioneer settlement. According to Nielson, the Fourteenth Ward occupied “nine ten-acre city blocks directly south and west of Temple Square” (15). Many prominent Church leaders lived in the ward’s boundaries, and Phebe Woodruff, first wife of Wilford Woodruff, became the president of the ward Relief Society when it was organized on September 17, 1856. The Female Relief Society succeeded an Indian Relief Society that had originally been formed in the Fourteenth Ward to provide aid to Native Americans in the valley (19–21). The group founded in 1856 met weekly in Woodruff’s home to sew and raise funds to clothe the poor and assist with contributions to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (26). The author could not determine when her husband’s ancestor won the quilt in the raffle, but dates given with some signatures on the quilt indicate at least some of the squares were completed in August 1857 (28–29). By that time, the Saints knew that the federal government was sending troops to the valley; the need for clothing and other forms of aid to assist in the move south would have been apparent to the sisters who were completing the quilt. They may have made the quilt to raise money to buy clothing and provide other aid.

Chapter 3 consists mainly of life sketches of the Relief Society women and photos of many of the quilt blocks and their makers. The chapter begins with a helpful discussion of the album quilt genre and discusses other needlework techniques that the women used to create the quilt.

Nielson explains that album quilts were popular in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and that the Relief Society women included several elements of the genre on their quilt, such as individually designed and stitched squares, signatures on each square, and appliqué and embroidery of recurring motifs (31–32). Although a very necessary element of the book, this section shows some limitations of writing about a process like needlework and quilting. The author valiantly tries to describe the process of *broderie perse*, a form of appliqué and embroidery used by several of the quilters, but the description leaves some confusion about what the women actually did to create the images and motifs on the quilt blocks (32). A more detailed description of the general elements of appliqué may have helped increase understanding of how the women combined piecing fabric, quilting, and embroidery.

Throughout the book, the design and high production values of the University of Utah Press validate Nielson's project to document the quilt and the quilters. Although Nielson states that pictures cannot convey the intricacies and durability of the cutting, piecing, and sewing techniques (33), the abundant high-quality color photographs add immeasurably to the readers' understanding and appreciation of the quilt. Because the format of the book is so straightforward, with life story following upon life story, the photographs take on added significance by reminding readers of the intricate sewing skills and the individual creativity and artistry of each woman.

Using her training and experience gained by teaching high-school English and history, the author documents her work with unpublished life stories in possession of family members, sketches in memoirs of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, journals, newspaper and magazine accounts, biographies, and biographical information about husbands and other family members of the women. The author begins her discussion with members of the Woodruff family and then presents information about other contributors by making family connections. The organizing principle of the life sketches is not clearly stated; however, it appears that the women are not discussed in relation to how their quilt blocks are arranged on the quilt but more in their relationships with each other.

The book contains a brief story of sixty-three of the contributors to the album quilt. This organizing pattern allows the book to be enjoyed over a period of time because the stories blend together if read in one sitting. As the author pieces together as much information as possible about some of the women, she admits, "Unfairly for many of the women, their preserved quilt blocks stand singularly representative of all else they might have accomplished" (205). Nielson acknowledges that the needlework is

both a fine memorial to the abilities of the quilters and a mere glimpse into the complicated richness of the women's lives. In the epilogue, the author mentions specifically her commitment to challenge the view of some of her respondents that the details of these women's lives were not of great significance (203–4). The life stories and beautiful photography of the quilt blocks inform or remind readers that these Relief Society women had moved repeatedly because of persecutions of the Church, had faced the difficulties of establishing homes in adverse settlement conditions, and had learned to live with the challenges of plural marriage and the other demands and blessings of being Latter-day Saints. The book acknowledges that their having the time and the ability to create intricate needlework in the midst of such eventful lives is a notable, significant accomplishment and legacy.

With its simple focus on a material artifact and its creators, Nielson's book makes a welcome addition to research on nineteenth-century Mormon women. For example, *The Salt Lake City 14th Ward Album Quilt, 1857* is an interesting companion piece to Margaret Brady's *Mormon Healer and Folk Poet: Mary Susannah Fowler's Life of "Unselfish Usefulness"* or to other books in the series *Western Women in History*, published by Utah State University Press. The book ably demonstrates that the design of the quilt itself, with the individually signed blocks bound together, is an invitation to recognize the unique experiences of each quilter and the strong bonds of family relationships, friendship, and faith that united the women in the sisterhood of their Relief Society.

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