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Sarah Louisa Bouton Felt. Courtesy International Society Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

# Sarah Louisa Bouton Felt

## Thousands Called Her Mother

*RoseAnn Benson*

A tribute to Sarah Louisa (“Louie”) Bouton Felt declared her “a beautiful lady whose name we all should know.”<sup>1</sup> Although many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are familiar with two names important to the organization of the Primary Association, Aurelia Spencer Rogers (1834–1922) and Eliza R. Snow (1804–1887), the name Louie B. Felt (1850–1928) is relatively unknown. However, Louie was the second person called to be a ward Primary president and at age thirty was selected to preside over all the Primary Associations in Utah Territory, serving as the first general superintendent of the Primary for forty-five years.

This article reveals how Sarah Louisa Bouton Felt developed from a shy, young girl into an innovative and progressive leader.<sup>2</sup> Her determination to stick with whatever the Lord asked, her readiness to learn

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1. “The Lessons—Church History, Subject for the Year 1924—Character Study: ‘By Their Fruits Shall Ye Know Them’: Lesson 1,” *Children’s Friend* 23 (December 1924): 378.

2. This article will draw on contemporary writings by Louie Bouton Felt, Eliza R. Snow, Emmeline B. Wells, Louisa Morris White, Lillie Tuckett Freeze, Aurelia Rogers, and Augusta Joyce Crocheron. Other primary sources include numerous articles about Louie in the *Woman’s Exponent* and *The Children’s Friend* by those who knew her well. Records of the early Primary leadership meetings and works on the history of Primary by Conrad Harward, Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, and Susan Staker Oman have been consulted. Susan Staker Oman has written on Louie’s friendship with May Anderson, and this article places that friendship in the context of Louie’s life.

more about the gospel she knew to be true, her eagerness to love and rejoice in the children of others, her perseverance in spite of illness and poor health, and her willingness to sacrifice her financial resources for the Primary shaped her into a beloved and memorable first general Primary president. Louie was young when she was called as a leader, did not have an assertive personality, and had no children of her own and thus felt inadequate, but when she was placed in a calling she did not anticipate, she rose to the challenge and spoke, taught, made decisions, and led adults and children. Her work was appreciated in her own lifetime, but hers is an unfamiliar name today, and her pioneering efforts are deserving of greater awareness.

### The Beginnings of the Primary Association

Aurelia Rogers lived in Farmington, Utah, about thirty miles north of Salt Lake City, and felt a need for more “cultivation and improvement of the children morally and spiritually than was being done through the influence of day and Sunday-Schools.”<sup>3</sup> She expressed this need to Eliza R. Snow in August 1878, and Eliza took the plan to John Taylor, head of the Church as the presiding Apostle, who approved a new organization for the teaching of children. Aurelia’s bishop called her to serve as the first Primary president in August 1878, and she served in that capacity and later as part of the Primary general board for many years.

Eliza organized the second Primary, in the Salt Lake City Eleventh Ward, on September 14, 1878, only weeks after the organization of the Farmington Primary. She selected Louie Bouton Felt to be the president, presaging the call she would receive just two years later to be the general superintendent of the Primary. The organization of local Primary Associations began in earnest soon thereafter. In 1879, Eliza—who was about seventy-four years old—began organizing Primaries in conjunction with her role as acting general Relief Society president as she traveled throughout the territory of Utah and into Idaho.<sup>4</sup>

Aurelia, Eliza, and Louie each recognized and addressed the problems of founding a children’s organization and dedicated their lives to ensuring the success of the Primary. Aurelia advocated the spiritual welfare of

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3. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), 36–37.

4. Marion Belnap Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth of the Primary Work,” *Children’s Friend* 27 (January 1928): 29. Kerr described the rapid growth of Primary Associations “as if by Magic.”

the children, promoted the need for such an association, and has since been considered the founding mother of the organization.<sup>5</sup> Traveling throughout Utah Territory, Eliza expanded the organization to branches and wards. She also created materials unique for Primary use, such as two music books, a Bible question-and-answer book, and two Primary speaker books. These materials united the widely separated associations in singing, reciting, and teaching in their weekly meetings. Louie was also an innovator, with many new ideas, and she faced the challenge of convincing Church leaders, parents, and teachers of the importance of the great work that could be accomplished in Primary. All three women showed a willingness to step forward into uncharted territory to initiate and contribute to an organization they were convinced was of divine origin. Heroically, they broke new ground, gave their hearts and countless hours of hard work to making the Primary successful, and as a result left a lasting legacy.<sup>6</sup> As the first general superintendent, young Louie Felt carried the responsibility for seeing the Primary Association become a stable, recognized, and well-run organization.

### Early Life of Louie Bouton

Sarah Louisa Bouton was born May 5, 1850, in South Norwalk, Connecticut, the third child of Joseph Bouton and Mary Rebecca Barto Bouton. The Bouton family joined the Church in the late 1840s, shortly before Louie's birth. As a child, Louie enjoyed living in New England. She loved winter sports and became a particularly proficient ice skater. She and her brothers tapped syrup from their grandfather's grove of maple trees; gathered flowers, berries, and nuts in the woods; sailed or rowed in Long Island Sound to dredge for oysters; and dug clams at the seashore for clambakes. They shared this food with the missionaries and members of the small Latter-day Saint branch that her father presided over. In addition to helping supply food for the family, as a teenager Louie learned

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5. On Aurelia Rogers's contributions to the Primary Association, see RoseAnn Benson, "Aurelia Spencer Rogers," in *Women of Faith in the Latter Days*, vol. 2, ed. Britany A. Chapman and Richard E. Turley Jr. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 303–14.

6. On the early history of the Primary Association, see RoseAnn Benson, "Primary Association Pioneers: An Early History," in *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration*, ed. Arnold K. Garr and David J. Whittaker (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 245–75.

to bake bread and pies from a black woman who worked for her family.<sup>7</sup> Louie's mother taught her housekeeping skills; however, perhaps the most important lesson Louie learned from her mother was by way of example. Two women once came to their home and began gossiping. Her mother simply left the room. When Louie went to find out where she went, her mother explained, "They were talking about the personal affairs of people, which I had no right to hear and did not wish to." Louie commented, "I had not realized until then, but I always noted it after, that other people's weaknesses and mistakes were not topics for discussion in our home, and it has been one of the guiding factors of my life."<sup>8</sup>

The family initially left Connecticut in 1864 to join the Saints in Utah but were thwarted by a fire in the baggage train that destroyed all their belongings but the clothes they were wearing. They started out again in 1866 by train and then by boat for Omaha, Nebraska. Louie, just sixteen, was later described as "full of life and animation, with sparkling blue eyes, beautiful golden hair, and a tall, graceful, slender figure. Though but a young teenage girl, she was self-possessed and dignified in her manner. By birth and education she was a gentlewoman."<sup>9</sup> Joseph Henry Felt, a recently returned missionary who had served in the northern European countries, was in charge of the Saints in Omaha and drove the carriage to meet the Boutons' boat. He was impressed with his good luck at having drawn the lot for this privilege over the other young men living there. It appears she and Joseph were attracted to each other from the outset. Louie's father was very ill, and it was necessary for the family to wait six weeks in Omaha until he recovered before continuing to Utah. During this time, young Louie and Joseph became better acquainted and fell in love. Sixteen-year-old Louie and twenty-six-year-old Joseph married in the Endowment House on December 29, 1866, a few months after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley.<sup>10</sup>

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7. "Louie B. Felt," *Children's Friend* 13 (November 1914): 597; "Lesson Department: Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt," *Children's Friend* 18 (October 1919): 404-6. See also Conrad Harward, "A History of the Growth and Development of the Primary Association of the LDS Church from 1878 to 1928" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1976), 178-97.

8. Adelaide U. Hardy, "Librarian's Department: Living for a Purpose," *Children's Friend* 17 (December 1918): 474.

9. "Louie B. Felt" (November 1914): 599. See also "Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt," 407-8.

10. Hardy, "Living for a Purpose," 476. At this time in the nineteenth century in most states and in Utah Territory, the age of consent to marry was ten,

## Early Married Life

As part of his colonization efforts, Brigham Young established settlements between Utah and California to act as way stations and as missions to Native Americans, creating a corridor that extended from Salt Lake to Las Vegas and on to San Bernardino.<sup>11</sup> The first Latter-day Saint pioneers to the Muddy River Valley, in present-day Nevada, worked diligently from the day they arrived in June 1855 to grow warm-weather crops such as cotton. The settlement was mostly abandoned in 1858 because the Saints felt threatened by the U.S. Army marching to Utah.<sup>12</sup> Settlers were again called to the Muddy River in 1865, and the newly formed Felt family was called, along with nine other young couples, at the 1867 October general conference to help pioneer the area. They left the next month for their mission. Although the Saints had been settling Utah for almost eighteen years, the Felt family had their own unique and difficult pioneering experience.

The Felts, on their way through St. George, met an old friend of Joseph's who suggested it would be much easier and more pleasant for his young wife to remain there rather than continuing into a wilder and less-civilized part of the country. Louie as a young girl was described as active and sporty, but for unknown reasons, as a seventeen-year-old and thereafter, her health was described as frail. With health concerns and the difficulties already encountered, Joseph was tempted to remain. When Joseph asked her opinion, Louie demonstrated her own faith and courage: "We were not sent to St. George; we were sent to the

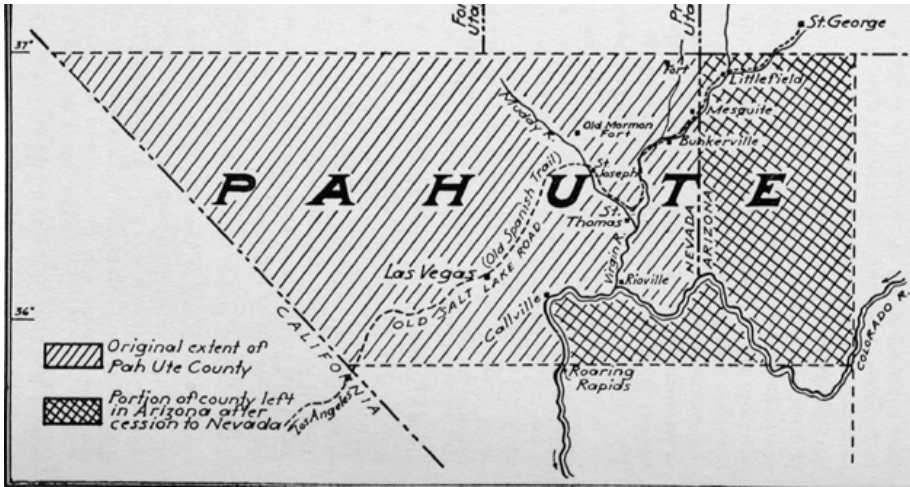
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and the marriage of a young woman to an older, financially established man was common, although in this instance Joseph was a mature returned missionary, but not yet financially secure. "To be marriageable was the same as being ready for motherhood, which was determined by physical development, not age." Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 16. See also "Joseph Smith's Marriages to Young Women," FairMormon, accessed February 1, 2019, [https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Joseph\\_Smith/Polygamy/Marriages\\_to\\_young\\_women](https://www.fairmormon.org/answers/Joseph_Smith/Polygamy/Marriages_to_young_women).

11. Richard L. Jensen, "Colonization," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:290.

12. Sondra Cosgrove, "The Muddy Mission," Online Nevada Encyclopedia, updated April 20, 2011, [http://www.onlinenevada.org/the\\_muddy\\_mission](http://www.onlinenevada.org/the_muddy_mission). As the U.S. Army, led by Albert Sidney Johnston, marched to Utah to install federal appointees in Utah's territorial government in 1857, Brigham Young called missionaries and settlers back to Utah to defend the Saints.





This historic map shows the “Old Mormon Fort,” St. Joseph, and St. Thomas along the Muddy River, which fed into the Virgin River and then the Colorado River. The settlements were along the Old Spanish Trail (also called the Old Salt Lake Road, the Arrowhead Trail, and the Mormon Trail) between St. George and Las Vegas. “Muddy Settlements in Pahute County, Arizona,” in James H. McClintock, *Mormon Settlement in Arizona: A Record of Peaceful Conquest of the Desert* (Phoenix, Ariz.: n.p., 1921), 103.

Muddy,” she told Joseph. “You may do as you please; I am going on.”<sup>13</sup> Louie’s tenacity in the face of a daunting assignment foreshadowed her long-term service as general Primary president despite a weak physical constitution.

By 1867, both the St. Thomas and the St. Joseph settlements were established. Until they could build adobe homes, most of the colonizers lived in tents or wagons within a small fort built a decade earlier.<sup>14</sup> Because of Louie’s youth and frail health, the Felts were lent what had once been a chicken coop in which to make a temporary home within the fort at St. Thomas. Soon they set to work making their own adobe bricks to build a small

13. “Louie B. Felt” (November 1914): 601. See also “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 408; Marion Belnap Kerr, “A Tribute to Louie B. Felt,” *Children’s Friend* 27 (March 1928): 99.

14. The original fort measured 150 feet on all four sides, with bastions on the northwest and southeast corners, and was made of sun-dried adobe bricks. Margo Bartlett Pesek, “Old Mormon Fort Preserves Las Vegas’ Early Roots,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, February 3, 2013, <https://www.reviewjournal.com/entertainment/entertainment-columns/trip-of-the-week/old-mormon-fort-preserves-las-vegas-early-roots/>.



home in St. Joseph, Louie working alongside Joseph in a pair of bloomers she had made for herself.<sup>15</sup> He shoveled the clay and added the water; then, bare footed, she tramped and mixed the clay until it was smooth and of the proper consistency to pour into molds they had made. The décor of their new home included a smooth clay floor covered by carpet, window openings with muslin stretched over them, a doorway enclosed by a blanket, and a brush-and-mud roof. Their furniture consisted of two chairs and a rocker, an adobe wheat storage bin upon which they placed their bed, a dry goods box covered by a curtain with a tin washbasin set on it, and a table made from brush limbs and packing boxes.<sup>16</sup>

Life in the Muddy River settlements was difficult from the outset because of the poor soil and harsh climate. Prior to the encroachment of white civilization in the 1800s, the Piutes had lived there comfortably with a combination of farming, hunting, and gathering.<sup>17</sup> Their lives were disturbed with the introduction of new diseases and the demand to share land, and those who survived were also trying to eke out an existence in the area. In an 1884 account, Latter-day Saint historian Augusta Crocheron described, however, the local Paiutes as “friendly Indians who were willing to work and learn civilization, but who were so hungry they could not resist the temptation to pluck the young watermelons and squashes planted by the missionaries, as fast as they approached the size of walnuts. . . . President Erastus Snow,<sup>18</sup> with fatherly kindness, sent beef, cattle and flour to the Indians, to stay their increasing instincts

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15. “Louie B. Felt” (November 1914): 602; “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 408–9. See also Kerr, “A Tribute to Louie B. Felt,” 99.

16. “Louie B. Felt” (November 1914): 602–3. See also “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 409.

17. “The Mormons arrived at the Muddy in January 1865 and established St. Thomas; six months later a second group founded St. Joseph nine miles to the north. Both discovered ample evidence that local Paiutes were growing crops along the Muddy River, yet the settlers saw nothing wrong with expropriating the Native Americans’ property. It was the Paiute practice to plant corn, beans, squash, and wheat before migrating to the cooler uplands for gathering and hunting. They returned every fall to harvest surviving crops. Needless to say, their 1865 return was an unhappy one.” Cosgrove, “Muddy Mission.” On early Utah missions, see also S. George Ellsworth, “Heeding the Prophet’s Call,” *Ensign* 25 (October 1995): 30–44; Susan Lyman-Whitney, “The Muddy Mission,” *Deseret News*, January 30, 1992, C1–C2.

18. Erastus Snow was the Apostle presiding over the missionary colonization settlements in southern Utah.

for self-preservation by way of appropriation.”<sup>19</sup> Other monumental difficulties included salts from a mineral spring feeding the Muddy, which made large-scale irrigation impossible; severe heat—above one hundred degrees at midnight in summer; drought, along with violent wind and biting sand; no stores or freight trains from which to purchase goods; and the annexation of the territory by Nevada, which demanded back taxes in gold or silver. These were all factors that caused Latter-day Saints to abandon the Muddy River Valley by 1871.<sup>20</sup> However, despite the hardships, Louie demonstrated her tenacity with this comment: “I never felt to murmur, but to stay as long as required.”<sup>21</sup> In 1869, the Felts returned to Salt Lake City.<sup>22</sup>

Joseph had saved no money to buy a home, having served a mission for the Church to England from 1863 to 1866, but Louie’s father had left her a small inheritance, which she used in 1872 to purchase land and to have a small cottage built for them on the southwest corner of First South and Seventh East in Salt Lake City.<sup>23</sup> Lillie Tuckett Freeze, a neighbor, described Louie as “thoroughly domestic, clean, orderly, a good housekeeper, an excellent cook; a real homemaker.” The two women became close friends in the Salt Lake Eleventh Ward, and Louie referred to her as Aunt Lillie, although Lillie was only five years her senior. Lillie described Louie as “intensely magnetic and sympathetic. Outside of her

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19. Augusta Joyce Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” in *Representative Women of Deseret* (Salt Lake City: J. C. Graham, 1884), 57–59.

20. Cosgrove, “Muddy Mission.” The settlement was reestablished in later decades.

21. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 58.

22. In 1869, likely after their return to Salt Lake City, Louie went back to Connecticut for three months to visit her father, who was not expected to live. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 58. A neighbor wrote, “Bro and sister Felt Jos. H. And Louie came in 1871 or 72—I think—we each lived on a corner—Felts on 1<sup>st</sup> So and 7<sup>th</sup> East and Freezes on 2<sup>nd</sup> So. And 7<sup>th</sup> East.” Lillie Tuckett Freeze, “A Bit of History Prior to 1880, 11th Ward,” Lillie Tuckett Freeze Papers, 1886–1928, MS 316, folder 2, p. 1, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

23. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 409. As unique as female ownership of land was at that time, Martha Sonntag Bradley wrote that as early as 1847, forty-one single women were apportioned city lots in Salt Lake City. As cited in Jill Thorley Warnick, “Women Homesteaders in Utah, 1869–1934” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1985), 23–24.

home life at this time she was a bright star in the social world. She loved parties and dances and was very popular. She and I were the leading ones in dramatics in the ward.”<sup>24</sup>

Having been faithful to the difficult mission to the Muddy, Louie now developed spiritual roots to her testimony. Although raised by faithful Latter-day Saint converts, Louie expressed her lack of gospel understanding until she served in Church auxiliaries. Rather than mourn her inability to have children, she involved herself in her ward, serving in the Sunday School as a secretary and promoting the new Young Ladies’ Retrenchment Association.<sup>25</sup> She professed, “Then . . . began some of the happiest days of my life. I soon became a member of the Y.L.M.I.A., and thereby received a better understanding of my religion, which brought me peace and happiness, such as I had never known before.”<sup>26</sup> Louie attributed much of her spiritual development to early meetings in the home of Mary Ann Freeze and Lillie Tuckett Freeze at the beginning of the Retrenchment Association. In 1878, Mary Ann designated Louie as first counselor when the stake YLMIA was organized.<sup>27</sup> In September 1878, she was also called to be the first ward Primary president in the second Primary organized in the Utah Territory.

Her more deeply established testimony of the Church included plural marriage. She bore testimony of the principle with these words: “Having no children of my own [I] was very desirous my husband should

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24. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 409–10.

25. President Brigham Young asked his wife Eliza to assist bishops in organizing ward Relief Societies in 1868 for adult Latter-day Saint women. The Relief Society that existed in Nauvoo had ceased to function as a Church organization. In 1869, President Brigham Young organized his teenage daughters into the Cooperative Retrenchment Association and asked Eliza Snow to establish similar organizations in each ward of the Church she visited. He challenged the girls “to grow spiritually, to resist idleness and gossip, to retrench from the styles of the world in dress and deportment. . . . They were not to give in to rude or harsh frontier ways” and to serve as “proper examples of Latter-day Saints.” Elaine Anderson Cannon, “Young Women,” and Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Retrenchment Association,” in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1616–19; Jill Mulvay Derr and others, *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), 168–71, 262.

26. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 58. See also “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 411–12.

27. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 411–13.

take other wives that he might have a posterity to do him honor.”<sup>28</sup> She encouraged her husband to marry women she loved as friends: Elizabeth Mineer in 1875 and Elizabeth Liddell six years later; both women bore children. Louie related, “After he took another wife and had children born to him, the Lord gave me a mother’s love for them; they seemed as if they were indeed my own, and they seem to have the same love for me they do for their own mother.”<sup>29</sup> Louie helped raise “Lizzie Ma’s” and “Aunt Dell’s” children and grandchildren and was called “Louie Ma” by them.<sup>30</sup> Louie, although childless, seemed to have a deep, innate ability to love and nurture children, which brought her great joy.

### Organizing the Primary Association

Under the direction of Church President John Taylor, Eliza Snow, with Zina Diantha Young, selected twenty-eight-year-old Louie to be president of the first Primary in Salt Lake City.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps Eliza saw in her a younger version of herself, a childless polygamous wife fully committed to helping children. Augusta Crocheron described Louie as tall, slender, and with delicate health—pale and with a countenance that was innocent, pure, refined, and spiritual in expression.<sup>32</sup> Her good friend of three years, Louisa Morris (White), illustrated Louie’s sense of humor: when Louie told her of the new calling, she engaged Louisa in a guessing game as to the names of her two counselors, finally telling her that one was to be Elizabeth Mineer Felt and she, Louisa Morris, was to be the other. Louisa declared herself “willing to obey the instructions which I knew Sister Felt was capable of giving.”<sup>33</sup> Louie, however, was not so confident of her own abilities, thinking herself too “uneducated, undisciplined in motherhood, unqualified, [and] unprepared” for her new

28. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 58.

29. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 58–59.

30. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 410–11.

31. Hardy, “Living for a Purpose,” 476. See also Kerr, “Tribute to Louie B. Felt,” 100.

32. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 59.

33. Louisa Morris White, “Recalling the Past,” Record of Louisa Morris White, MS 5568, folder 1, Church History Library. Later in her life, Louisa would add these words of thanksgiving regarding this call to her record: “Dear Sister Louie, during all the years that have intervened, my heart has gone out to you in loving gratitude for the opportunity you gave me in my girlhood of working by your side.”

calling. When Eliza and Zina informed Louie the call was from priesthood leaders, she pledged to do her very best.<sup>34</sup>

During the time Louie worked in the Salt Lake Eleventh Ward Primary and also the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. Young, Mary I. Horn, and other sisters and brothers from the stake took note of her "great ability and charm as a leader and speaker in the Stake M.I.A." and as the ward Primary president.<sup>35</sup> Lillie Freeze wrote, "Louie had a most wonderful influence over the little children of the Eleventh Ward. They were fascinated by her gracious manner. Every child was willing and anxious to do whatever she suggested."<sup>36</sup> Louisa Morris White wrote, "President Felt was beloved by officers and children alike. She was continually studying up something that would be of benefit or interest to the children. Many times I have been summoned to her home to discuss some plan pertaining to their welfare or entertainment."<sup>37</sup> Louie honed her testimony and abilities in the ward Primary and YLMIA, overcoming some of her feelings of timidity and emerging as one who motivated and encouraged others.<sup>38</sup>

In 1879, Eliza suggested to Aurelia Rogers, Primary president in Farmington and the first in all the Church, that she thought it wise "to have some one appointed to preside over all the Primary Associations in the Territory."<sup>39</sup> She [Eliza] suggested that the person should reside in Salt Lake City, as that was the center; and asked me whom I would propose to fill the office." Upon a few moments of reflection, Aurelia confessed that "the

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34. Hardy, "Living for a Purpose," 476.

35. Freeze, "A Bit of History Prior to 1880," 2. See also Susan Staker Oman, "Nurturing LDS Primaries: Louie Felt and May Anderson, 1880–1940," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 49 (Summer 1981): 265.

36. "Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt," 413.

37. White, "Recalling the Past."

38. Even after serving many years in her calling, Louie referred to her timidity as one of her weaknesses. See Louie B. Felt, "Loyalty: President Louie B. Felt," Report of the Sixth Annual Convention of Primary Association Workers, *Children's Friend* 7 (July 1908): 276.

39. Aurelia Rogers recorded April 1879 as the date she was asked by Eliza about Louie. Rogers, *Life Sketches*, 222. However, Rogers set the date as "in the spring of 1880" in her article "After Forty Years," *Children's Friend* 17 (September 1918): 357. Crocheron lists September 1879 as the date Eliza Snow appointed Louie as "Territorial President of the Primary Improvement Associations." Crocheron, "Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations," 59.

name of Sister Louie B. Felt came to my mind.” Eliza confirmed that Louie was also her choice. When Aurelia first met Louie Felt, she acknowledged even then she had “an unusually warm feeling of sympathetic friendship” toward her.<sup>40</sup> When others suggested it was Aurelia’s rightful place to preside, Aurelia declared she “never had a moment’s jealousy over anyone holding office; for no person will ever take my honors from me; I shall have all that I deserve.”<sup>41</sup> Louie recorded the visit of several “leading sisters” from the Church to her home.<sup>42</sup>

In the last week in May 1880 Sisters Eliza R. Snow Young, Prendia [Pre-sendia] Kimball and Aunt Zina Young came to my house on the corner of 1st South and 7th East SL and said a Central Board of the Primary Association was soon to be organized to look after the interest of the stake organizations and they desired to have a President of the Org. I remarked that I thought Sister Aurelia S. Rogers would be just the right [person]. But said Sister Eliza it will be necessary to have at the head ones living in the city that we may easily consult with them about the work. I also suggested the name of Sister Ellen S. Clawson who was Prest of the 12 Ward Ass[ociation].

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40. Rogers, *Life Sketches*, 222–23.

41. Rogers, *Life Sketches*, 222; Aurelia Rogers noted her sister, Salt Lake Twelfth Ward Primary president Ellen C. Clawson, who had also been asked who should preside over all the Primaries, selected Louie B. Felt. Rogers, “After Forty Years,” 357.

42. There was an unofficial female elite that led in spiritual and organizational matters. They had not yet been officially called or sustained to positions of authority; however, several had been members of the original Relief Society organized in Nauvoo. Eliza Snow was the hub around which she gathered similarly strong, faithful women. One list of who belonged to that special group of women appears in Augusta Joyce Crocheron’s book, *Representative Women of Deseret*: Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. H. Young, Mary Isabella Horne, Sarah M. Kimball, Prescendia L. Kimball, Phoebe W. Woodruff, Bathsheba W. Smith, Elizabeth Howard, Elmina S. Taylor, Mary A. Freeze, Louie B. Felt, Ellen C. Clawson, Emmeline B. Wells, Romania B. Pratt, Elvira S. Barney, Emily Hill Woodmansee, Hannah T. King, Augusta Joyce Crocheron, Helen Mar Whitney, Zina Y. Williams, and Louise M. Wells. Crocheron identified Eliza R. Snow as the “First Lady” and “President of Latter Day Saints’ Women’s Organizations” with her presiding board: Zina D. H. Young, Mary Isabella Horne, and Sarah M. Kimball (iv, 7). See also Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “The ‘Leading Sisters’: A Female Hierarchy in Nineteenth-Century Mormon Society,” in *The New Mormon History: Revisionist Essays on the Past*, ed. D. Michael Quinn (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992), 153–68.

Despite Louie's good suggestions, the women already knew whom they were to choose: "Sister Felt we have chosen you for this place." Louie's surprise and alarm was evident in her response: "I am not worthy and am so ignorant. I could not fill that position. I'm sure I could not." Eliza reassured her with this comment: "If you thought you could we would not want you." Louie was finally comforted when the sisters gathered around her and Eliza gave her a "grand blessing" employing her gift for speaking in tongues.<sup>43</sup>

Eliza Snow had long been recognized as the leading lady in the Church and was referred to as the "president of the entire Female Relief Societies" but had not yet been sustained as general president. Nevertheless, she was at the head of all the Latter-day Saint women's organizations and stood preeminent among women in organizing.<sup>44</sup> Even in her unofficial capacity, Eliza had taken the lead in organizing both the "Retrenchment Associations" (later called the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Associations, YLMIA) and the Primary Associations, considering them auxiliaries under the responsibility of the Relief Society.<sup>45</sup>

From the reports recorded in the *Woman's Exponent*, it does not appear Louie traveled to organize any of the early Primary Associations, apparently not having the authority to do so. Lillie Freeze in cryptic notes explained, "Eliza R. Snow spoke on organization[,] said women

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43. Louie Bouton Felt, "Sarah Louisa B. Felt Reminiscence," Sarah Louisa Bouton Felt Papers, 1850–1928, MS 354, folder 1, Church History Library. See also Oman, "Nurturing LDS Primaries," 265; Derr and others, *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 464–65, 474.

44. Emmeline B. Wells, "Pen Sketch of an Illustrious Woman," *Woman's Exponent* 9 (February 1, 1881): 131.

45. The *Woman's Exponent* regularly reported events in the Primary, YLMIA, and Relief Society auxiliaries. See, for example, *Woman's Exponent* 1 (June 15, 1872): 2; *Woman's Exponent* 9 (July 1, 1880): 19, 22; "Aunt Lillie's President's Party," *Children's Friend* 14 (February 1915): 67. See also Jill Mulvay Derr, "'Strength in Our Union': The Making of Mormon Sisterhood," in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987), 172; "Lesson Department: Eliza R. Snow," *Children's Friend* 18 (February 1919): 72. In 1867, almost two decades since arriving in Salt Lake Valley, the Relief Society was formally reorganized and local units established with the leadership of Eliza R. Snow under the direction of Brigham Young. In 1869, Eliza also organized the "Retrenchment Associations" for teenage women to build their testimonies and learn frugality and moderation.



could organize a primary or YL asso[ciation] but had no right—Relief Society, but could assist the Priesthood in doing so.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps what Lillie’s record refers to is explained in this 1928 historical overview of those first years of Primary by Marion Belnap Kerr:

In the early days of the Church the Sisters’ Associations were presided over by Sister Eliza R. Snow (Smith). She was known as “The Elect Lady.” Although we are not sure that she was publicly sustained to such a position, she with the sisters [Zina D. H. Young, Emmeline B. Wells, M. Isabelle Horne, E. Howard, Lula Greene Richards, Sarah M. Kimball, and other associates] . . . represented the First Presidency in organizing under the direction of the Bishops and the Presidents of stakes and in supervising all organizations presided over by women.<sup>47</sup>

These women remembered how Joseph Smith had “turn[ed] the key to you in the name of God”<sup>48</sup> in 1842, and they considered Relief Society the restoration of an ancient pattern.<sup>49</sup> Sarah M. Kimball recalled that Joseph Smith declared, “I will organize the women under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood. . . . The Church was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized.”<sup>50</sup> Eliza used this foundation as a vital point to appeal to the importance of Relief Society. Procedurally, the organization of Relief Societies required priesthood leaders’ approval and participation; however, the organization of the Young Ladies and Primary Associations was done with local priesthood leader approval but without priesthood leaders’ participation in the calling and setting apart of ward and stake presidencies.<sup>51</sup> As soon as Primary Associations were organized, they became part of the

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46. Lillie Tuckett Freeze, “Minutes of RS Severe [Sevier] Stake Oct 24 & 25, 1880,” Freeze Papers.

47. Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth of the Primary Work,” 29–30. See also Carol Cornwall Madsen and Susan Staker Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints: One Hundred Years of Primary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 4–5.

48. “Nauvoo Relief Society Minute Book,” April 28, 1842, 40, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/nauvoo-relief-society-minute-book/1>.

49. “Although the name may be of modern date, the institution is of ancient origin. We were told by our martyred prophet, that the same organization existed in the church anciently.” Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society,” *Deseret Evening News* 1 (April 18, 1868): 2; *Deseret Evening News* 1 (April 20, 1868): 2.

50. Sarah M. Kimball, “Auto-biography,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12 (September 1, 1883): 51.

51. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 10.

Relief Society quarterly meetings, which also included the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association.

The women recognized that what was de facto leadership in the women's organizations needed to become official:

In 1880 Sister Wells, in speaking to Sister Eliza R. Snow, addressed her as President. Sister Snow said, "I am not the President." "Then," said Sister Wells, "I will see that you are the President." . . .

One evening, Sister Wells went to see President John Taylor, and explained the conditions existing and the necessity for some system of general supervision in the organizations officered by women. President Taylor approved of the suggestions made by Sister Wells, and asked that he be informed of the first meeting of the sisters when he would come and attend to the matter.

In the meantime Sister Eliza R. Snow submitted the names of Mrs. Elmina S. Taylor and Mrs. Louie B. Felt as the ones suitable to preside over the Y.L.M.I.A. and the Primary Associations of the Church.<sup>52</sup>

Fittingly, during the year of the Church's jubilee celebration, on June 18 and 19, 1880, at a conference of the associations of the Salt Lake Stake—which included the Relief Society, the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association, and the Primary Association—several important Church responsibilities became official.<sup>53</sup> On Saturday morning, July 19, "the middle seats of the tabernacle were filled with the children of the Primary Association of the city. . . . The first business to be transacted was to appoint a central committee to preside over the Primary Associations of the Salt Lake Stake of Zion." Following this, "Sister Eliza,' then nominated Mrs. Louie Felt as General Superintendent

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52. "Aunt Lillie's President's Party," 67.

53. See Emmeline B. Wells, "Salt Lake Stake Relief Society Conference," *Woman's Exponent* 9 (July 1, 1880): 21–22. At a later date, Emmeline B. Wells gave additional and slightly different information about what occurred that day. President Taylor was notified that there would be a conference of the sisters on June 19, 1880. He came to the morning meeting and "neither Sisters Snow nor Taylor were present, so President John Taylor, after talking for a while to the children, presented the name of Mrs. Louie B. Felt to be sustained as General President of all the Primary Associations throughout the Church." Eliza R. Snow and Elmina S. Taylor were sustained in the afternoon. "So concluded Sister Wells, 'Sister Felt is not only the President who has presided the longest, but she is the first woman in the history of the Church to be sustained as a general president.'" "Aunt Lillie's President's Party," 67. On the jubilee celebration, see Margaret F. Maxwell, "Year of Jubilee," *New Era* 10 (July 1980): 44–51.

to preside over all the Primary Associations of all the stakes of Zion, which was unanimously carried.”<sup>54</sup> President Taylor, in his remarks to the conference, emphasized the important duty of Relief Society in teaching the children, the young men, and young women. He asked L. John Nuttall to read from “The Law of the Lord” regarding the organization of the Relief Society. President Taylor then “made explanatory remarks concerning the organization and the powers and duties it gave to women.” This was followed by the nomination and sustaining of Eliza as president of all the Relief Societies. He concluded with an apostolic blessing: “God bless the children and God bless the sisters with Sister Snow at their head.”<sup>55</sup> In his actions and remarks, President Taylor again recognized the Relief Society and its president as the presiding organization over all the women and children of the Church.

### Finding Her Place

In May 1880, Louie had just turned thirty years old when she was chosen by Eliza to preside over all the Primary Associations in the territory.<sup>56</sup> With limited training as ward Primary president for less than two years, combined with apparent inborn talents others recognized, she was selected to be the first Primary general superintendent. It appears, however, that her new calling did not mean she was automatically released from other responsibilities. According to Lillie Freeze, Louie “held 3 offices at once—ward treasurer<sup>57</sup> stake coun[selor in the YLMIA] and General Primary Prest. during the time between 1878 and 85.”<sup>58</sup> For a time, Louie seems to have concentrated on her responsibilities as the Salt Lake Eleventh Ward Primary president, as a counselor to Mary Ann Freeze on the Salt Lake Board for the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association, and as ward treasurer until she felt forced to give up these responsibilities.<sup>59</sup>

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54. Wells, “Salt Lake Stake Relief Society Conference,” 21; Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 31.

55. Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 31; see also Derr and others, *First Fifty Years of Relief Society*, 470–79.

56. Crocheron, “Louie B. Felt, President of the Primary Associations,” 59.

57. “Ward treasurer” likely refers to management of funds raised for and spent on the YLMIA.

58. Freeze, “A Bit of History Prior to 1880,” 3, underlining in original.

59. Emmeline B. Wells, “R. S., Y. L. M. I. A. and Primary Reports,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (August 1, 1880): 35; Lillie Tuckett Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 2–4, Freeze Papers; White, “Recalling the Past.”

In her new calling, Louie faced challenges finding her place in the large shadow cast by Eliza R. Snow. Her youth, the newness of the calling, and her lack of the executive expertise that Eliza had all caused her to willingly seek advice and counsel from those who were older, wiser, and more experienced—Eliza, Aurelia, Emmeline, Zina, and other women—on how to fulfill her new responsibilities as the general Primary leader.<sup>60</sup> Although described by her friend Lillie Freeze as very popular and enjoying parties and dances, “she was personally shy and preferred to remain in the background.” Having grown up in the East and then moving immediately after her marriage to the Muddy, “she was not well acquainted with either the leading sisters or the leading brethren of the Church.”<sup>61</sup> Although she had returned to Salt Lake City from the Muddy River and had resided there for nine years prior to her call to be general Primary president, perhaps her popularity and familiarity were within the confines of her Eleventh Ward and the neighborhood.

Louie’s position as head of the Primary Association was referred to with various names: “General Superintendent to preside over all the Primary Associations of all the Stakes of Zion,” “Territorial President of the Primary Improvement Associations,” and “General President of all the Primary Associations throughout the Church.” It appears the terms “superintendent” (of Primary) and “president” (of Relief Society) may have indicated a hierarchal status in the initial governance of the women’s organizations, as Louie continued to defer to Eliza and other leading women of the Relief Society.

Louie had an enormous responsibility to fulfill in getting the Primary to be accepted throughout the territory. Initially, the Primary Association was not readily received by the general Church membership. From a number of editorials and letters in the *Woman’s Exponent* and Eliza R. Snow’s several personal exhortations, it appears that support for the Primary Association was not unanimous even after more than a year of organizing associations throughout the territory.<sup>62</sup> Attendance was disappointing: “Reports from the 1880s indicate that attendance averaged

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60. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 1. See also Oman, “Nurturing LDS Primaries,” 266.

61. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 30.

62. See Homespun [Susa Young Gates], “Talk,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (December 15, 1880): 106; and M. J. C., “Education and Occupation,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (December 15, 1880): 106.

about half the number of children enrolled.”<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, most priesthood leaders, from the prophet on down to the stake presidents, were united regarding the importance of Primary work.

Several personal problems surfaced early in Louie’s presidency in response to the 1882 Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act.<sup>64</sup> Lillie Freeze recorded, “The raid began and we all scattered for nearly four years. . . . Nothing much could be done; only as the stakes and wards kept the work going.” Many Church leaders were in hiding and, according to Lillie, approximately fifteen hundred men were imprisoned. Louie’s husband, Joseph, who had at this time two additional wives, went “underground,” and Louie twice traveled East to an undisclosed location to avoid testifying against her husband that indeed he had more than one wife.<sup>65</sup> It appears Louie may have had to leave town very quickly in 1886: a letter written by general Relief Society secretary Emmeline B. Wells to Primary secretary Lillie Freeze stated: “Louie . . . asked Sister Aurelia Rogers to take her place until she returned. But she never went to see ‘Aunt Eliza.’”<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, somehow “from 1880 to 1890 Louie visited a number of Stakes some of them a number of times in company with the Leading sisters [in Relief Society and the YLMIA] for all went together in those days and helped each other.”<sup>67</sup> In October 1880, Louie, in company with Mary Ann Freeze and Clara Conrad took the train from Salt Lake to Provo to visit, “by invitation, the Primary Mutual Improvement Associations of Spanish Fork.”<sup>68</sup> Of the meeting, Louie remarked on the

63. Jill Mulvay Derr, “Sisters and Little Saints: One Hundred Years of Mormon Primaries,” in *The Mormon People: Their Character and Traditions*, ed. Thomas G. Alexander (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 80.

64. In 1887, the Edmunds-Tucker Act strengthened the previous antipolygamy act and provided serious consequences for those who practiced polygamy as well as for the financial well-being of the Church.

65. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 2; Freeze, “Bit of History Prior to 1880,” 3–4. Orson Whitney recorded that Lucy Devereau, a plural wife, was imprisoned in 1885 for refusing to answer certain questions regarding her husband. *History of Utah*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1898), 394. The estimate of the imprisonment of fifteen hundred men may be high; other estimates are a little more than half that amount.

66. Emmeline B. Wells to Lillie Freeze, September 11, 1886, Freeze Papers, folder 1.

67. Freeze, “Bit of History Prior to 1880,” 4.

68. L. B., “A Pleasant Visit to Spanish Fork,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (November 15, 1880): 91.

quiet and attentive order of the children, their ability to answer gospel questions, and particularly the singing of the small children. She might have gleaned the giving of such compliments from watching Eliza R. Snow interact at similar meetings with Primary children. The Spanish Fork minutes of the meeting report, “Mrs. Louie Felt addressed the meeting, praising and encouraging the little ones; engaging their attention by her pleasing and lovable manner.”<sup>69</sup> It appears she traveled only as invited and without her counselors, perhaps partly because there was no general Church operating fund to pay for travel; Louie’s husband paid her expenses.<sup>70</sup>

Lillie Freeze confirmed the sentiments of the Spanish Fork Primary: “Louie Because of her charming magnetic personallity, her sweet winning ways, her peculiar adaptability in handlin[g] and appealing to children—made her the idol of the day—she was sought after—by women and children[,] feted, praised, honored, and adored—no woman in the church has been more beloved[,] no woman has received such manifestations of loving admiration from co-workers—especially from her own board—no woman filled her positions better—no one is entitled to more honor.”<sup>71</sup>

A second challenge emerged at the death of Eliza R. Snow in 1887. Thirty-seven-year-old Louie felt a keen loss of “good support and council.”<sup>72</sup> The transition from having Eliza’s strong, sure hand and close proximity to priesthood leaders to working with her own skills and gifts took Louie some time. After almost ten years of learning from the “Elect Lady,” Louie now began to slowly emerge as a strong leader in her own right.<sup>73</sup> In October 1888, the Primary presidency was sustained in

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69. Hannah Cornaby, “Meeting at Spanish Fork,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9 (November 15, 1880): 95.

70. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 414; Janet Peterson and LaRene Gaunt, *Children’s Friends: Primary Presidents and Their Lives of Service* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1996), 13. I have been unable to find information on Joseph Felt’s employment, but evidently it was sufficient for him to take care of Louie’s train fare, despite the fact that in 1883 he served a six-month mission to the Cherokee Nation Indian Territory and another mission in December 1885 for an unknown length of time to the United States and Europe.

71. Freeze, “Bit of History Prior to 1880,” 4, underlining in original; see also Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 32.

72. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 2. See also Oman, “Nurturing LDS Primaries,” 266.

73. Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 29–30.

the general conference of the Church, with Lillie Tuckett Freeze as first counselor. Lillie recorded, “Joseph F. Smith blessed Louie.” Louie and Lillie Freeze attended the Utah Stake conference together, where “Louie told of her happiness in having a [traveling] companion [from the Primary] for the first-time in 8 years.”<sup>74</sup>

Louie was beset with an additional personal issue, an undefined intermittent illness.<sup>75</sup> According to Lillie Freeze, “In 1889 Louie had a long severe illness and the [Scott and Mary] Anderson family rented her home.” Scott and Mary Anderson had a daughter, Mary, known as May, age twenty-five, who became Louie’s “most attentive nurse and help in many ways.”<sup>76</sup> An article in *The Children’s Friend* recalled the first meeting between the Andersons and the Felts. The Andersons, after sailing across the Atlantic from Liverpool, continued to Utah in 1883 by train. En route to Salt Lake City the family met Joseph and Louie Felt, who were also on the train. Mary described her first impression of Louie as “a most beautiful woman with a dear little babe [a child of one of Joseph’s other wives] in her arms.” Mary was “fascinated by the blue eyes and lovely golden hair.”<sup>77</sup> It appears the nineteen-year-old Mary, from the beginning, was in awe of the thirty-three-year-old Louie and enchanted by the baby. Shortly after their arrival in Salt Lake City, Mary and her mother began to visit the Felt home, and a wonderful friendship developed. At some point Louie suggested she change her name to May to avoid confusion with Mary [Ann] Freeze, another close friend of Louie’s.<sup>78</sup> May Anderson was to become Louie’s dear friend, Primary co-worker, one of her long-term caregivers, and successor as the second general Primary president.

“As Sister Felt [having recovered from her illness] was about to make a trip to Springville to visit the Primaries there, May said, ‘I really wish I could go too.’ Brother Felt said, ‘You may. I’ll buy you both a ticket.’” On the way, Louie became concerned about whether or not the Primary workers in Springville could accommodate an additional visitor. The thought suddenly came to her, “Why not make May a Primary worker.

74. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 3.

75. At one point, her condition was described as “partial paralysis” for several months, and she also suffered from “rhumatism in her foot.” Crocheron, “Prominent Men and Women of the Church,” 414–15.

76. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 3.

77. “The Story Hour: Mary and May,” *Children’s Friend* 18 (October 1919): 420.

78. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 35; “Mary and May,” 421.



She would be a good one.”<sup>79</sup> On the train, Louie queried, “May why couldn’t you be a worker on the General Board[?]” May expressed her reservations with laughter: “What do I know about your work? And if you should call upon me to pray in public I would die.” Louie encouraged her, declaring, “I believe it is your calling,” and May responded, “I would like to think that I would always be with you.”<sup>80</sup> May became acting secretary to the board.

Louie’s love and the growth of her spiritual confidence are evident in the following story told much later by May Anderson. Once when Louie was visiting one of the stakes, “a note was brought to Sister Louie B. Felt asking that she and her party call at a home where there was a very sick baby.” They went to the home, and although Louie and the others were sure the child was about to die, the mother said, “‘Won’t you please pray for my child?’ We all knelt around and Sister Felt prayed humbly and fervently. She had the gift of prayer.” Later on in the day, upon reviewing in her mind what she had said, May wrote, “Sister Felt was much disturbed for she had promised that baby it would live. . . . Several months later Sister Felt received a letter from the mother expressing her gratitude and enclosed was a picture of a fine healthy child.”<sup>81</sup>

### Stagnation, Innovations, and a New Steady Course

Early on, the “untrodden and obscure way” of running the weekly meeting meant that Primary presidencies had to “catch the Spirit of their calling” and then determine their own program.<sup>82</sup> Women who knew how to discipline and teach their own children were now faced with managing up to one hundred children, with ages ranging from four to fourteen, sitting together for at least an hour.<sup>83</sup> As one large group, the children sang, were taught, and learned to bear testimony. The Primary presidency and their assistants (if such help could be enlisted)

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79. “Mary and May,” 421–22. See also Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 3.

80. “Mary and May,” 422.

81. May Anderson, “Officers Notes: The Spirit of Primary,” *Children’s Friend* 33 (October 1934): 349. See also “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 415.

82. White, “Recalling the Past.”

83. In 1880, one Primary president determined that trying to maintain order and interest was too much for her presidency if the mothers were not willing to be involved. Within the month she was released and her counselors resigned. Derr, “Sisters and Little Saints,” 80.

taught the children a wide variety of topics, from honesty, punctuality, and good manners to obedience, faith in God, and prayer.<sup>84</sup> According to minute book records, mainstays of the weekly meeting included an adult lecture, adult-led stories from the Bible or the Restoration, lots of singing, recitations by the children, and occasional outings to a park.<sup>85</sup>

In organizing the individual Primary Associations, Eliza invited the children as well as their parents to attend the organizing meeting, and both sustained their new leaders. In her travels, she demonstrated a pattern for leading Primary Association meetings. She encouraged children of all ages to express their feelings, bear testimony, and express publicly what they liked about Primary, giving them the feeling that the gatherings were “their own meetings.”<sup>86</sup> With the publication of her music and recitation books, the weekly meetings began to take on a more consistent and uniform direction with songs, poems, dialogues, and other children-led activities.

Several years after Eliza’s death, Louie began her own innovations to the organization. Primary Children’s Day celebrations began in May 1889, but Louie suggested June rather than May, in honor of Brigham Young’s birthday, as the date for Primary celebrations.<sup>87</sup> June 1, 1890, began the first annual celebration of Primary Day as a children’s holiday

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84. See Rogers, *Life Sketches*, 215–17.

85. The following passage is from a typewritten copy of the history of the Provo Utah Fourth Ward Primary from October 12, 1878, to 1900, Church History Library. It is a late reminiscence written in April 1957 by Beatrice Young Moore, granddaughter of President Brigham Young, and a member of that ward’s Primary in the 1890s. She provides insight into a typical weekly Primary meeting: “In all these years there were no regular lesson outlines as we have now. A program was arranged a week in advance, either by officers or a number of children as a program committee. Bible stories were told by the sisters, poems by the children. Sometimes verses from the Sermon on the Mount, some of the Articles of Faith or Ten Commandments were recited in unison or sometimes by one or two children. Also dialogues were quite popular with two, three or four children participating.” Other activities included such things as sewing rags to help make carpet, planting beans and corn, and hosting a yearly concert. See Rogers, *Life Sketches*, 220–21.

86. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 18.

87. The announcement in *The Children’s Friend* regarding the celebration included a request of a recitation of twelve “reasons why we honor Brigham Young” and a short essay on the life of Brigham Young. “President Brigham Young’s Birthday,” *Children’s Friend* 1 (June 1902): 191–93. See also “Primary Children’s Day,” *Woman’s Exponent* 18 (June 1, 1889): 4.



Primary general board members. *Front, left to right:* Lillie T. Freeze, Louie B. Felt, and Josephine R. West. *Back, left to right:* Aurelia Spencer Rogers, May Anderson. Courtesy International Society Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

throughout the stakes of Zion. Emmeline Wells commented that the date was the anniversary of Brigham Young's birthday and "a very fitting and beautiful tribute to his memory that the children of Zion rejoice."<sup>88</sup> Primary worker conferences began in 1889 for all who could come "to encourage, counsel and advise for the mutual benefit and advancement of the Primary associations." Although only twenty-five attended in 1889, it marked the beginning of Louie centralizing Primary leadership training.

In October 1890 (just as the manifesto ending polygamy was announced),<sup>89</sup> the second Primary conference convened. Louie voiced her concerns for the spiritual education of children. Since the Public School Act passed by the territorial legislature that year no longer allowed teaching of Latter-day Saint doctrine at secular schools, she

88. "First of June," *Woman's Exponent* 19 (June 1, 1890): 4.

89. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "The Manifesto and the End of Plural Marriage," <https://www.lds.org/topics/the-manifesto-and-the-end-of-plural-marriage?lang=eng>.

urged a greater focus on the welfare of the children's souls.<sup>90</sup> Despite Louie's efforts, priesthood leaders through the General Board of Education created a new organization of weekday religion classes held after school rather than turning to Primary to fill the spiritual void. Contrary to President Taylor's words in 1880 to the leaders of the women's organizations at their sustaining, it appears that Louie did not yet have the confidence of the new First Presidency and other priesthood leaders. Primary had yet to develop its own distinctive and important role separate from weekday and Sunday School classes.<sup>91</sup>

Fortuitously, in the middle of the decade new ideas were presented to Louie and May. In 1894 and 1895, the two furthered their knowledge of how to better organize the Primary by attending a class in kindergarten principles and practice and participating in a model kindergarten at the First Congregational Church led by a Miss Chapin, who had recently moved from Boston to Salt Lake City and had been trained by Elizabeth Peabody, founder of the first kindergarten. After receiving their diplomas, Louie and May started their own private kindergarten in the basement of the Eleventh Ward meetinghouse to implement these new ideas, a program that lasted for four years. Soon, the *Deseret Evening News* reported that thirty-one children between the ages of three and six were being provided interesting instruction and they were making "remarkable progress," as described by Joseph Felt, Louie's husband.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, under the direction of Miss Chapin, Louie and May opened a summer kindergarten in one of the old university buildings.<sup>93</sup> In the words of Lillie Freeze, "From that time The Primary began

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90. Primary General Board Minutes, 1889–1901 (October 3, 1890), 3–4, Church History Library.

91. Derr, "Sisters and Little Saints," 82; Thomas G. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition: A History of the Latter-day Saints 1890 to 1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 147.

92. "Kindergarten Exercises," *Deseret Evening News*, December 24, 1895, 8.

93. "Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt," 413. Although the idea of a kindergarten began about 1870, few children were enrolled in it—and likely it was nonexistent in the far reaches of the West. Initially, teaching required no special training; however, by the end of the nineteenth century, most teachers had completed a two-year normal school program. Serious educational reform began at the turn of the twentieth century with educational experts advocating compulsory public schooling for everyone up to the age of fourteen. See Lou Ann Sears, "Reaction, Initiation, and Promise: A Historical Study of the International Reading Association" (PhD diss., University of

to take on definite and steady growth.”<sup>94</sup> The experience of developing a kindergarten program gave rise in the Eleventh Ward Primary to the practice of separating the students by age and teaching them in three separate rooms with the aid of young women. These changes quickly increased activity, discovery, and participation by each child.<sup>95</sup> By 1898, the Primary general board recommended all ward Primary classes be separated by age.<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately, not all Primary workers had this professional training, and some felt uncomfortable with the new changes and desired more instruction.<sup>97</sup> As the Primary general presidency already recognized, a central mechanism was needed for disseminating information. A stopgap measure, *The Primary Helper*, was produced in 1899. The real need, their own magazine, was not to come until 1902.

At the onset of the new century, Louie expressed appreciation to educators who had provided the ideas of object lessons and kindergarten, providing for her and her co-leaders what they felt was inspired direction. Prophetically, she concluded, “The new century will see much advancement” because of these new ideas in education.<sup>98</sup> Partial fulfillment of her words took place within the next twenty years through the organization of age groups, with two age levels within each group, and the development of Seagull Girls, the Trail Builders, and the Bluebird Group to foster leadership and service in the older children.<sup>99</sup>

The year 1902 was a banner one for Primary. Louie and her counselors at that time, Lillie T. Freeze and Josephine R. West, announced that the First Presidency had approved a conference of the officers of the Primary Association in the stakes and wards and branches in May.<sup>100</sup> The necessity of holding a conference to accommodate the business

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Pittsburgh, 2007), 61, accessed July 1, 2018, [http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/7110/1/SearsLA\\_ETD4-2007.pdf](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/7110/1/SearsLA_ETD4-2007.pdf).

94. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 3.

95. Initially, children of various ages and abilities were taught together in a mutual instructional setting. Grading of children by age was a technique advocated by Horace Mann, Secretary of Education for Massachusetts.

96. Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 30; Derr, “Sisters and Little Saints,” 83–84.

97. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 43.

98. Louie B. Felt, in “Symposium: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *Woman’s Exponent* 29 (January 1, 1901): 70.

99. “Louie B. Felt: A Tribute,” *Children’s Friend* 24 (November 1925): 424.

100. Evidently, with the creation of Primary classes, more teachers were enlisted, and these teachers did not necessarily attend the conferences. The conferences were designed for stake and ward officers.

of a growing organization had been evident for some time, and now the officers would meet the day preceding the Mutual Improvement Association conference.<sup>101</sup> Almost from the beginning, the conferences were attended by stake presidents and Apostles, lending credence to the Primary Association visible to other priesthood leaders in the Church. Additionally, permission was granted for a monthly magazine. Initially, the *Woman's Exponent* acted as an agent for informing Latter-day Saint women on a wide variety of topics, including all the female-led associations; however, by 1892, the Primary Association began discussions on developing its own publication. Stake and ward Primary presidencies requested more help in managing and teaching children. The Primary general board recognized the need for regular communication through a magazine, but the First Presidency told them “it was too great an undertaking.”<sup>102</sup> Their first effort was *The Primary Helper*, a soft-covered booklet published in 1899 under the direction of the General Board of Primary Associations. It sold for fifteen cents. The preface was dedicated to “Primary Association workers, children and teachers.” The booklet contained twelve lessons covering Genesis 1–18. Each lesson consisted of songs, a Bible story (beginning with “The Creation of the World” and concluding with “Sarah and Hagar—Ishmael and Isaac”). Each lesson included review questions and several recitations or a dialogue. Many also contained a “Moral Story,” short “Memory Gems” from the Bible or Book of Mormon, and aphorisms to live by.<sup>103</sup> Unfortunately, it did not meet all the criteria needed by the wards and stakes, and only one volume was published.<sup>104</sup> After almost ten years and several requests, the First Presidency consented for the Primary presidency to create its own magazine with these directions and limitations: “You have our permission and blessing, providing you do not ask the Church for financial help.”<sup>105</sup>

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101. Louie B. Felt, Lillie T. Freeze, and Josephine R. West, “General Conference,” *Children's Friend* 1 (May 1902): 153.

102. Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 32; Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 46.

103. William A. Morton, *The Primary Helper* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1899).

104. Kerr, “Consistent and Rapid Growth,” 32.

105. “The Children's Friend,” *Children's Friend* 21 (January 1922): 54; See also Adelaide U. Hardy, “Librarian's Department: The Children's Friend,” *Children's Friend* 17 (June 1918): 230. Hardy cited this quotation: “You have our consent

The vision of the magazine Louie shared with her close friend and general Primary secretary, May Anderson, sustained their undertaking despite others' negative attitudes, their own lack of experience and money, and the addition of many more long hours of hard work.<sup>106</sup> The men in the printing office tried to discourage them: "Don't do it. Don't do it. Magazines run by women always fail. Take my advice and drop the idea." When the women pressed forward, the business manager queried, "What security have you to offer?" Louie used her home as collateral to pay for the publication of the children's magazine.<sup>107</sup> In late November 1901 they secured a small rental office, and Lula Greene Richards offered the dedicatory prayer.<sup>108</sup> In January 1902, with May Anderson as editor, Louie presided over the first publication of *The Children's Friend*, writing, "With feelings of intense joy, deep devotion and profound gratitude we introduce this little book. Hope and fear alternately plead for supremacy and we humbly ask that you will exercise charity and assist us by your faith and prayers."<sup>109</sup>

In just one year, the general board increased the number of copies published from two thousand to four thousand. Although only a portion of the officers of the Primary organizations initially supported it, *The Children's Friend* managed to survive, and Church authorities pronounced it equal to the other Church publications.<sup>110</sup> May Anderson wrote the lessons in the new magazine, changing the emphasis from Eliza's catechisms and recitations to stories and thought questions, but still including repetition and memorization. May's was a pragmatic approach employing both traditional and the new progressive methods of teaching. For three grades, there were instructions for Primary officers in addition to lessons. A yearly nickel fund from each child and officer was established to insure financial solvency from which office expenses could be paid and leadership visits could be reimbursed.<sup>111</sup>

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and our blessing, but you must take all the burden of it yourselves. If you fail, it will be impossible for us to give you any financial aid."

106. See Hardy, "Children's Friend," 230–31.

107. "Louie B. Felt," *Children's Friend* 18 (December 1919): 414; 21 (January 1922): 54–55.

108. Kerr, "Consistent and Rapid Growth," 32.

109. Louie B. Felt, "Greeting," *Children's Friend* 1 (January 1902): 2.

110. See Hardy, "Librarian's Department: The Children's Friend," *Children's Friend* (June 1918): 232.

111. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 46–47.



In 1903, the Primary conference could not be held because of cost concerns, and in its place Louie wrote a letter. She asked the Primary officers to “exercise your faith that when next June comes, we will have our conference, with the support” of Church leaders, and “all those who perhaps today do not understand us, and are a little indifferent to our work,—we will make them feel that they need us, that there must be a place for us, because we are worthy of it.” She wrote that she had not sought her position, nor would she hold it without it having been placed upon her by those in authority. In fact, she had suggested several times that someone better qualified should take her place; however, since that had not happened, she promised to do the best she could with the help of the Lord. She revealed:

Many mothers have said in my hearing, which has made me feel badly at the time, “It is all very well for Sister Felt to stand up and tell mothers what they should do when she has never been a mother.” In one sense I have not been a mother; but after all, my husband has children and I have tried to do my duty to thirteen of his children, and I know I have the respect and love of all of them. And after all I am mother over more children than any woman, for I claim 50,000 children as mine, while I hold this position; and I pray every night and morning of my life that God will give me strength and ability to help to train them.

She also delightedly announced to her co-workers, “President [Joseph F.] Smith is taking a great interest in our work; he has visited around in the different associations where he has been invited” and had been impressed with the children’s answers to his questions. He also remarked, “Sister Felt, I have never enjoyed myself better in my life than in that little meeting Sunday night.” He was willing to give his support and do all that he could for the organization.<sup>112</sup>

In the 1906 conference, Louie declared her delight in the spiritual feast that occurred when her Primary co-workers met together. She testified, “I know we are engaged in one of the noblest works here upon the earth.” She continued, “There is nothing greater than your work, when you stop to think that you are in charge of the children, the most precious gifts of God to men and women. You are teaching them to become noble men and w[o]men.”<sup>113</sup>

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112. Louie B. Felt, “Officers’ Meetings: Sister Louie B. Felt,” *Children’s Friend* 2 (July 1903): 243–45.

113. Louie B. Felt, “General Conference of Primary Officers: President Louie B. Felt,” *Children’s Friend* 5 (August 1906): 291–92.

In her 1907 address to the Primary officers, Louie urged them to love their callings and co-workers, reminding them their service should not make them feel weary. She informed them of the unity she had with her twenty-six-member board and the First Presidency. President Joseph F. Smith told the board “he wanted every Primary child enrolled on our books,” so Louie concluded, “We must do it because it has been required of us by President Smith.”<sup>114</sup> Just days after the general Primary meetings took place in early June, Joseph Felt, at the age of sixty-seven, Louie’s husband of forty years, passed away.<sup>115</sup> Surely Louie and her sister wives along with their thirteen children were devastated at their loss.



Louie B. Felt. Courtesy International Society Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

In 1908, Elder L. W. Shurtliff, president of the Weber Stake, spoke at the Primary conference and recognized the Primary Association as “one of the most important organizations in the Church. You take the children of the people almost from infancy, . . . I know that they are taught in the correct principles of the Gospel. You will teach them to be loyal to every principle that God has revealed, as well as to the authorities that He has placed to preside over the Church. . . . There is no greater work; you are laying the foundation for lives of purity of men and women.”<sup>116</sup>

Louie, the next speaker, declared, “I have longed for twenty-eight years to hear some good brother stand up here in Salt Lake City and say that this is one of the greatest organizations, because it is the foundation. . . . You cannot realize or appreciate it to-day. . . . And if I were to stop

114. Louie B. Felt, “Report of the Annual Convention of Primary Officers: Louie B. Felt,” *Children’s Friend* 6 (August 1907): 337.

115. “Joseph H. Felt, Whose Funeral Occurred in the Eleventh Ward Meetinghouse This Afternoon,” *Deseret Evening News*, June 18, 1907, 5.

116. L. W. Shurtliff, “Loyalty: Elder L. W. Shurtliff, President of Weber Stake,” *Children’s Friend* 7 (July 1908): 275.

to-day my work in the Primary Association, I have been repaid, because of the words that I have longed for years to hear from the Priesthood of God."<sup>117</sup> Following her expressions of appreciation, Louie's main message to the Primary workers was love. Harkening back to the lesson she learned many years earlier from her mother to not speak ill of others, she entreated them to not judge: "If we see in some sister, or in the President of the stake, or in the President of the Church something that we do not exactly like, is it our business to set them straight? . . . I think not, I know it is not. Our duty is to shut our eyes to the faults, that is, so far as speaking of it and repeating things that we hear. Our duty is to look upon all of our fellow-creatures with love and with kindness."<sup>118</sup>

In this meeting, Louie conveyed her feelings for her co-workers and children:

I have in my heart a love that I cannot express in words for you, my dear co-[a]borers. . . . Perhaps, like me, there are some who have been denied the great privilege of being a mother; but, if you feel as I feel, I know it was the wisdom of God that denied me this blessing, for I am certain that I should have been more selfish than I am to-day had I been a mother. But God has given me many, many lovely children through other mothers, that I may pray for, think of, and love. . . . I feel that you are all my children.<sup>119</sup>

Indicative of Louie's ongoing poor health, the 1911 convention report noted with pleasure that Sister Felt "was able to attend every session and preside with all her powers of dignity and grace."<sup>120</sup> During that year, she and May observed a crippled boy trying to cross a busy intersection in Salt Lake City, and they determined to do something. Aware that there were many children without proper medical care, May recommended the idea of a hospital. Together the two women, with the approval of the board, decided that the Primary should furnish two rooms in the Latter-day Saint Hospital, one each for boys and girls. Their idea came to fruition in 1913 with the completion of a new hospital wing.<sup>121</sup>

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117. Felt, "Loyalty: President Louie B. Felt," 276.

118. Felt, "Loyalty: President Louie B. Felt," 277.

119. Felt, "Loyalty: President Louie B. Felt," 276.

120. "Condensed Report of the Annual Convention of Primary Workers, Held in Salt Lake City, Utah, Jnue [sic] 2, 3, 4, 1911," *Children's Friend* 10 (July 1911): 365.

121. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 47–48.

The years 1912 and 1913 saw major changes in conjunction with the recommendations of the first Churchwide committee to eliminate conflicts and define areas of responsibility among the auxiliaries. Accompanying these discussions were the prayers of the Primary board for changes and new directions that had been under consideration for a decade. In 1909, Primary had two members from the Council of Twelve assigned as advisors, and a much clearer vision of Primary's goals and direction began to form. Louie, May, and the general board members were committed to the new "progressive education" promoted by G. Stanley Hall, Francis W. Parker, Marietta Pierce Johnson, and John Dewey, who emphasized "doing," such as singing, dancing, drama, arts and crafts, and exploring nature to stimulate interest in learning. Primary encouraged using the child-centered educational principles through the lessons written by May Anderson in the monthly *Children's Friend*. Primary would include social activities, ethics lessons, and music, with committees organized to develop the programs.<sup>122</sup> What began as two advisors from the Quorum of the Twelve became in 1913 a correlation committee to coordinate the various auxiliaries to avoid duplication of lessons and activities and to develop lesson materials, teacher training, and a unified church magazine. Each auxiliary was given an area of focus, and Primary's assignment was practical religion, secular subjects, and recreation.<sup>123</sup>

Louie instigated the first long-term instruction of Primary workers. In 1913, 130 Primary officers representing fifty-six stakes from Canada to New Mexico gathered for six weeks of study in Salt Lake City under the direction of the general board. They were taught folk dances, games, general health and first aid, systematic personal exercise programs, and other subjects. At the conclusion of the meetings, a special reception was organized by the officers for Louie and the general board members, honoring them with a shower of flowers and the presentation of a special painting titled *A Little Child Shall Lead Them*.<sup>124</sup> Overcome at the kind gesture, Louie apologized that she had not yet been able to overcome her natural timidity but nevertheless was pleased to represent the

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122. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 50–51, 55.

123. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 152. The unified Church magazine was not brought to fruition.

124. Louie B. Felt, "Report of Primary Officers Present at the Conference for 1913; Remarks by President Louie B. Felt," *Children's Friend* 12 (July 1913): 396; Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 55.

great Primary organization, now numbering seventy thousand workers and children.<sup>125</sup>

As evidenced by some of the training sessions, providing physical activities alongside religious instruction were two of the main focuses of Primary. Each weekly Primary meeting began to have a focused concentration: a lesson hour of scriptural topics, a story hour of moral values from good literature, a busy hour of learning everyday chores, and a social hour for marches, games, and folk dances. Although this sort of weekly concentration changed over time, Primary classes and lessons began to take on greater organization and direction under Louie's leadership. The Primary presidency, board members, and children also became involved in the wider community, forging an alliance with the American Red Cross, aiding the World War I effort, and the nonsectarian care of crippled children.<sup>126</sup> Primary was now on a firm philosophical foundation from which they could expand curriculum planning and their own magazine and aid social welfare efforts.<sup>127</sup>

In 1914, Louie's message at the annual conference included a call to be united: "If at any time there is a lack of unity among you, ask yourselves who is to blame." Louie reminded the Primary officers that their work was a privilege. She testified, "God is with us; we see it manifested more and more every day. He intended us to do the work we are doing, and if there are any not called of Him they will step down and out." She called for the women to heed the counsel of the General Authorities by dressing properly and avoiding extremes in low necks and short sleeves. She urged them to "be willing to respond to any request that comes from the priesthood of God, and strength will be given you!" Interestingly, at the conclusion of the conference, Lillie T. Freeze, an honorary member of the board, blessed the workers through the gift of tongues, declaring "the Lord was with them in their work, and would reward them according to their desires."<sup>128</sup>

In 1917, just prior to the United States entering the war, the First Presidency addressed a joint letter to all the women's organizations

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125. Felt, "Remarks by President Louie B. Felt," 395–96.

126. Derr, "Sisters and Little Saints," 86–87.

127. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 50–53, 60; Derr, "Sisters and Little Saints," 87; Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 127–28.

128. "Brief Report of the Twelfth Annual Conference of the Primary Workers," Officers' Department, *Children's Friend* 13 (July 1914): 375, 379.

declaring a need for the youth to improve dress and social customs.<sup>129</sup> Louie and her counselors urged the Primary officers to look forward to a brighter future in order for the Primary Association to “take its place in the onward movement of the Church.” She encouraged them to honor their office and their responsibility including dress and conduct so “no child may hold us guilty of setting examples unworthy to follow.”<sup>130</sup> In a prayer at the conclusion of the Friday session of the annual Primary officers’ conference, Elder William A. Morton of the Quorum of Seventy invoked the Lord’s blessing upon “Thine handmaiden, Louie B. Felt, who has presided so long and so ably over this department of Thy great latter-day work. Give unto her health and strength, vigor of body and of mind, and the spirit of her high and holy calling. May she realize more fully than she has ever realized before that in the service of the children of Zion, she is in the service of the Lord her God.”<sup>131</sup> The Primary continued its involvement with the Red Cross, and the general board was organized to coordinate “war work.” By war’s end, the children and officers of the Primary had shipped washcloths, comfort pillows and kits, tray covers, hospital bed socks, hot water covers, pajamas, sheets, and bandages; they had also planted war gardens and saved fruit stones and nut shells for use in gas masks.<sup>132</sup>

Although World War I was winding down in the fall of 1918, an influenza pandemic erupted, infecting five hundred million people and causing an estimated fifty million to one hundred million deaths. Shortly after the death of President Joseph F. Smith in 1918, Primary was suspended for a time during the winter of 1918 and 1919 because of the outbreak of this highly fatal virus. The Primary war efforts were over, but the children were asked to contribute to relief funds for Armenia, Syria, and Europe. The children were accustomed to these sorts of contributions and with the nickel fund contributed \$4,200.<sup>133</sup> The cooperative efforts by the auxiliaries and members of the Church during the war led to the feeling that more could be done to alleviate suffering at home. The Primary board chose to focus on providing a day nursery and convalescent home for needy children in Salt Lake City.

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129. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 66.

130. Louie B. Felt, May Anderson, and Clara W. Beebe, “For a Happy New Year,” *Children’s Friend* 16 (January 1917): 17.

131. “A Beautiful Prayer,” *Children’s Friend* 6 (July 1917): 267.

132. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 62–63.

133. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 65.

In January 1921, the general Primary presidency greeted the Primary officers by noting 1920 had been the most successful year in the history of the Church.<sup>134</sup> The First Presidency sent “their personal thanks and blessings to the officers and children of the Primary Association for their loyal, unselfish support in gathering funds for the little ones in the war devastated countries.”<sup>135</sup> In 1921, Louie and May traveled east to learn about establishing a hospital for needy children. In 1922, the Home and Day Nursery in the renovated Hyde home just north of the temple in Salt Lake City was dedicated.<sup>136</sup> As the time approached for opening the convalescent home and day care hospital, funding ideas were needed. The one adopted was the “birthday pennies” contribution. On “Penny Day” every person in the Church was asked to contribute pennies equal to his or her age. This became a major source for financing Primary-sponsored patients at the hospital.<sup>137</sup> Although now almost seventy-one, Louie still ably and efficiently presided over the annual June convention, much to the delight of her peers. At a special afternoon entertainment presented by children, each one presented Sister Felt with a bunch of flowers.<sup>138</sup>

In 1925, Louie looked back with pride at a well-organized and respected auxiliary whose influence was widespread. In a greeting to all Primary Association workers, she declared her delight with the increase in numbers of associations, officers, new members in the mission field, and a total membership of almost one hundred thousand.<sup>139</sup> Later that year, President Heber J. Grant lauded her remarkably long years of service and efforts on behalf of the Primary Association. He declared, “By reason of their faithfulness, they have been an inspiration; I am sure, to the Stake and Ward officers with whom they have come in contact. There is no labor in which any of us can be engaged that is

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134. Louie B. Felt, May Anderson, and Clara W. Beebe, “Greetings,” *Children’s Friend* 20 (January 1921): 20.

135. Louie B. Felt, “Our Heartfelt Thanks,” *Children’s Friend* 20 (April 1921): 157.

136. This later became the Children’s Convalescent Hospital and was the progenitor of the Primary Children’s Hospital. Alexander, *Mormonism in Transition*, 148.

137. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 67–68.

138. “The Convention for 1921,” *Children’s Friend* 20 (September 1921): 367.

139. Louie B. Felt, May Anderson, and Clara W. Beebe, “Greeting: To All the Primary Association Workers at Home and Abroad,” *Children’s Friend* 24 (January 1925): 30.



more acceptable in the sight of our Heavenly Father than laboring for the children in the Church of Christ.”<sup>140</sup>

### Health and Aging

Louie’s Primary responsibilities were legion, and her health, even in her adolescence, was described as frail. As an adult she suffered from rheumatism, endured a months-long bout of partial paralysis, and another time collapsed during a Primary board meeting. Fortunately, her good friends stepped in to care for her.<sup>141</sup> In about 1889, when Joseph was going to be away on a business trip for six weeks, he asked May Anderson to stay in their home and care for Louie, who was ill at the time.<sup>142</sup> May was solicitous in caring for Louie and continued to provide helpful service thereafter, remaining in their home for twenty-five years. May’s presence provided a comfortable transition when Joseph died in 1907, leaving Louie a widow for the last twenty-two years of her life.

Observers of Louie and May’s friendship over many years of working together described it as having “ripened into love” with deep filial devotion: “never were more ardent lovers than these two.” Because of the abiding friendship between Louie and May they were called “the Primary David and Jonathan,” in a *Children’s Friend* article,<sup>143</sup> referring to the close friendship between David, the man Samuel designated as the future king of Israel, and Jonathan, King Saul’s son, as recorded in 2 Samuel 1.<sup>144</sup> Louie and May served together for about thirty-five years, wearing out their lives in service to the Primary. The two women counseled together for long hours every day regarding Primary, and “when they were too tired to sit up any longer they put on their bath-rob

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140. Heber J. Grant, “Address by President Heber J. Grant: Delivered at the Annual Convention of Primary Association Workers, June 7th, 1925,” *Children’s Friend* 24 (August 1925): 323.

141. Freeze, “Primary Work from 1880 to 1890,” 3. See also “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 414–15.

142. “Mary and May,” 421.

143. “Mary and May,” 420–21.

144. David expressed his profound feelings of sadness at the death of Jonathan with these words: “I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant [the Hebrew term means pleasant, beautiful, sweet, delightful, lovely] hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women” (2 Sam. 1:26).

and crawled into bed to work until the wee small hours of the night.”<sup>145</sup> Louie described her friend May: “Although small in stature, she has wonderful force of character, resourcefulness, and business ability. But her greatest interest in life is the children. Nothing is too great a task if it will in any way be of benefit to them.”<sup>146</sup>

The overtly sentimental Victorian phraseology used to describe their friendship is not common today.<sup>147</sup> These expressions typified true Christian friendship and service to individuals and causes greater than themselves. Louie and May’s personal friendship made for an extraordinary working relationship. They complemented and compensated each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and together helped Primary grow and mature into a truly marvelous organization.<sup>148</sup> May had become a self-confident and efficient professional who filled the need for an organizer when Eliza R. Snow died, while “Louie remained the

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145. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt,” 414.

146. Louie B. Felt, “An Appreciation,” *Children’s Friend* 11 (January 1912): 28.

147. Descriptions of the relationship between Louie and May show a godly, sisterly, and spiritual love with no evidence of erotic context. Florid expressions of love were part of Victorian prose and did not have the sexual overtones placed upon them by some today. In today’s modern society, intimacy and sex are often considered the same. These women, however, were not modern; they were in a relatively isolated Victorian-influenced culture. As an example, George Q. Cannon, a contemporary and member of the First Presidency, discoursed on true brotherly and sisterly love in the gospel: “There is one thing that distinguishes the Latter-day Saints from every other people that I know anything about . . . and that is, they love one another. . . . It exceeds any sexual love that can be conceived of, and it is this love that has bound the [Latter-day Saint] people together. It has been a cement that all the persecution, all the tribulation, and all kinds of trial could not dissolve or break. . . . It is the outpouring . . . of the Spirit of God . . . and these are the fruits of that spirit.” George Q. Cannon, “The Gathering—Miracles not Designed to Convert the World,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 22:365–66 (July 24, 1881).

George L. Mitton and Rhett S. James, “A Response to D. Michael Quinn’s Homosexual Distortion of Latter-day Saint History,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10, no. 1 (1998): 141–263. Overall, Mitton and James describe Quinn’s book as politically motivated, radically revisionist, and with a presentist bias. For more on platonic female relationships in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1 (Autumn, 1975): 1–29. In the 1890s, the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual” came into use but primarily in a clinical sense and were not part of common vocabulary. *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com/>.

148. Madsen and Oman, *Sisters and Little Saints*, 73.

spiritual and charismatic leader and the arbiter of difficulties among board members.”<sup>149</sup>

May likely looked up to Louie as a dear mentor, friend, and kindred spirit with whom she had much in common and who also needed her help because of poor health. After Joseph died, Louie continued to carry a very heavy load as Primary president, and as she aged, she needed a good friend. As described in *The Children’s Friend*, May saw to it that “Sister Felt’s attire is perfect in every detail. She pins on her collar and she combs her hair. She helps her down the stairs and into the automobile and is on a constant lookout to see that nothing disagreeable happens to her.”<sup>150</sup>

After Joseph died, other family members moved back into the home. Her closest sister wife, Elizabeth Mineer Felt; Vera, one of Elizabeth’s children; and the four children of the deceased Louie Felt Keysor (also a child of Elizabeth), moved in. Although Louie’s home likely became overcrowded, she rejoiced in having these family members live with her. She loved the grandchildren and willingly shared her income to feed, clothe, and educate them. Every night she insisted on visiting each bed and tucking each one in.<sup>151</sup>

In a 1919 private letter to then honorary board member Lillie Freeze, Louie wrote about her new home located on 1225 Third Avenue and called it “almost off the map.” In the letter, she lamented the pace of her life:

It seems to me that I never was so rushed as I am now. I never get to bed till after one-o-clock in the morning, and I am always the first one up, so you can see I am pretty well tied up . . . with home and office work. We are all fairly well and our work in the office is constantly increasing. . . . We are beginning to go out to our conventions now and of course that is always a trial to me as so many are unwilling to go, or have a reason for not going and it falls on a few, and it nearly distracts me to find enough to go.<sup>152</sup>

Lillie revealed how she and others felt about Louie: “Much sympathy has been felt for Louie’s childless life, and the death of parents—and all

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149. Oman, “Nurturing LDS Primaries,” 271.

150. “Mary and May,” 421.

151. “Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louis B. Felt,” 411; “Louie B. Felt: A Tribute,” 423.

152. Louie B. Felt to Lillie T. Freeze, May 7, 1919, Freeze Papers, folder 1, underlining in original.



Louie B. Felt with grandchildren of her sister-wives, 1919. Courtesy International Society Daughters of Utah Pioneers.

brothers and sisters—But as she has often said plural marriage gave her everything, [including] children & grandchildren.”<sup>153</sup>

In 1919, Adelaide U. Hardy wrote about God’s creation of Louie B. Felt. She observed Louie

was not born with all her present virtues, active as they are now; she has developed them through a very full life. Difficulties have been overcome, deprivations endured, sorrows suffered, patience tried and temptations conquered. . . . The great

secret of Sister Felt’s success in life is this: In her early years she learned the nearness of God to His children and His willingness to aid and direct them if they will permit Him, so that whenever a task was to be performed, or a new course pursued, she governed herself not by what this one or that one might say, but by what would be pleasing in the sight of Our Father in Heaven. . . . Sister Felt never imposes her worthiness upon one. One unwittingly senses it. . . . Her charming simplicity, natural humility and understanding heart richly qualify her to be a leader of the little ones.<sup>154</sup>

In 1924, the “Lesson Department” of the Primary general board decided that the youngest children were to be taught about the “beautiful lady whose name we all should know, who has lived for little children and served them for forty-six years. . . . She started to help little folks when she was a young woman. She has worked and prayed for them these many years until now her hair is as white as snow. She is our leader, our president and her name is Louie B. Felt.”<sup>155</sup> The lessons for

153. Freeze, “Bit of History Prior to 1880,” 5.

154. Adelaide U. Hardy, “Librarians’ Department: Louie B. Felt,” *Children’s Friend* 18 (December 1919): 492.

155. “Lessons—Church History, Subject for the Year 1924,” 378–79.

the older children focused on Louie B. Felt's acts of service and her gifts to humanity.

### Retiring

For her Primary officers and children, Louie had "lived, worked, wept, and prayed nearly half a century. She [had] grown old and young again doing for others."<sup>156</sup> She was beloved by the children, her counselors, and other Primary officers and teachers; Louie returned love to them in a long life of service. She served as Primary general president for forty-five years, even during poor health, until age seventy-five. In the fall of 1925, she asked to be released from her calling because she had grown too feeble to continue her responsibilities.

Louie died a few years later, in her seventy-ninth year. In a memorial, Marion Kerr Belnap described Louie as "beautiful, cultured, modest, warmly sympathetic, magnetic, fun-loving, companionable, deeply spiritual and possessed [with] an extraordinary love for little children."<sup>157</sup> She further noted her devotion to her husband, Joseph, and to his children, especially those of Elizabeth Mineer Felt.

### Conclusion

Louie's determination to fulfill a mission with her husband to help settle the very difficult Muddy River Valley, although she was young and her health frail, set the stage for a woman who knew how to roll up her bloomers for hard work. Her friendship with Mary Ann Freeze and Lillie Tuckett Freeze nurtured a more mature understanding of the Church her parents had raised her in as she served with them in the YLMIA. She swallowed her disappointment at being childless by embracing the children of her husband's other two wives, the young women of the YLMIA, and then the children of the Primary Association. Through her faithful dedication to whatever the Lord called her to do, her latent spiritual gift of leadership became enlarged, and she overcame her feelings of shyness and inadequacy. She increased her abilities as a teacher and leader by taking a class in current educational philosophy and starting two kindergartens. She bridged the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with innovative educational and social work ideas that helped institutionalize a new

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156. "Prominent Men and Women of the Church: Louie B. Felt," 415.

157. Kerr, "Tribute to Louie B. Felt," 99.

organization for children. Financially, she and her husband willingly sacrificed in order for her to travel throughout the territory to meet with the young children, start *The Children's Friend* against the advice of seasoned editors, and pay for untold other expenses. Louie's long-term efforts with the Primary organization were legendary in her day—they deserve to be appreciated and acknowledged in our day as well. She gave her heart, soul, and health to building up the Primary organization from its infancy.

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