POLYGAMY and the FRONTIER
Mormon Women in Early Utah

THE MORMON ATTEMPT to establish a form of polygamy in Utah and adjacent areas of the Intermountain West during the last half of the nineteenth century constitutes the largest, best-organized, and most controversial venture in radically restructuring marriage and family life in nineteenth-century America. Although other alternatives to monogamy in this period, such as the systems of the celibate Shakers and the free-love Oneida Perfectionists, directly affected only a few thousand individuals at most, plural marriage ultimately became the family ideal for more than one hundred thousand Latter-day Saints who placed their indelible cultural imprint on much of the American West. In setting up their Great Basin kingdom, the Mormons skillfully and systematically sought to create an autonomous religious and cultural order based on American and biblical models. Polygamy became an integral part of that larger effort between 1852, when the Mormons in Utah first publicly announced that they were practicing it, and 1890, when, under intense federal pressure, they began to give up the practice.1

Few aspects of Mormon polygamy have been more controversial than its impact on women. During the nineteenth century, hostile external observers attacked the practice as a “ relic of barbarism,” a system of institutionalized lust that degraded women, destroyed the unity of the family, and led inevitably to unhappiness, debaucheries, and excesses of all kinds. Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints were equally vigorous in defending their marital practices, arguing that plural marriage and the Old Testament patriarchal model on which it was based actually strengthened family and kinship ties, led to the rearing of righteous children in the best families, and allowed women greater freedom in choosing the men they wanted to marry. More recently, both Mormon and non-Mormon scholars have attempted to treat polygamy with greater objectivity, to show how it functioned in pioneer Utah and what it meant to the people who participated in it. Through the use of demographic studies, literary analyses, oral histories, group biographies, and a variety of other methods, these writers have highlighted key questions raised by this extraordinary effort to introduce new forms of marriage and family relations in nineteenth-century America.2

Based on current research and available manuscript materials, it is now possible to move beyond simple polemics and begin to understand the complex ways in which polygamy affected relationships between men and women in the Great Basin region. Although polygamy had been secretly taught and practiced by Mormons at least as early as 1841 in Nauvoo, Illinois, not until the difficult exodus to the relative isolation of the Intermountain West were the Latter-day Saints free to set up their unorthodox marriage system without constant external interference. During the years between 1847, when the Mormons first arrived in Utah, and 1877, when Brigham Young died, polygamy became an integral part of Mormon life in the Great Basin region and profoundly influenced the experiences and activities of women there.

The problems and challenges of life under polygamy in Utah are described in numerous diaries, journals, letters, and other firsthand accounts by Mormon women.3 Perhaps the finest presentation of the range of women’s experiences under polygamy is found in the reflections of Jane Snyder Richards, first wife of the Mormon apostle Franklin D. Richards and herself active in many capacities on behalf of her family and the women of Utah. In 1880 in an interview entitled “The Inner Facts of Social Life in Utah,” Mrs. Richards spoke candidly about her experiences and feelings with the non-Mormon
Mrs. Hubert Howe Bancroft, who was helping her husband collect information for his monumental history of Utah. Although Mrs. Richards was far from a typical Mormon wife and mother, her interview and other writings sensitively portray many of the characteristic features of early polygamy, as well as the complex adjustments necessary to make polygamy work even in an unusually good relationship. Observing Mr. and Mrs. Richards together, Mrs. Bancroft wrote, “He seems remarkably considerate and kind and speaks of her with gratitude and pride, and that he wanted her to enjoy this little visit to California for she has suffered so much affliction and so many hardships. . . . His attentions and kind consideration for her are very marked. She is certainly very devoted to him, and I am imagining this trip and the one they have just returned from in the East, as a sort of honey-month in middle life.”

Before abstracting out some of the characteristic aspects of polygamy illustrated by the Richards case, a brief look at their relationship and experience is in order. Jane Snyder was born on January 31, 1823, in Pamela, New York, one of the youngest of eleven children of a prosperous farmer and stock raiser. Her father had not belonged to any church before joining the Mormons, while her mother had been a devout Methodist. Jane showed her strength of will at age seventeen, when, upon deciding to join the Mormon church in midwinter, she insisted on undergoing a proper baptism by immersion out-of-doors in a lake near her home in La Porte, Illinois.

Franklin D. Richards was born in Richmond, Massachusetts, on April 2, 1821. The fourth of nine children, he grew up accustomed to hard manual labor on his father’s farm, but in his spare time he loved to read and discuss issues of the day. At age ten Franklin left home and traveled about as an itinerant worker until he joined the Mormon church in 1838. He rose rapidly in the hierarchy as he demonstrated his remarkable organizational and proselytizing skills.

Jane Snyder and Franklin Richards met through their mutual involvement in the Mormon church. Robert Snyder, Jane’s father, was one of Franklin’s traveling missionary companions. When Franklin became seriously ill on one occasion, Jane nursed him back to health in the Snyder family home in La Porte. Thereafter, he became a frequent visitor to La Porte, eventually marrying Jane in December 1842. Their first child was born in November 1843, and in the spring of the following year Franklin was called on a mission to England.

As an increasingly prominent member of the Mormon church, Franklin soon learned of the new belief in polygamous marriage as a necessity for the highest exaltation in the afterlife. About eight months after their marriage, when Jane was in the advanced stages of pregnancy, he approached her about the possibility of taking another wife. She was deeply hurt at this suggestion, and her opposition may have been largely responsible for his waiting nearly three years before finally taking the seventeen-year-old Elizabeth McFate as a plural wife in January 1846, eight days after he and Jane had been sealed together for “time and eternity” in the temple.

Although Jane Richards had severe misgivings about polygamy, she found that she and Elizabeth could get on well together. Aware of the awkwardness of the situation, Elizabeth was deferential to Jane and tried to be especially kind and considerate. Jane lived in the lower half of the house, while Elizabeth was assigned to the upper story. They divided the labor between them. If Elizabeth did the cooking, for instance, Jane did the washing, and vice versa. To those who knew that the Mormons were practicing polygamy, Jane Richards spoke of Elizabeth as Mrs. Elizabeth Richards.

In May 1846 the Richardses reluctantly sold for a mere pittance the house for which they had sacrificed so much to build. Along with the other Mormons who were fleeing the anti-Mormon mobs in Illinois, Jane and Elizabeth Richards began an incredibly difficult journey west. The two women had to take almost complete responsibility for the difficult move because Franklin Richards was called away on another mission at the time of their departure from Illinois. During the trip west, Jane gave birth to a second child, who promptly died. She also lost her first daughter, Elizabeth, whose health had never been robust, died of “consumption” en route. During the trip Jane was so sick at times that, in her own words, “I only lived because I could not die.” Seeing her pitiable state when the Mormons stopped for the winter in Nebraska, Brigham Young expressed special concern for her, saying that if he had known her situation, he would not have required her husband to go on a mission at that time.

Conditions improved somewhat after Jane’s arrival in Salt Lake, but life was still exceptionally difficult for her. In 1849, after
Franklin had been back only a short time, he was appointed one of Brigham Young's twelve apostles and shortly thereafter was called to undertake yet another mission to England. There he was playing an increasingly important role in originating and developing the remarkable Mormon emigration system. Before he left, he was married to Sarah Snyder, a sister of his wife Jane. Sarah had been deserted by her first husband while she was coming west, and she was having considerable difficulty managing alone with five small children. Also in 1849, Franklin took Charlotte Fox as a plural wife.

The succeeding fifteen years were marked by Franklin's repeated missionary and church appointments and by his resulting long absences from home. Following a highly successful term as president of the British mission from 1850 to 1852, during which time sixteen thousand people joined the Mormon church, Franklin Richards returned home to the Great Basin, taking three additional wives, Susan S. Pierson in 1853, Laura A. Snyder in 1854, and Josephine de la Harpe in 1857. After Willard Richards died in 1854, Franklin was counseled by Brigham Young—following the Mormon variant on the Mosaic practice of the levirate—to marry his uncle's widows. As a result, four more women, Nancy Longstroth, Mary Thompson, Susannah Bayliss, and Rodah H. Foss, were sealed to him by Brigham Young in March 1857.⁶

Living conditions for the various wives differed greatly during the course of their marriages to Franklin Richards. The early years were the hardest. When Franklin was called to go to England in October 1849, for instance, Jane Richards was left temporarily in a one-room, floorless, almost roofless house. As soon as possible, she and the other women who married Franklin took steps to improve their condition. To a considerable extent they were on their own resources, at least until 1869, when Franklin finally came back permanently to live in the Great Basin region after the last of his four major missionary trips to England. Jane Richards eventually established a house in Ogden, while the other wives lived in different cities in Utah. During this period Jane played an active role in the Relief Society, the women's organization in the church, as well as in national women's organizations, while Franklin served variously as judge, church historian, and president of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, one of the highest positions in the church. Though his work still called him away from home much of the time, many of the greatest pressures from the early period were gone after he had finally completed his missionary activities abroad.

Underlying the entire interview between Mrs. Bancroft and Mrs. Richards was an awareness of the intense personal commitment and the difficult personal renunciations involved in the practice of polygamy, especially for women, and most especially for the first wife. Romantic love was sharply undercut by the new arrangements. Jane Richards spoke of her initial "repugnance" when she first learned of polygamy in Illinois; how "crushed" she felt when her husband first approached her about the possibility of taking another wife; and of her unhappiness when he married three new wives in Utah after he had returned from an extended mission to England. Like many other Mormon women, Mrs. Richards was able to accept polygamy only because she convinced herself that it was essential to her salvation and to that of her husband. She found that in practice polygamy "was not such a trial as she had feared" and that she and the other wives were able to cooperate effectively. On several occasions during the interview Mrs. Richards appeared to be trying to reassure herself that her husband was motivated by a sense of religious duty and not by any lustful desires. Mrs. Bancroft concluded her record of the interview by observing that on the whole it seemed to her that Mormon women considered polygamy "as a religious duty and schooled themselves to bear its discomforts as a sort of religious penance, and that it was a matter of pride to make everybody believe they lived happily and to persuade themselves and others that was not a trial; and that a long life of such discipline makes the trial lighter."⁷

Other diary and journal accounts, interviews with individuals who lived in polygamous families, and recent quantitative analyses show that religious commitment was, indeed, the primary reason that most Mormon women—and most men as well—gave for entering into plural marriage. Only a sense of the cosmic importance of their endeavor was enough to convince thousands of individuals to accept or adopt practices radically at variance with all that they had ever been taught. As the Mormon mother Annie Clark Tanner, who grew up in a polygamous household and became a plural wife herself, declared:
I am sure that women would never have accepted polygamy had it not been for their religion. No woman ever consented to its practice without great sacrifice on her part. There is something so sacred about the relationship of husband and wife that a third party in the family is sure to disturb the confidence and security that formerly existed.

The principle of Celestial Marriage was considered the capstone of the Mormon religion. Only by practicing it would the highest exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom of God be obtained. According to the founders of the Mormon Church, the great purpose of this life is to prepare for the Celestial Kingdom in the world to come. The tremendous sacrifices of the Mormon people can only be understood if one keeps in mind this basic other-world philosophy.

Although polygamy was especially difficult for women, it also required significant renunciations from the men who took on the responsibility of marrying plural wives. Polygamists such as Franklin Richards were typically of a higher religious and economic status than the average member, and they were frequently called away from home on church business for extended periods of time so that they had relatively little opportunity to be with their families. Furthermore, even when such Mormon polygamists were at home, they faced complex problems of family management that made significant expression of romantic love difficult. Like other serious polygamists, Franklin Richards had to try to avoid favoritism toward his plural wives if he were to maintain family harmony; he had to try to make an equitable distribution of his time, money, and affections when he was not away on church business. Jane Richards remembered how even her husband’s most sincere efforts to treat his wives equally led to frustration and heartache. Even with the best of will, individuals who had been socialized into monogamous norms found the necessary transition to the new patterns of relationships in polygamy difficult.

Given the complexities of polygamy and the renunciations that it entailed, it is not surprising to find that plural marriage was far from universally practiced in the Great Basin. Using a sample of more than six thousand prominent Mormon families, Stanley Snow Ivins estimated that at most only 15 to 20 percent were polygamous. Using a subsample of 1,784 polygamous men, Ivins found that a large majority, 66.3 percent, married only the one extra wife considered necessary for the highest exaltation in the celestial kingdom. Another 21.2 percent married three wives, and 6.7 percent went so far as to take four wives. The remaining group of less than 6 percent married five or more women. The limited incidence of polygamy may also have been the result of the limited number of available women. At no time during Utah’s territorial history did the total number of women outnumber the men. Finally, according to Ivins’s figures, the rate at which new polygamous marriages were established was always in an overall decline after the early 1856–57 peak. Sporadic increases in the rate of entry into polygamous marriages occurred during times of internal or external crisis, when polygamy served as a rallying point through which Mormons could prove their loyalty to the church, but continued exhortation and group pressure appear to have been necessary to sustain the practice.

Although plural marriage may well have been less than appealing to many men and women, such arrangements can be viewed in context as part of the necessary subordination of individual desires to long-term group goals that underlay Mormon success in the rapid settlement and development of the Intermountain West. Sexual impulses were sublimated into the arduous group enterprise of settling Utah and building up a Zion in the wilderness. As the historian Leonard Arrington has observed, “Only a high degree of religious devotion and discipline, superb organization and planning, made survival possible” in early Utah. Mormon men, particularly the leading ones, who were most often polygamists, had to be willing to move flexibly on church assignments as the demands of the group required. By partially breaking down exclusive bonds between a husband and wife and by undercutting direct emotional involvement in family affairs in favor of church business, polygamy may well have contributed significantly to the long-range demands of centralized planning and the rapid establishment of a new religious and communal order.

Polygamy obviously required difficult renunciations and tended to undercut, though by no means to eliminate, emotional attachments based on romantic love. Yet polygamy also had certain posi-
tive features that gave it staying power. In a rather impressionistic survey of 110 plural marriages, the sociologist Kimball Young concluded that 53 percent were highly or reasonably successful, 25 percent were of moderate to doubtful success, and 23 percent were unsuccessful. Other evidence also suggests positive features that could be present in polygamous marriages. What were some of the possible compensatory aspects of plural marriage for women, and how did they adapt to the demands of the new arrangements? How did polygamy in some instances encourage women to develop self-reliance and independence?

The status advantages of being a plural wife have seldom been seriously considered. Non-Mormon critics of polygamy have almost invariably assumed that because they would have felt degraded under plural marriage, plural wives must also have felt degraded. Plausible though this might seem, little internal Mormon evidence supports such a view. Life certainly did hold special trials for plural wives, but at least until the 1880s, being a plural wife also brought higher status through association with the most influential men and through a sense of serving as a religious and social model for others. First wives such as Jane Richards who married under monogamous expectations often had considerable difficulty in adjusting, but many plural wives had other reactions. In some cases, first wives actively encouraged a reluctant husband to take a plural wife so that they could both reach the highest state of exaltation in the afterlife or for other more pragmatic economic or personal considerations. Viewed as an honorable and desirable practice, plural marriage could give women a sense of pride and significance within the Mormon community.

The almost cosmic importance attached to home and family life was a major factor determining women’s status in the Great Basin region. Children were highly valued by Mormons. Like outside converts, children provided an essential work force to help in settling the new land and in building up an essentially agrarian economy in Utah. One polygamous wife emphasized the extreme importance that Mormons placed on childbearing and child rearing:

Our children are considered stars in a mother’s crown, and the more there are, if righteous, the more glory they will add to her and their father’s eternal kingdom, for their parents on earth, if

In terms strikingly similar to those used by their Victorian contemporaries, Mormons stressed the positive and vital social role that women could play in the family and, by extension, in the larger community, which in the Mormon case was generally coterminous with the family. As the non-Mormon historian Gail Farr Casterline has noted, “Polygamy seemed to introduce no outstanding change in how Mormon women viewed themselves in their home role; the family was often treated in the same sentimental tones used by those who lauded the monogamous family.”

The Mormon emphasis on the mother-child relationship served compensatory emotional functions for women whose husbands were often absent. Jane Richards, like many other plural wives, indicated that her primary emotional involvement was with her children, rather than her husband. Similarly, Mrs. S. A. Cooks, who became a Mormon despite her aversion to polygamy, described how Heber C. Kimball’s first wife, Vilate, had advised an unhappy plural wife that “her comfort must be wholly in her children; that she must lay aside wholly all interest or thought in what her husband was doing while he was away from her” and simply be as “pleased to see him when he came in as she was pleased to see any friend.” In short, the woman was advised to maintain an emotional distance from her husband to avoid psychic hurt. Mrs. Cooks concluded: “Mrs. Kimball interested herself very much in the welfare of others’ wives and their children to see that there was plenty of homespun clothing etc. for all; and set a noble example to others situated as she was.”

The strong stress on ties of sisterhood between plural wives also served an important compensatory emotional function when the husband was absent. Informal female support networks and cooperation among women developed, especially during crisis periods such as those associated with childbirth, economic hardship, and bereavement. Mormon “sister-wives,” as they were sometimes called, often literally were blood sisters. Of Vicky Burgess-Olson’s sample, for in-
stance, 31.2 percent of the plural marriages included at least one pair of sisters. Although such sororal polygamy was a departure from Old Testament standards and led to erroneous allegations that the Mormons practiced incest, such arrangements made much practical sense. If two sisters were married to the same man, they could more easily adjust to each other in the marriage than total strangers could.\textsuperscript{17}

The popular seminovelistic American stereotype of the plural wife as living in a Mormon “harem” had almost no basis in fact. Far from excluding women from the world, polygamy and the cohesive Mormon village community with which it was associated could lead some women to participate actively in the larger society. Cast-erline notes:

As in New England colonial families, the Mormon wife seemed to move with relative ease and frequency between home, neighborood, and church; the Mormon village plan of settlement allowed a variety of social contacts outside the immediate family. Wives were not cloistered or excluded from the larger society as in a harem, although husbands did seem to have a possessive attitude on the issue of their womenfolk associating with Gentiles.\textsuperscript{18}

Women’s independence was stimulated in a variety of ways by the social conditions of frontier Utah and by the practice of polygamy. With husbands frequently away on church missions, wives and their children tended to be thrown back on their own resources and on those of their immediate relatives and friends. Jane Richards said that her husband “was away so much she learned to live comfortably without him, as she would tell him to tease him sometimes; and even now he is away two thirds of the time as she is the only wife in Ogden, so that she often forgets when he is home, and has even sat down at meals forgetting to call him. She says she always feels very badly about it when it happens, but that he was more necessary to her in her early life.” Mrs. Bancroft added: “And yet she is a very devoted wife, and he is remarkably attentive to her. To see them together I would never imagine either had a thought but the other shared.”\textsuperscript{19}

Other accounts also stressed this same tendency of polygamy practice to encourage women’s independence. After stating, “Plural marriage destroys the oneness of course” and it “is a great trial of feelings,” Mary Horne noted that the practice got her away from being “so bound and so united to her husband that she could do nothing without him.” She became “freer and can do herself individually things she never could have attempted before; and work out her individual character as separate from her husband.”\textsuperscript{20} Evidently in some cases women also were grateful for the possibility polygamy offered for freedom from male sexual demands; as Mary J. Tanner noted: “It is a physical blessing to weakly women.”\textsuperscript{21} And the feisty Martha Hughes Cannon, who was the first woman state senator in the United States and the fourth wife of a polygamist, argued that a plural wife was in a better position than a single wife: “If her husband has four wives, she had three weeks of freedom every single month.”\textsuperscript{22}

While this might be the kind of “freedom” that some wives would wish to be freed from, it does suggest how polygamy and the exigencies of life in the Great Basin region could force women into new roles and break down certain sex stereotypes, at least temporarily. In the absence of their husbands, women and their children ran farms and businesses. Some early census reports even went so far as to identify plural wives as “heads of households.” Burgess-Olson’s sample showed that in polygamist marriages, husbands and wives exercised approximately equal responsibilities in financial management, while in her monogamous sample, men held greater control. By the late nineteenth century a relatively large class of professional women, many of them plural wives, had developed in Utah. Women dominated the medical profession, for instance, and a sizable number worked as teachers and writers.\textsuperscript{23}

Brigham Young and other early church leaders recognized the necessity of making use of female talent in establishing and maintaining the group in the sometimes hostile environment of the Great Basin. Mormon leaders encouraged education for women from the very early settlement period, as indicated by the establishment of the University of Deseret as a coeducational institution in 1850. Women voted earlier in Utah than in any other state or territory in the United States, including Wyoming. And, somewhat ironically in view of the non-Mormon attacks on the degradation polygamy sup-
posedly caused women, the efforts of Mormon women in the 1870s and 1880s to organize themselves to support plural marriage against external attacks served as a significant means of increasing their political awareness and involvement.\textsuperscript{24}

One major forum for women’s expression in the church was the Relief Society. Originally founded in 1842, the Relief Society was organized “under the priesthood after a pattern of the priesthood” to support a variety of activities, including the building of a temple, charitable work, and cultural betterment. During the troubled period that followed Joseph Smith’s death, the Relief Society became largely inactive, but with the reestablishment of the society in the mid-1850s under the leadership of Eliza R. Snow, it went on to play an important role in Utah economic, social, and cultural life.\textsuperscript{25}

Perhaps the most impressive achievement of the women in Utah during the late nineteenth century was the publication of the \textit{Woman’s Exponent}. Although it was not officially sponsored or financed by the church, this largely woman-managed, supported, and produced newspaper served as the major voice for Mormon women’s concerns during its publication between 1872 and 1914. The \textit{Exponent} was the second periodical expressly for women to appear in the trans-Mississippi West. A respectable and well-produced periodical by any standards, the \textit{Exponent} spoke highly for the literacy and intelligence of its women contributors and designers. The wide-ranging historical and literary concerns of this publication were by no means limited to sectarian matters.\textsuperscript{26}

As suggested by its masthead slogan, “The Rights of the Women of Zion, The Rights of the Women of All Nations,” the \textit{Woman’s Exponent} provided an important forum for the discussion of many problems of “woman’s sphere.” Expressing an almost feminist awareness at times, the \textit{Exponent} devoted much attention to the universally inequitable position of women in politics, education, and the professions. Even marriage was not put forward as an absolute imperative for women. In the \textit{Exponent’s} wide-ranging discussion of issues, only polygamy, then one of the key elements of Mormon self-definition as a group, failed to receive a critique. Overall, the \textit{Woman’s Exponent} portrayed Mormon women as individuals of character, intelligence, and high aspirations. It served an important identity-building function and helped to reinforce pride and unity among the women of the church.

As Casterline observed:

The reinstitution of the ancient custom of polygamy may have in its own subtle ways served as a liberating force for women. This may have occurred by default, with restless or dissatisfied plural wives looking for places to direct their energies, or it may have occurred through the necessity of a wife’s supporting her family. Some women may have welcomed polygamy as a great boon, as it decreased some of the demands and divided the duties of the wife role, allowing them more time to develop personal talents. By these quirks in its machinery, plural marriage did in some cases provide a working method for women to achieve independence from men.\textsuperscript{27}

III

Despite certain positive or at least mitigating features, polygamy was obviously a more demanding way to organize marriage than monogamy. Even under the best of circumstances, developing and sustaining an optimal relationship among husband, wives, and children in polygamous families was difficult. How did Mormon families deal with the inevitable tensions that arose in plural marriages? Although the studies of James E. Hulett, Jr., Kimball Young, Vicky Burgess- Olson, and Jessie L. Embry reveal great differences in the ways conflict situations were managed in both monogamous and polygamous families, the general rule was to try to deal with problems within the home as much as possible.\textsuperscript{28} As Jane Richards noted, “It is making confidants of other women in their domestic disturbances that has brought about most of the trouble in polygamy, and the less people gossip, the better off they are.”\textsuperscript{29} In the practice of polygamy, as in other aspects of social life in Utah, great stress was placed on unity and consensus, on the avoidance of public expressions of hostility. This emphasis may well help account for the impressive degree of external order and social harmony described by many of the more open-minded visitors to Utah during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{30}

Even with goodwill and sincere effort, attempts to salvage a relationship could fail. In such cases the possibility of separation or divorce always remained. Jane Richards was frank in noting, for in-
stance, that when her husband first talked with her in Illinois about the possibility of taking another wife, she told him that he should do what he felt he had to do and that "if she found they [she and the new wife] could not live without quarreling, she should leave him." This never became necessary for her, but she noted that others had taken such steps: "If a marriage is unhappy, the parties can go to any of the council and present their difficulties and are readily granted a divorce."\(^{31}\)

How representative were Jane Richard's informal observations on nineteenth-century Mormon attitudes toward divorce? This topic has only recently begun to be investigated, but a few preliminary observations may be made. One initial point of reference is Utah territorial divorce policy. The Utah divorce law of February 4, 1852, was one of the most liberal in the country. For instance, a divorce could be granted not only to a person who "is a resident of the Territory" but also to a person who "wishes to become one." Presumably this proviso allowed the Mormon church flexibility in dealing rapidly with converts who had separated from an unbelieving spouse and who needed to be reintegrated as quickly as possible into the new Mormon society. In addition to the usual causes, a divorce could be granted to the plaintiff in cases in which the defendant was guilty of "absenting himself without reasonable cause for more than one year." If liberally applied, such a proviso could be used to terminate unsatisfactory relationships in which missionaries were gone for extended periods of time. Finally, the territorial law contained an omnibus clause allowing divorce "when it shall be made to appear to the satisfaction of the court, that the parties cannot live in peace and union together, and that their welfare requires a separation."\(^{32}\)

The Utah divorce law cannot necessarily be assumed to represent Mormon church policy because marriage and divorce—particularly polygamous marriage and divorce, which were not directly recognized in territorial law—were handled primarily through church courts and procedures. Instead, the primary function of the divorce law probably was to provide maximum flexibility for Mormons in handling their own unorthodox arrangements. What, then, was the Mormon church's policy on divorce? The official stand was highly complex. In theory, divorce was strongly discouraged. Marriage was viewed in the light of eternity as a vital part of life that brought out the finest aspects of human relationships. Brigham Young and other early leaders repeatedly inveighed against divorce, particularly when requested by the man. Using rather salty language, Young could suggest, for example, that one man had made his bed and would have to lie in it. Declarations such as the following were typical: "It is not right for men to divorce their wives the way they do. I am determined that if men do not stop divorcing their wives, I will stop sealing."\(^{33}\)

Yet if men were discouraged from divorcing their wives, women were given remarkable freedom in seeking a divorce for themselves in unsatisfactory situations. Young himself once publicly offered to give a divorce to any of his wives who did not want to live with him any longer. He could declare that "he liked a woman to live with her husband as long as she could bear with him and if her life became too burdensome than leave and get a divorce." In an important sermon in the Salt Lake Tabernacle on October 8, 1861, Brigham Young further developed the argument about when a women could leave a man lawfully. He said that if a woman became alienated in her feelings and affections from her husband, then it was his duty to give her a bill of divorce and set her free. Men must not have sexual relations with their wives when they were thus alienated. Children born of such alienated unions were properly seen as "bastards," not the product of a full marriage relationship.\(^{34}\)

This line of argument is strikingly similar to the 1842 argument put out in Illinois in The Peace Maker, the first defense of polygamy ever printed under Mormon auspices. According to that pamphlet, whose authorship and significance have been hotly debated, the only "biblical" (i.e., legitimate) ground for divorce was the alienation of a wife's affections from her husband. If a man became dissatisfied with his wife he could not legitimately divorce her if she remained loyal to him, because that would be an irresponsible shirking of family duties. Instead, his option in such a case was to take additional wives, while maintaining the first and her children.

This approach is essentially the same as early Utah practice. Women had the primary initiative in determining when to terminate a relationship, while the husband could not easily divorce his wife if she were opposed. No stigma was attached to the remarriage of a divorced woman; indeed, such remarriage was normally assumed. Thus,
in Utah, women could find through easy divorce and remarriage the opportunity for what amounted to a sort of de facto serial polygamy (though Mormon writings never spoke in such terms), while their husbands were allowed to take additional wives if they wished.  

The relationship between polygamy and divorce in early Utah may also be easier to understand as a result of the recovery of records of 1,645 divorces granted during the Brigham Young period (1847–77). Although these records have not yet been thoroughly analyzed, the bulk of the cases appear to have involved plural marriages. The entire population of Utah numbered only 86,786 in 1870 (with a high percentage consisting of unmarried children and youths), so the divorce rate might appear rather high. Support for such a conclusion is also suggested by D. Michael Quinn’s listing of Mormon church leaders and their wives between 1832 and 1932. A simple analysis of his data shows that the 72 church leaders who practiced plural marriage had a total of 391 wives, with 54 divorces, 26 separations, and 1 annulment. For perspective, one should note that at least some of these divorces were those of apparently nonconjugal wives whose marital ties were only symbolic. The extent to which the divorce situation in Utah and surrounding areas of Mormon settlement differed from that of other frontier areas also needs to be investigated.

To understand the significance of these data on divorce, they must be placed within the larger context of the development of plural marriage and other early Mormon social institutions. Plural marriage appears never to have become fully institutionalized during the relatively brief period when it was publicly practiced in Utah. Joseph Smith’s revelatory mandate promulgating polygamy in 1843 had required that polygamy be introduced, but it did not specify exactly how it was to be practiced after it was introduced. Later Mormon leaders apparently also claimed no special inspiration on exactly how the system was to be regulated, except to continue to insist, as Joseph Smith had, that all plural marriages must be sanctioned and sealed by the central church authorities.

The wide variation in polygamy practice has been noted by scholars. James E. Hulett, Jr., one of the earliest serious students of Mormon polygamy, observed that he had “expected to find a variety of behavior but not so great a variety.” No fully standardized patterns of handling the needs of polygamous families for things such as shelter, food, clothing, and amusement appear to have developed, although there were tendencies toward such standardization. For example, plural wives sometimes lived together under one roof, sometimes had separate houses adjoining each other, and sometimes lived in entirely different locations. Hulett argued that Mormon society of the period continued to remain basically monogamous in its norms and that “except for the broad outlines, the local culture provided no efficient and detailed techniques for control of the polygamous family; each family in a sense had to develop its own culture.” Although Hulett’s sample was primarily taken from the period of extreme stress in the late nineteenth century, when polygamy was under heavy attack, scholars who have focused on the period when polygamy was more openly practiced have also found significant variation in the ways polygamous families were organized.

The primary reason that polygamy never became fully standardized in Utah was the short period of time that it existed before the intense antipolygamy persecution of the late nineteenth century led the Mormon church to discontinue the practice. Had there been greater time for the new cultural patterns to develop free of external pressure, plural marriage probably would have continued to adapt itself to the changing conditions of the Great Basin region. Just how the new marriage practices would eventually have stabilized will now never be known, however. After the mainstream of the Mormon church broke decisively with polygamy practice at the turn of the century, a small number of dissidents did continue to practice polygamy, but the church as a whole moved on to find new ways of expressing its underlying family ideals through monogamous marriage. Today, somewhat paradoxically, Mormons are among the most “traditional” of any group in their attitudes toward family life and the role of women.

IV

What is the significance of this extraordinary nineteen-century Mormon experiment with plural marriage? Was the effort simply a freakish American sideshow, a rather unpleasant and unappealing aberration, or does it raise larger issues that are of concern today?
the largest and best sustained attempt in nineteenth-century America to create an alternative to monogamous marriage and family life, Mormon polygamy does suggest larger issues worthy of further exploration. At the most basic level, investigations such as those of Ivins, Burgess-Olson, Smith and Kunz, Embry, and others are needed to show how monogamous and polygamous Mormon marriages in early Utah differed from each other. To what extent were the distinctive features of nineteenth-century Mormon family life the result of the existence of polygamy and to what extent were they a product of the broader Mormon drive for cultural and religious autonomy? How did the life experiences of monogamous wives differ from those of first wives or of subsequent wives in polygamous families?

A second area worthy of further investigation is a comparison of the experiences of Mormon plural wives with the experiences of other women on the frontier or in the larger Victorian society. Research by Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, for instance, suggests that at least in the economic sphere, Mormon women were largely indistinguishable from other women in the frontier West.39 Similarly, Mormon women appear to have been remarkably closely in touch with general currents of thought and practice in Victorian society. At times, in fact, they seem to have been in advance of popular trends. In what ways were Mormon women in contact with the larger society, and what role did polygamy play in that contact?

Finally, Mormon polygamy of the nineteenth century raises comparative and cross-cultural questions of much significance for the present. The problems of women acting as heads of single-parent families, for example, bear much resemblance to the problems of women in some polygamous families. The issues of easy divorce and its effect on family life are also worthy of comparison. And, of course, the Mormon experience provides an American example of polygamy that could be compared with polygamy as it functions in non-Western societies today, as studied by anthropologists such as Remi Cognet.40

These and other questions may be fruitfully investigated by using the nineteenth-century Mormon experience as a reference point. Perry Miller could as easily have been speaking of Mormons as of the New England Puritans when he wrote of their experiment as an "ideal laboratory": "It was relatively isolated, the people were com-

paratively homogenous and the forces of history played upon it in ways that can more satisfactorily be traced than in more complex societies. Here is an opportunity, as nearly perfect as the student is apt to find, for extracting certain generalizations about the relationship of thought or ideas to communal experience."41 Scholars have only begun to make use of the rich Mormon experience in their attempts to understand the nature and significance of women's varied experiences in nineteenth-century America.

Notes

10. POLYGAMY and the FRONTIER

1. A previous version of this chapter was published in the Utah Historical Quarterly 50 (Summer 1982): 268–89. Kimball Young's Isn't One Wife Enough? is a classic study focusing on Utah polygamy. Jessie L. Embry's Mormon Polygamous Families qualifies and largely supersedes much of Young's earlier path-breaking work. Also see Van Wagoner, Mormon Polygamy, and Richard D. Poll et al., eds., Utah's History (Provo: Brigham Young Univ. Press, 1978).

2. Among the historically important treatments of Mormon polygamy by apostates, see chap. 8, n. 6; and Fanny Stenhouse, "Tell It All": The Story of a Life's Experience in Mormonism (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington, 1875). Seminovel-
istic attacks on Mormon polygamy are surveyed in Arrington and Haupt, “Intolerable Zion.” Mormon defenses of polygamy are presented in Orson Pratt, The Seer (Washington, D.C., and Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853–54); Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Why We Practice Plural Marriage (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884); and periodical publications such as the Journal of Discourses, the Deseret News, and the Woman's Exponent. Bitton, “Mormon Polygamy,” and Scott and Beecher, “Mormon Women,” provide bibliographic analyses of recent scholarship on polygamy.

3. See Bitton, Guide to Mormon Diaries and Autobiographies; Stanley Snow Ivins’s notebooks and transcripts in the Utah State Historical Society Library, Salt Lake City; the Kimball Young Papers in the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; Flake, Mormon Bibliography, and Meher, “Plural Marriage.”


6. In levirate marriage as described in Deuteronomy 25:5–10, it was the duty of the brother of a man who died without leaving any male heir to take the dead man’s wife as his own and sire children by her to perpetuate the dead brother’s name and family line. In the Mormon system, as practiced in this instance, women who had been sealed to Willard Richards for “time and eternity” were remarried following his death “for time only” to Franklin D. Richards. Children born to that union were considered to belong to the Willard Richards family in the afterlife, according to Mormon marital theory.


12. Young, Isn’t One Wife Enough? 56–57. Embry, Mormon Polygamous Families, also emphasizes the harmonious relationships in many plural marriages. Other recent studies such as Van Wagoners Mormon Polygamy, however, increasingly are stressing the tensions that often existed behind the public appearance of harmony in prominent polygamous families.

13. Both Kimball Young and James E. Hulet, Jr., emphasize the extraordinary range of personal reactions possible to polygamy. For additional evidence, see Quinn, “Mormon Hierarchy,” 177–245.

14. Whitney, Why We Practice Plural Marriage, 53. Of course, children were the sons of the monogamous mother as well. Although plural families of three or more wives appear to have had fewer children per wife than monogamous wives did on the average, the objective was not producing the largest number of children per wife but rather the largest total number of children in the families of the best men, where, presumably, they would be reared under the most advantageous circumstances. See Ivins, “Notes on Mormon Polygamy,” 236–37; Quinn, “Mormon Hierarchy,” 246–91; Burgess-Olson, “Early Utah Mormon Families,” 100–104; Smith and Kunz, “Polygyny and Fertility,” 471; and Embry, Mormon Polygamous Families, 151–74.


16. Mrs. S. A. Cooks, “Theatrical and Social Affairs in Utah” (Salt Lake City, 1884), 5–6, in Bancroft Collection.


18. Casterline, “‘In the Tolls,’” 71.
20. Mrs. Joseph Horne, "Migration and Settlement of the Latter Day Saints" (Salt Lake City, 1884), 34–35, in Bancroft Collection. Mary Isabella Horne was Relief Society president of the Salt Lake Stake and a prominent woman in her own right.
21. Letter of Mrs. Mary J. Tanner, Provo, Utah, 1880, 5–6, in Bancroft Collection. Casterline, "In the Toils," 103, discusses the argument of Mormon women that polygamy freed them from masculine demands and allowed for a healthy continence. It also made possible continence during pregnancy and lactation, as recommended by nineteen-century medical theory, and therefore was seen as making for healthier, better-spaced babies.
27. Casterline, "In the Toils," 80–81.
29. "Reminiscences of Mrs. F. D. Richards," 47.
32. The law is printed in Acts, Resolutions and Memorials, Passed at the Several Annual Sessions of the Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah (Great Salt Lake City, 1855), 162–64.
34. See JD 4: 55–56, and Brigham Young's Office Journal, 1858–63 (Oct. 8, 1861): 300, LDS Archives. A summary of Brigham Young's speech of Oct. 8, 1861, is found in the entry for that date in James Beck's Notebook I, 1859–65, LDS Archives. The original speech, recorded stenographically by G. D. Watt, is in LDS Archives and has been reproduced in an unauthorized transcription in Dennis R. Short, For Women Only: The Lord's Law of Obedience (Salt Lake City: Dennis R. Short, 1977), 85–90.
35. For a discussion of the pamphlet, its argument, and its significance, see Foster, "A Little-Known Defense of Polygamy.
36. The existence and whereabouts of the divorce records, which have now been microfilmed, are reported in Eugene E. Campbell and Bruce L. Campbell, "Divorce Among Mormon Polygamists: Extent and Explanations," UHQ 24 (1978): 4–23. Ibid, 6, bases its figures on Quinn "Mormon Hierarchy," 248–91. Quinn, 154–56, provides information on some of Brigham Young's wives who were not publicly acknowledged and bore him no children. Also see Jeffrey Ogden Johnson, "Determining and Defining 'Wife': The Brigham Young Households," Dialogue 20 (Fall 1987): 57–70.
37. Hulitt, "Mormon Polygamous Family," 11, 406; Burgess-Olson, "Early Utah Mormon Families," 59–68; and Embry, Mormon Polygamous Families, 73–87. Housing patterns of leaders ran the gamut from Brigham Young, second president of the church, who set up most of his wives and children in two large houses, to...
John Taylor, third president of the church, who eventually established all his wives in separate houses. For Brigham Young’s remarkable household, see Clarissa Young Spencer and Mabel Harmer, Brigham Young at Home (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1947), esp. 15–80.


41. Miller, New England Mind: From Colony to Province, Foreword.

The above is Ch. 10 in Foster’s book Women, Family, and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons (Syracuse, NY, 1991), pp. 182–201 and 283–88.

Extra Credit Assignment (10 points; due 4/9):

Think up a “question to think about” for this secondary source and then answer it. Your answer should be 1.5 pages typed and 1.5 spaced or 3 pages front and back and handwritten.