

The Mormon Experience in Alberta: Oral History of the Polygamy Question

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In his thesis, "Founding of the Mormon Community in Alberta," Archie Wilcox explained, "It can be said, without any fear of correction, that the Mormons of Alberta do not and have not practised polygamy in this province at any time."¹ Although this is the image the Mormons in Alberta wanted to give the Canadian government, Wilcox's defensive statement is only partially true. Though very few polygamists actually lived with more than one wife in Canada, a number of the Mormon men who settled there left a wife or several wives in the United States and brought another wife to Alberta. The oral history interviews conducted by the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, at Brigham Young University, help document the role that polygamy played in the Mormon settlements in Alberta.

When Joseph Smith founded the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1830, it was to be a restoration of truths lost from the Christian churches during the "apostasy," the period since the death of Christ. As part of this restoration, Joseph Smith revised the Bible to correct errors and to return, as the Book of Mormon puts it, "plain and most precious truths" which had been removed to "pervert the right ways of the Lord [and] blind the eyes and harden the hearts of the children of men." During this period, Joseph Smith received numerous revelations, often in answer to his questions. One of his questions was why many of the Old Testament leaders had more than one wife. In response, the Lord told him that the Latter-day Saints would be required to obey this law.

Current research suggests that Joseph Smith may have received this revelation as early as the 1830s in Kirtland, Ohio, where the members of the new church moved after a large number of the Disciples of Christ in that area were converted.² However, the commandment was not written until 1843 in Nauvoo, Illinois, at the request of Joseph's brother Hyrum, apparently in an effort to reduce the opposition of Joseph's wife, Emma Hale Smith. Emma later accepted the doctrine and agreed to let Joseph marry other wives. In her later life she denied that her husband was associated with the practice.³

Initially only the Church leaders were aware of the commandment to marry plural wives. After Joseph Smith was killed in 1844, many of the Saints followed Brigham Young west from Illinois, reaching the Great Basin in 1847. In 1852, after the Saints were firmly established in Utah, the Mormons publicly announced that they practised polygamy. The reaction from those outside of the Church was immediate and negative. In 1854 the Republican Party termed polygamy and slavery "twin relics of barbarism." Opponents of plural marriage petitioned Congress to pass laws, and in 1862, the Morrill Act, introduced by Justin S. Morrill from Vermont, prohibited plural marriage in the territories. The Mormons felt that the Morrill Act denied their right to religious freedom, and Brigham Young's secretary, George Reynolds, offered his polygamous marriages as a test case.⁴ After the United States Supreme Court in *Reynolds vs. United States* (1879) upheld the anti-polygamy provisions of the 1862 Morrill Act, the stricter provision of a new law, the 1882 Edmunds Act, seemed almost inevitable. James May, who married a plural wife, Rhoda Ann Lang, in 1877 and moved with her to Cardston in 1888 after serving a prison term for unlawful cohabitation, summarized in 1882, "In this year Congress of the United States enacted and passed what is known as the Edmunds Bill making plural marriage a crime and punishable by fine and imprisonment. Then commenced a raid on that class of men which lasted about eight years. . . . Men fled to every point of the compass to escape the wrath of those very righteous Pharisees".

In 1886 and 1887 some polygamists moved to Mexico. However, when Charles O. Card asked the Church President John Taylor if he should go to Mexico, Taylor encouraged him to go to Canada because, as Taylor explained, "I have always found justice under the British flag."⁵ Card and his group initially planned to settle in British Columbia, but when they could not find land there, they selected property in southern Alberta. They selected a place to settle near Lee's Creek, near present-day Cardston, just over the Canadian border from Montana.

Initially, husbands only brought one wife with them. A year after arriving, Charles Card along with Francis M. Lyman and John W. Taylor, two of the Church's Twelve Apostles, went to Ottawa to ask for special land, water and immigrant privileges, and also to feel out the political situation. In a letter to Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, these men explained that they were not asking Canada to legalize polygamy or to sanction plural marriage but simply to accept existing families. They argued, "The comparatively few who need to seek rest and peace in Canada would not be a drop in the bucket compared with the millions of people who are protected in their faith and practice plural marriage under the Government of Great Britain."⁶ Macdonald informed the Mormon leaders that the Latter-day Saints would be allowed to settle in his jurisdiction only if they agreed to live monogamously in Canada. When they returned to Cardston, Lyman, Taylor and Card expressed their disappointment with Macdonald's ruling, but Taylor told the members to regard Canada as "a place of refuge where we [can] raise one family and wait till the clouds . . . disperse."⁷ To ensure that the law was sufficient, in April 1890 the Canadian criminal code was modified so that those practising polygamy would be imprisoned for five years instead of two.⁸

Although the Mormons technically agreed to obey the laws of the land, polygamy did not become a dead issue to the settlers. A handful of husband Xarissa Merkley Clarke remembered that her mother's father, John Lye Gibb, took both of his wives to Canada.⁹ Franklin Dewey Leavitt and Thomas Rowell Leavitt also had more than one wife in Canada. These wives lived in different communities to avoid public notice. On the whole, though, as William L. Woolf explained, "The Canadian government's . . . agreement was generally adhered to." He only recalled four to six men who kept more than one wife in Alberta.¹⁰

Since there are neither ward membership records nor census records for early Cardston, it is impossible to determine what percentage of the settlers were part of polygamous families. However, available sources show that most of the first Church leaders had plural wives, although most of them had only one wife in Canada. For example, in 1895, the stake presidency, a group of three men who preside over a number of congregations called wards, all had more than one wife, although one member may not have had both wives at the same time. Of a twelve-member high council who also officiated in the stake, ten were polygamists and only one was definitely a monogamist. Of the forty-nine members of the high priest quorum, the highest position in the lay priesthood of the Mormon Church usually reserved for bishoprics who presided over wards and other leaders, twenty-four (48 percent) were polygamists. Of the other twenty-two members

of the quorum, only seven (14 percent) were definitely monogamists.¹¹

Most of these men, however, only lived with one wife in Canada, visiting others when they went to the United States especially at the time of the General Church Conference held twice a year. As Winnifred Newton Thomas explained, "The ones that were here [in Canada] were okay because they only had one wife here. Then if they went down there and had a fling, that was up to them. They had two legal wives in two different countries." The oral histories show a variety of ways in which husbands handled their multiple wives and families.

Ephraim Harker married his first wife, Alice Jane Bennion, in 1876 in Salt Lake City, Utah, when he was twenty-two and she was twenty years old. The family lived in Taylorsville, a small community just south of Salt Lake. Alice had six children and then apparently had some health problems and spent some time in a mental hospital. In 1889, because she was unable to take care of the children, Ephraim asked Sarah Elizabeth Carter, a twenty year old from southern Utah who had been in Taylorsville for five years helping her sister, to be his plural wife. Her daughter, Winnifred Harker Smith, explained, "When she [Sarah] could see the need of a mother for those children, she opened up her heart, and she accepted his proposal."¹²

Winnifred continued, "They came to Canada. At that time they were having quite a time with polygamy, and there were polygamous families going in different directions." Ephraim planned to go to Mexico until he met Charles Card who "told him what a wonderful country [Canada] was for animals." Since Ephraim ran sheep, he "changed his mind and decided to come to Canada. They were married in February and by May they had come by covered wagon from Utah to Alberta." Because of his first wife's illness, Ephraim took his five oldest children with him. The baby, who was two years old at the time the family moved to Canada, stayed with her mother's sister until she was three or four and then she also came to Canada.¹³

Alice continued to live in Utah and was in and out of the state mental hospital. Sarah's daughter Elizabeth Harker Hull recalled that she met Alice "once or twice. She was up here once for a short time"¹⁴. The visit must have been early in 1894 because Alice had another son on October 10, 1894, after she returned to Taylorsville. The son also evidently came to Canada.¹⁵ Alice died in the state mental hospital in Provo, Utah, in 1929 and was buried in Taylorsville.¹⁶ All of her children were raised by Sarah. Winnifred explained, "They soon took to Mother and called her Mother."¹⁷ Sarah evidently had eleven children of her own from 1890 to 1910. Ephraim died in 1932 in Cardston. Sarah died nineteen years later in her home town of St.

George, Utah, but she was buried in Cardston.

Henry Ernest Wynder chose to live with his wife in the United States instead of in Canada. In 1874 when he was twenty-two years old he married Louisa Parker, a nineteen year old, in Salt Lake City, Utah. The couple moved from Salt Lake City to Deseret in Millard County, Utah, and then to Almo, Idaho. Henry's brother moved to Canada in 1892. Two years later, after a severe winter in Idaho, Henry decided to move to Cardston too. After the family moved, Henry served a mission to England, his birthplace. When he came home, according to a neighbour, Winnifred Newton Thomas, "he met this little cutie," Maud Ellen Skinner, who he married in 1903.¹⁸ Maud lived in Alberta for a short while, but then she and Henry moved to Sugar City, Idaho. Later they moved to Salt Lake City where Henry worked as a janitor. They both passed away in Salt Lake City. Henry died in 1934. William Wynder, a son of Louisa, recalled that his father "had to follow" the second wife. "That was a mistake to ever do this. We took it right on the chin" and helped Louisa. "I was a pretty good husky lad all of the time. We never went off and left Mother alone. . . . I usually stayed home no matter what."¹⁹ Louisa died in Cardston, Alberta, in 1932.

Ephraim Harker and Henry Wynder lived only with one wife and rarely, if ever, saw the other wife. Heber Simeon Allen, however, made periodic trips to visit other wives. Heber Simeon Allen went to Canada with his father who was a polygamist. He married Amy Louise Leonard in 1889 in Cardston. Amy's parents had also come to Canada because her father had more than one wife. Heber was president of the Alberta Stake, a lay executive over several wards. In 1903 the stake was divided, and Heber was asked to be the president of the new Taylor Stake in Raymond. A number of authorities including Apostles Matthias Cowley, John W. Taylor, Anthon H. Lund, and Reed Smoot and Church President Joseph F. Smith came to Cardston to divide the stake. Some time during their visit, John W. Taylor or Matthias Cowley convinced Heber and the new Alberta Stake president, E.J. Wood, to marry plural wives even though the Manifesto issued by Church President Wilford Woodruff in 1890 said that there would be no new marriages contrary to the laws of the land. Some members of the Church and the United States Government felt the Manifesto meant the Church would perform no new plural marriages, but other members, including leading Church officials, felt the declaration was only a political move. Heber married Elizabeth Skidmore Hardy in Cardston, Alberta. Amy Allen Pulsipher, Elizabeth's daughter, was not sure of the date of the marriage. She remembered her mother told her very little about the marriage because "when it became evident that we would go to Canada and would have to cross the

border [she said] 'If you don't know anything about it, you won't have to lie.'²⁰

Amy, however, explained what she knew about her parents' courtship. She said, "It is my understanding that before he married Aunt Amy he even told her that he would be living this principle. They had been married some time and had children. His oldest daughter is only three or four years younger than my mother. According to my aunts, my father was very much taken by my mother when he first saw her and courted her." After the marriage, Elizabeth continued to live in Salt Lake, and Heber visited twice a year for a month at General Conference time in April and October. Amy remembered when he came "he always carried a big black leather bag. . . . I was always excited about him coming down because he always brought us a little present when he came. It was usually a candy bar or something." She didn't feel much of a father's influence, although when he visited, her mother said that she could wrap him around her finger. She said she did not miss her father's influence because "I had been close to my mother since I was the baby and the only girl." However, she felt her brothers, who refused to be interviewed, probably missed having a father.²¹

Amy remembered meeting her father's first wife on several occasions when she came and stayed with Elizabeth. Although she does not remember much about her, she has talked to her grandchildren about her. She recalled, "Aunt Amy was very sweet, very well educated, and very lovely. She was a leader in the community."²² After "Aunt" Amy passed away in 1936 in Raymond, Alberta, Elizabeth moved to Canada and was the legal wife. Amy explained that she was close to especially her half brothers' and sisters' children since they were so much older than her. "I've thought about this particularly as I've gotten older, been married, and had a family of my own. I think they were great people because I think it would be hard to have a family come and move in right there with you. It must have been almost humiliating to them but I have no recollection of it being that way. They treated me just beautifully." When Heber died in 1944, Elizabeth moved back to Salt Lake. Amy remembered when Elizabeth died in 1944, all Heber's children from his first family came to the funeral.²³

These first Mormon settlers came to Canada to escape the U.S. laws on polygamy. Even though most of them only lived with one wife, polygamy was still seen as an important Church doctrine and was a common topic of discussion at Church meetings. Visiting general Church leaders from Salt Lake City, Utah, encouraged the Saints to obey the laws of Canada but exhorted them to also continue to live the celestial law of plural marriage. For example, in 1889, George Q. Cannon, a counsellor in the Church's First Presidency, "said we have all taken interest in the establishment of

a settlement on this side of the line" and he had come to see if the people were obeying the commandments. He congratulated them for their faithfulness and then concluded, "We do not speak of the higher principle of the gospel at home, because it is deemed treasonable, but we testify that God did reveal this principle to Joseph Smith and commanded his elders to embrace the principle of plural marriage."²⁴ In the local Relief Society, the women's organization, and Priesthood, the men's meetings, polygamy was also frequently discussed.

Even though new marriages were performed in Canada after the Manifesto in 1890, polygamy was no longer discussed openly in local church meetings. In 1899 when more Mormons started going to Canada, they came for economic reasons.²⁵ Polygamy was not discussed as openly even in private among the new residents as it had been in early years. Winnifred Newton Thomas recalled that in later years, al-

though everyone knew that there were polygamists "it was still kind of hush, hush. Polygamy was out and it was a no-no then. It wasn't talked of."²⁶ A woman, born in Cardston about 1920 and raised there explained that she was a grown woman before she knew that E.J. Wood, the president of the Alberta Stake and president of the Cardston Temple, had another wife and family in the United States.²⁷

In short, Cardston residents generally tried to downplay the importance of plural marriage by not living with more than one wife in Canada, and in later years limiting public discussion about the practice except among those who had plural wives. However, plural marriages was the reason why the first group of Mormon settlers moved to southern Alberta, and although legally plural families could not live together in Canada and only a handful actually lived there with more than one wife, the practice played an important role in the Mormon's decision to settle in southern Alberta.

Notes

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4. Jessie L. Embry, "Exiles for the Principle: LDS Polygamy in Canada," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18 (Fall 1985): 108-16.
5. James Hudson, "Charles Ora Card: Pioneer and Colonizer," M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1961, pp. 80-81.
6. Lowry Nelson, "Settlement of the Mormons in Alberta," in C.A. Dawson, ed., *Group Settlements: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936), pp. 203-4.
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10. William L. Woolf, oral history, interviewed by Maureen Ursenbach and Gary L. Shumway, 1972, p.18 LDS Church Archives.
11. Embry, "Exiles for the Principle," pp. 112-13.
12. Ephraim Harker. LDS Genealogical Department Family Group Sheets, p. 4.
13. Elizabeth Harker Hull, oral history, interviewed by Jessie Embry, 1982: p. 6. LDS Polygamy.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
15. Ephraim Harker, op. cit.
16. Winnifred Harker Smith, oral history, interviewed by Jessie Embry, 1982, p. 9. LDS Polygamy.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 26; and William Wynder, oral history, interviewed by Jessie Embry, 1982:pp. 2, 4. LDS Polygamy.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 6.
20. Amy Allen Pulsipher, oral history, interviewed by Tillman Boxell, 1978, pp. 5-6. LDS Polygamy.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4,6.
22. *Ibid.*, p 6, 8.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 10; and Heber Simeon Allen, Family Group Sheets, LDS Genealogical Department.
24. Cardston Ward Minutes, 1888-1904, LDS Church, 3 Nov. 1889.
25. Nelson, "Settlement of Mormons in Alberta," pp. 196-97.
26. Winnifred Newton Thomas, oral history, interviewed by Jessie Embry, 1982. LDS Polygamy.
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