“Provoking the Brethren to Good Works”: Susa Young Gates, the Relief Society, and Genealogy
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Around the year 1918 Susa Young Gates, one of the Latter-day Saint Church’s most influential women and one sometimes jokingly referred to as the “thirteenth apostle,”1 was preparing a history of Latter-day Saint women. One chapter indicated that despite male leadership in the Genealogical Society of Utah, it was the women who were most responsible for making genealogy catch on within the Church, for women were doing more of both genealogical research and temple work than were the men. In a witty reminder of the special role she thought women were playing, Susa observed that “the old-time motto of the women’s auxiliary committee of the Genealogical Society of Utah ran thus: ‘Let us provoke the brethren to good works, yet not provoke the brethren while we work.’” She may have been indulging in a bit of good-natured sarcasm when she allowed that the men of the priesthood “naturally bear off the heavier and more exacting responsibilities of directing, guiding and presiding over the labors performed by women,” but there was no denying that it was really the women who were doing the most to bring genealogical work into prominence in Latter-day Saint life.2 What follows is the story of the early contribution of women, particularly of Susa Young Gates, to genealogical work among the Latter-day Saints. The story is significant not just for what it says about the history of genealogy, but also for what it says about the nature of some Latter-day Saint women in the early twentieth century and their relationship to the Church.

Much of Susa Young Gates’s work took place in the Progressive Era in American history, when the pressure for women’s suffrage reached its peak and in 1920 at last achieved its goal. Many American women were excited about what the vote could mean with respect to even broader political, economic, and social equality. Among the Latter-day Saints, however, total religious equality was not yet a question, for women generally accepted the fact that Church leadership was in the hands of the male-only priesthood and showed no inclination to change that fact. At the same time, they were hardly cowed by the priesthood; they were not reluctant to vigorously seek what they considered were necessary changes in programs and policies. With respect to genealogy, at least, Susa and her friends boldly suggested
new directions, worked to achieve what they believed the Church needed most, and goaded their brethren when they thought the men lax or derelict in their genealogical responsibilities. These women enjoyed an equality of spirit and responsibility, and, with few predetermined bounds on their activities, they set about to achieve what they felt were some long-needed new directions for genealogical work. In a sense they set their own bounds, which they saw as the farthest perimeters to which their faith and perseverance could carry them. For a while they even seemed to control the direction genealogical activity took in the Church, but their willingness to relinquish that control demonstrates also their recognition that such programs ultimately should be directed by priesthood leaders. Their success is a remarkable tribute to what the Latter-day Saint women, who were also active in all phases of the national women’s movement, could accomplish within the Church.

Genealogical research was a natural and important outgrowth of the revelations received and doctrines taught by Joseph Smith. One of the angel Moroni’s early messages, in fact, foretold the coming of Elijah, in fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy, to “plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers.” In April 1836 Elijah appeared in vision to Joseph Smith in the Kirtland Temple and, according to the faith of the Saints, opened to the Church the spirit and responsibility of seeking after the dead. The longing for such a doctrine, at least for some Saints, already existed, and from that time on, the “Spirit of Elijah” seemed to spread like seeds in the wind among them.

The great ancestor hunt was not unique to Latter-day Saints, however, for the genealogical spirit caught hold of many people in the nineteenth century. The American Antiquarian Society was founded in 1812; at least eleven state historical societies existed before 1845; and each of these groups included genealogy among its concerns. Beyond that, many of the most prominent American families had long taken an interest in their ancestors—the first published genealogy in America appeared in 1771—although by 1915 there were still only about three thousand published family histories. Then a flood tide seemed to hit, and in less than thirty years another sixteen thousand titles were added to the list.

Long before the Latter-day Saints actually organized their own society, many individuals and family groups were promoting genealogy, and Church publications urged upon their readers the need for genealogical research. Several members of the Council of the Twelve Apostles, including Parley P. Pratt, Orson Pratt, and Wilford Woodruff, set the example. Especially prominent was Elder Franklin D. Richards, who was also Church historian and general church recorder from 1889 to 1899. His extensive work was known far outside Utah (in 1899 he accepted an invitation to join the
New England Historic and Genealogical Society). He collected a large personal library of genealogical publications that eventually became the basis for the first Church-owned genealogical library.

Genealogical activity was promoted in a variety of ways among lay members of the Church. Church leaders encouraged those immigrating to Utah to bring information on their friends and relatives, the dead as well as the living who might not accept the gospel in this life. Those who were already in Utah wrote letters to relatives in an effort to obtain names and dates. Others returned to their homelands, sometimes as “genealogical missionaries,” to search records and visit relatives. Although few, if any, were officially called as missionaries, those interested in finding information about their ancestors were invited to come to Salt Lake City to be set apart by a General Authority. They were each given a missionary card and a clergy railroad discount card. Franklin D. Richards, who set apart many of these missionaries, also encouraged them to share the gospel with their living ancestors. Between 1885 and 1900 at least 178 Saints served on genealogical missions. While most were middle-aged or older retired men, a few young men and women and some couples served as well. John Adams Wakeham, for example, was set apart for a genealogical mission in 1891 and returned to his native New England. There he visited distant relatives and a member of the New England Historic and Genealogical Society to learn more about his ancestors. He also helped friends with farm work and attempted to talk with them about the Church.7

By 1894 several avid genealogists were advocating a Church-sponsored organization, and on 1 November 1894 the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve approved the articles of incorporation of the Genealogical Society of Utah; appropriately, Franklin D. Richards was named the first president of the new organization. On 22 November the society became a legal state entity. In 1944 its name was officially changed to the Genealogical Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though for public purposes it still used the name Genealogical Society of Utah. In 1975 it became known as the Genealogical Department of the Church, and in 1987 the name was changed to the Family History Department.

The articles of incorporation defined benevolent, educational, and religious goals for the new society. Its benevolent goal was to establish and maintain a genealogical library. Its educational goal was to disseminate genealogical information. Its religious, and overriding, purpose was to acquire records of the dead so that the saving ordinances (baptism, the temple endowment, and the sealing of families for eternity) could be performed vicariously for them in the temples. The founders dreamed of one day providing a network of paid genealogical agents who would do research for others. These agents would work outside of Utah under the direction of
the Society. Unfortunately, early efforts to establish the agent program were not highly successful, as many people preferred to either hire private researchers or do the work themselves.

Few people, however, were well trained in the necessary skills, and as the genealogical impulse quickened, the need for a training program became apparent. It was in this area that the women of the Church began to lead out. At their head, provoking both men and women to good works, was Susa Young Gates, an enthusiastic, incredible woman who, when she set her mind on something, usually accomplished it.8

A daughter of Brigham Young, Susa Young Gates was respected both nationally and internationally. She was prominent as a suffragist, a prolific writer and editor, a publisher, a public speaker, an educator, a genealogist, and the mother of thirteen children. She was a leader in the Relief Society and the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA) and founder of The Young Woman’s Journal. She represented the YLMIA seven times at national meetings of the National Council of Women. For three years she chaired the press committee of the national organization, and in 1899 she was a speaker at the International Quinquennial held in London. Two years later she was the sole delegate of the National Council of Women at a meeting of the International Council in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Susa’s intense commitment to genealogy and temple work was lifelong. When the St. George Temple was dedicated in 1877, she served as official stenographer, and she became the first woman to be baptized there for the dead. She was also official stenographer at the dedications of the Logan, Salt Lake City, and Cardston temples. She helped the Young family compile a thirteen-volume genealogical record containing twenty thousand names. Later, in order to avoid duplication of temple work, she directed the preparation of an index to the Young family records and had a copy deposited in each temple.9

Sometimes women like Susa Young Gates were needed to infuse new ideas, inspire the men and, in effect, “provoke the brethren” into filling their religious responsibilities. For example, her son-in-law, Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Council of the Twelve, was once a director and then president of the Genealogical Society of Utah. He first met Susa in Boston in 1892 when he was a student at Harvard University and she was there gathering Young family genealogy. He later confessed that it was Susa “who turned [his] own interest in the direction of genealogy.”10

For Susa Young Gates, genealogy had more than the usual spiritual significance. In 1901 she was taken seriously ill while returning from the Copenhagen conference. Confined for several weeks at the home of a friend in Geneva, she was finally able to travel after receiving a blessing from the missionaries. But her condition remained critical and “she was ready to
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die,” recalled John A. Widtsoe, “or at least we thought so.” Then came the miracle. Francis M. Lyman, a member of the Council of the Twelve and President of the European Mission, was asked to give her a blessing. He was so certain she would die that the blessing began to take the form of an admonition not to fear death. Suddenly, however, he stopped, and, as Susa recalled later, waited for nearly two minutes before he continued: “There has been a council held in heaven, and it has been decided you shall live to perform temple work, and you shall do a greater work than you have ever done before.”

Though Susa became well enough to travel, she did not fully recover at once. The doctors at home were convinced that she had little chance to live, but she clung stubbornly to life and even protested loudly when a patriarch came to give her a blessing. “I don’t want him to come and dedicate me to the Lord,” she cried. “I don’t want to die. I want to live—to live to do temple work!” Replied the patriarch, “Well, Sister, if you want to live to do temple work, you shall live.” Horribly emaciated and weighing only eighty-five pounds, she continued to fight for life; when she went to the temple, she had herself carried there in a chair. Gradually she recovered, and from then until her death in 1933, she was constantly involved in temple and genealogical work. She not only paid one-tenth of her income to the Church as tithing, but she also deducted another ten percent for genealogical purposes.

Joseph Christenson, secretary of the Genealogical Society of Utah, was aware of Susa’s great interest in her ancestors and temple work and was instrumental in making her aware of the Society’s library. One day in 1904, shortly after she moved from Provo to Salt Lake City, he asked her, “Sister Gates, why don’t you go over to the Genealogical Library and hunt out the names of the Young family?” Susa replied that she did not even know there was such a thing in Salt Lake City. While this response undoubtedly confirmed fears already expressed by the officers of the Society that few people knew of the library and even fewer were using it, this was probably the last time Susa Young Gates would be caught unaware of something important in the area of Latter-day Saint genealogy.

After discovering the genealogical library, Susa was dismayed to find it so full of rich material and yet used so ineffectively. So far as she was concerned, research was in chaos, for as someone later wrote, “No one knew where to begin or how to continue, and, indeed, no one tried except the Library attendant who worked a little in the books for the benefit of a few clients.” As Susa later recalled, “I felt that I must do something more, something to help all the members of the Church with their genealogy and temple work. There was practically no book of lessons in genealogy and temple work. Beginners were forced to blunder into record keeping without guide
or compass; there were no classes in schools or printed instructions to enlighten them.” Her efforts to correct this lack continued throughout her life and included editing a weekly newspaper article on genealogy; organizing and teaching classes under the auspices of the Daughters of Utah Pioneers, the Genealogical Society, and the Relief Society; writing genealogical manuals; arranging genealogical conventions; and planning and implementing programs to help Latter-day Saints gather the names of their ancestors and do temple work for them. All of these activities were interwoven and interdependent upon each other.

In these activities a frequent companion was Elizabeth Claridge McCune. Elizabeth, wife of mining entrepreneur Alfred W. McCune, was also involved in Church and community affairs. As a member of the YLMIA General Board, she was active in the National Council and International Council of Women. She was a trustee of the Utah State Agricultural College and served as a member of the Relief Society General Board. In addition to her genealogical work with Susa, she also gathered her own genealogy while on a trip to England in 1896 and was a worker in the Salt Lake Temple. Genealogical classwork was so important to both Susa and Elizabeth that when they began to work out the details they went to Elizabeth’s father, Patriarch Samuel Claridge of the St. Joseph (Arizona) Stake, and “received a remarkable prophetic blessing.”

Susa’s organizational leadership in genealogy began within the Daughters of Utah Pioneers (DUP), which she helped found in 1901. This hereditary organization had a natural genealogical interest and urged its members to collect genealogies. In 1904 Susa was asked to become president, but, ever on the alert to promote her cherished genealogical agenda, she accepted only on condition that the organization inaugurate a program for more effectively training the women in genealogy and encouraging them in temple work. The society agreed, and Susa was installed in April 1905. She wasted no time in getting started; her first two activities through the DUP were a weekly newspaper column and the establishment of genealogy classes.

Joseph Christenson, who had referred Susa to the library, suggested that she ask the Deseret Evening News to run a department on genealogy. Susa approached the newspaper, and the News accepted her offer to write weekly genealogical articles. On 1 January 1907 her new section first appeared. A year later the Herald-Republican added a similar weekly column, which Susa also produced. Published each Saturday, it carried genealogical news, genealogical data on various Church leaders, and other items of interest. It even found its way into the libraries of genealogical societies outside Utah.

The DUP was responsible for the newspaper articles for the first year and a half. It received inquiries and suggestions, and Susa prepared the
material for publication. On 21 July 1908, however, the board of the Genealogical Society passed a resolution “requesting that the articles on Genealogy now appearing in the Deseret News under the auspices of the DUP be published hereafter under the direction of the Genealogical Society and that a committee of sisters to assist in the work be appointed.”

Joseph Fielding Smith, secretary of the board, wrote to Susa explaining the contents of the resolution and asking the sisters to accept the “call.”

Susa readily agreed to the Genealogical Society’s request, but her reasons were part of a set of larger concerns. For one thing, she believed that the column had become so significant that it should be part of the Church’s official genealogical organization. For another, she was in the midst of a serious disagreement within the DUP over how far its genealogical activities should range. Some, including Susa and Elizabeth, wanted to subdivide into groups with special hereditary interests in great Church historical epochs, such as Daughters of the Founders of the Church, Daughters of Kirtland, Daughters of the Mormon Battalion, Daughters of the Pioneers from Great Britain, and so on. They also wanted the DUP to become a Church organization rather than a state society. They saw its increasing secularization as a threat to their plans for temple work, and when their suggestions for reorganization were rejected, they took the matter to Church leaders. At that point, Anthon H. Lund, a member of the First Presidency and president of the Genealogical Society, invited them to bring their work over to the Society. Almost immediately Susa resigned as DUP president and shifted all her genealogical programs to the Society’s newly organized Women’s Committee, which she chaired. She also encouraged all the women she had been working with to join the Genealogical Society of Utah. Her committee represented the first active involvement by women in that organization.

Significantly, through its newspaper column, its classes, and other projects, the DUP was doing at that time as much as, if not more than, the Church itself to stimulate genealogical work among the Latter-day Saints. But such activity could not long remain outside the pale of Church sponsorship, and the shift in 1908 was a classic example of how the Church has sometimes adopted programs that have been established and conducted successfully outside its bounds.

Transferring sponsorship of the newspaper department made no difference in the way it was handled. Susa continued as editor and took charge of all publishing details. When asked for a history of the column, she explained, “I am the only one who can hope to give you anything like a connected story of the work done in the . . . two papers.”

The genealogical department continued in the Deseret Evening News for many years, though in 1918 it was threatened with extinction. The
wartime scarcity of paper led the management of the News to cut down on
the size of the Saturday paper, and genealogy was one of the features sched-
uled for elimination. The dauntless Susa was outraged. On 26 August with
the approval of the Board of Directors of the Genealogical Society, she sent
a thousand circulars to Relief Societies throughout the Church, calling
upon the women to send letters of protest to the Church-owned newspa-
paper. “Sometimes business men are more interested in finances, and city
dwellers are more interested in society than in topics pertaining to our
spiritual advancement,” she wrote with righteous indignation. But, she
urged, “the right of petition is always ours and the women in the Church
may well take advantage of this right to convince our Deseret News Man-
agement that we are vitally interested in the work of genealogy and temple
work generally.”

As Susa hoped, a number of women soon wrote to the newspaper
expressing their concern. At the end of September, however, the News
counteracted by sending a form letter to all the Relief Societies that responded,
explaining that the department had not been discontinued; it had only
been condensed and would appear less frequently because of the paper
shortage. The letter added that the News would publish matters “of the
greatest interest to its readers, and that it is the best judge of what should
and should not appear in its columns in these days of stress and govern-
ment regulations.” A stamped envelope was enclosed with the letter and
the sisters were asked to deliver the message to whoever had told them
that the genealogical articles would no longer appear. The sisters dutifully
flooded Susa Young Gates with letters.

Dismayed with the attitude of the News, and particularly with what she
considered its lack of candor in not admitting that it had planned to shut
down the column, she was unwilling to take undeserved criticism. In a
letter to Joseph Fielding Smith on 17 October, she said she wanted the
News to know she had obtained his approval before she mailed the letters
to the Relief Societies and explained, “I think I would like to clear my
own skirts . . . for the Deseret News letter would indicate that I was both
untruthful and out of harmony with the powers [that] be.” She added,
“However, I do not care very much about it and am willing to do whatever
you think best.”

As another possible way to lean on the paper, on 29 August Susa wrote
a strongly worded letter to the board of the Genealogical Society. In the letter
she vehemently protested the loss of the column, reminding the brethren of
its inestimable value in providing communication between genealogists
and in making genealogy “a settled part of our daily life and communica-
tion.” Further, she lamented, “if this department ceases, and if the Relief
Society genealogical classes should be discontinued, as some people wish
they were, it might so cripple our genealogical interests that the people’s
temple activities would suffer irreparable loss.” In addition, she said, appar-ently convinced that the name of a male editor connected with the Society
might carry more weight than hers, “for some time I have felt that the
department should be turned over to your Society and the name of the Sec-
tetary, Elder Joseph F. Smith, Jr. placed there in lieu of my own. . . . [A]nd
although this seems to be a strange time in which to turn over the depart-
ment to your Society, I now formally do so and beg of you to resurrect it in
the columns of the News and thus serve the people who greatly need that
help.”32 In a letter to an officer of the Sons of the Revolution in Los Ange-
les, Pierson W. Banning, who wrote her asking what he could do to save the
newspaper section, Susa said to write directly to the News because “there
are always wheels within wheels” and commenting straight to the paper
would have more influence.33

Although there is no evidence that Susa responded directly to the
Deseret Evening News, whatever pressures were applied by others appar-
ently had an effect on the management’s view of what was newsworthy. The
genealogy column was absent for a few weeks in August, but it began again
as a regular feature in September, even as the controversy continued to rage.
Nephi Anderson, prominent writer and genealogist, eventually replaced
Susa as editor.34

Susa’s development of the newspaper section was typical of her involve-
ment in genealogy. She initiated the section at the suggestion of a friend
and priesthood holder. Once the suggestion was made, she personally
approached the paper and made the necessary arrangements. When the
section was threatened, she turned first to the men who led the Genealogi-
cal Society, whom she saw as her priesthood leaders in the matter, for per-
mission to write to the women. She then asked the Relief Societies to help
her in a fight to continue the articles. She next encouraged the men to take
over the department in reality as well as nominally because she felt they
would have more influence. Furthermore, she saw the column as their
responsibility as priesthood leaders and felt that the final decisions should
be up to them.

Susa followed the same pattern in managing genealogical classes. As
president of the DUP, she obtained the use of a room for classes in the
historic Lion House, then being used by the Latter-day Saints University.
Formal classwork began in the fall of 1906.35 The classes were approved
by officials of the Salt Lake Temple, especially Duncan McAllister, temple
recorder, avid genealogist, and personal friend. Susa directed these meet-
ings and asked both men and women to give the lessons. Such genealogical
stalwarts as Duncan McAllister, Joseph Christenson, Susa Young Gates,
Elizabeth McCune, and Joseph Fielding Smith were among the first lecturers.
One of the lectures, Elder Smith’s “Salvation Universal,” was eventually printed in pamphlet form and circulated widely in the Church.36

The classes were so successful that the DUP was encouraged to continue them on a regular basis, and beginning in the fall of 1907, weekly classwork was offered. The women in charge were so surprised when sixty people showed up for the first weekly class that they had to postpone instruction in order to move to larger accommodations. In addition to weekly classes, a special class was conducted on 7 October for the benefit of those who had come to Salt Lake City for the Church’s semiannual general conference.37

The following year the Genealogical Society absorbed the genealogical programs of the DUP. At the first meeting of the Women’s Committee, 4 September 1908, Joseph Christenson told the members that their task was to arouse greater interest in genealogical work and increase membership in the Society, “not slackening in their labors until a sufficiently large membership had been secured which would enable the Society to purchase every genealogical book now published or to be published.”38 This was an ambitious charge, and the women were equally ambitious in pursuing it. They took full advantage of the already well-established structure of the Church by writing the stake presidents to ask permission to speak in the various wards on the subject of genealogy and temple work.39 Combining genealogical and other historical interests, they held a series of balls and other social activities commemorating historical events and memorializing Church leaders.40 They continued the lessons and lectures begun under the auspices of the DUP and beginning in 1910 published a yearbook that contained information about meetings and classes. The result of all this activity so impressed the Genealogical Society that the January 1910 issue of its magazine reported a great awakening in the two years past and acknowledged that one of the chief factors was the Women’s Committee.41 Four years later the First Presidency also complimented the women: “The sisters in charge of that work [classwork] have labored with zeal and efficiency and have accomplished wonders, not only in the direction mentioned, but in arousing interest in it throughout the Church, and greatly increasing the membership of the Society.”42

The new committee was originally designated the Women’s Auxiliary Committee, but in 1909, apparently wanting to emphasize the fact that genealogy was not just women’s work, the women asked for a change. They wanted to be called the Historical Division of the Genealogical Society of Utah. The idea was approved, but during the life of the committee both designations seemed to be applied interchangeably.43 In 1910 the Society’s board again made some changes in its organization. The board decided that the work of the women should be subdivided and that the committee

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itself should be superseded by six committees. Although the new committees were named, in actuality the Women’s Committee remained intact and active until its work was absorbed by the Relief Society in 1912.44

There was good reason for transferring the classes from the Genealogical Society to the Relief Society. Officially reaching into every ward of the Church, this auxiliary was in a much better position to promote genealogy among the women than was a small organization such as the Genealogical Society, which had no branches and no specially designated leadership at the local level, where the work had to be popularized. The Women’s Committee knew that convincing the Relief Society to adopt the genealogical lessons would be a giant step toward achieving the committee’s goal of genuine Church-wide participation.

The move took time, for there were questions in the minds of some Relief Society leaders as to whether their organization should adopt any uniform course of study. Some stakes and wards had prepared their own courses of study, and it seemed inappropriate to interfere with local autonomy by imposing something from above. Several discussions took place in 1906 and 1907 at the Relief Society General Board meetings, but all motions to have Church-wide lesson plans lost. Not until the end of 1907 did the board finally compromise by deciding that it would prepare lesson outlines but that their use by the stakes would be optional.45

Even the President of the Church could not force the issue when it was first discussed. On one occasion, President Joseph F. Smith overheard an interesting conversation about the classes between his wife, Julina (a member of the Relief Society General Board), President Bathsheba W. Smith of the Relief Society, Isabel W. Sears, and Susa. He injected himself into the conversation remarking, “Why Sisters, you ought to put that work into the Relief Society.” The women laughingly assured him that such a “Herculean task” was not possible even for them. He repeated his suggestion twice more, but when the women made a tentative effort to introduce the idea to the Relief Society, they met with no success.46 The problem was not genealogy per se but only the continuing question of whether Church headquarters should impose any classwork upon local Relief Societies. The Relief Society board, a highly independent group, was seldom dictated to, though after 1911 its complexion began to change when Susa and Elizabeth McCune were appointed as members. Local organizations, meantime, also began taking the initiative, and in October 1911 the Relief Societies of Ogden joined together and requested the Genealogical Society to send someone to provide instruction for them.47

Resistance gradually weakened, and early in 1912 the Women’s Committee of the Genealogical Society wrote to the Relief Society, officially requesting that the latter take over genealogical classwork. The board agreed, and
on 20 April 1912 the first genealogical class under the auspices of the Relief Society was begun in Ogden. Although attendance was strictly voluntary, fifty people showed up. Susa was there to organize the class, the Salt Lake City class was there to visit, and Annie Lynch, secretary of the Women's Committee, was designated as the teacher.48

Disappointingly, sustaining the first great blush of interest was difficult; out of the initial fifty, only ten people continued for the full sixteen lessons. By the middle of 1915, however, the Ogden Stake reported that 369 people were actively working on genealogy, a total of 5,939 genealogical visits had been made, and 30,777 names had been collected.49 As the work expanded from Ogden to other stakes, the Relief Society accomplished more among the Latter-day Saints than the priesthood, the DUP, or the Genealogical Society had ever done.

Requests kept coming in, and in December the Women's Committee of the Genealogical Society proposed that a corps of instructors be sent throughout the Church. Susa and Elizabeth McCune both could afford to travel, so they began to stump the Church, preaching the gospel of genealogy. They visited all the Latter-day Saint communities in Canada and traveled throughout southern Utah in the summer of 1913 carrying letters of recommendation signed by Anthon H. Lund and Joseph Fielding Smith. On the latter trip they preached genealogy, held classes, and wrote to the Society urging it to open even more classes.50

All these classes were still voluntary, according to the desires of the individual stakes and wards, but Susa and her friends were working for the day when the Relief Society General Board would require genealogical classes to be a regular part of the Relief Society program. In the meantime, Susa urged the women of other stakes to write the Genealogical Society requesting help in setting up genealogical work. She anticipated that eventually the Society would correspond with every stake in the Church.51 By the fall of 1913, classes had extended to several additional stakes. In Salt Lake City, special genealogical classes were being held for the general boards of the Relief Society and the YLMIA.

In some ways the effort to promote Relief Society genealogy classes was part of a larger reform movement within the Church. Beginning with the priesthood, a general revitalization effort had been taking place since about 1907. In 1909 regular lesson manuals for priesthood meetings were adopted, and from there the idea spread to other Church organizations. A correlation committee under the direction of Apostle David O. McKay attempted to correlate the programs of the various organizations; representatives from the Relief Society were on that committee.52 Finally, in 1914 the Relief Society became the last Church auxiliary to inaugurate regular Church-wide lessons. In that year the Relief Society Magazine began
publication and carried outlines for monthly lessons on four different topics. The second weekly meeting of each month was devoted to genealogy. At long last Susa and her friends saw their ambition fulfilled, and for the next seven years the women of the Relief Society would spend at least one week a month studying genealogical techniques.

The women took just pride in what they were accomplishing. By 1915, it was reported, nearly 700 ward organizations and over 30,000 women were studying genealogy. Relief Society leaders recommended that special committees be appointed in each ward. The 1915 reports showed many wards had fully organized genealogical activities. Only a few wards gave completely negative or discouraging reports; in one case the person compiling the report noted sarcastically, “Everybody asleep in Beaver.”

These figures did not mean, of course, that everything ran smoothly or that everyone agreed with all that was happening. In November 1917 Susa informed the board of the Genealogical Society that some branches of the Relief Society “felt discouraged concerning the somewhat difficult and technical lessons given on Surnames for the past two years . . . [and] others have felt almost justified in setting aside these lessons for the more attractive and really essential work which we are now doing for the Red Cross.” She also discovered that the Relief Societies in Utah Stake had “gathered the impression that they were to drop their own genealogical lessons and confine their genealogical studies to the outlines just prepared by your society.” Practically demanding a decision from the board of the Society, she asked, “Will you kindly indicate by letter just what you would like . . . to be undone? We are quite willing to continue our lessons or discontinue them.”

On behalf of the Society, Joseph Fielding Smith replied in no uncertain terms. “We feel that it would be a deplorable thing should you, for any cause, discontinue the work in this direction. For we consider the work in the interest of the salvation of the dead . . . as the most important labor with which we have to do. We therefore pray you that your efforts do not slacken, for we hope to see the spirit of temple work and record making grow, until it shall find a permanent place in the hearts and lives of all the Latter-day Saints.” Susa published his reply in the Relief Society Magazine, asking the sisters to “resume your studies with renewed zeal and determination.”

A natural outgrowth of the lessons sponsored by the Genealogical Society’s Women’s Committee was the preparation of the first genealogical lesson manual. Susa and others were disturbed by the fact that nowhere was there a well organized, step-by-step printed manual on how to go about research. Especially after the committee began to organize and present lessons around the state, they felt they had the expertise to produce a manual. Susa prepared most of the material.
The first lessons were published in the *Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine* beginning in October 1911, but the women were not satisfied and wanted them published as a book. The board was reluctant, for its financial resources were limited, and it was unwilling to gamble on a publication venture. Taking matters into their own hands, therefore, the women raised the money independently, and after being edited by Nephi Anderson, the lessons were published in 1912 as a forty-five page book, *Lessons in Genealogy*. Vindication of the women’s optimism came quickly, for within a year the first edition was sold, expenses were met, and a second edition was issued.\(^{55}\)

The publication of this little book evoked some interesting commentary in a German magazine devoted to women’s suffrage. The author, Peter Von Gebhardt, made various favorable observations about the Church and its practices, then praised the “excellent little book” in glowing terms. “We ask if the German woman also could not become active in the field of practical genealogy,” he continued, “and it would be well if the American Lesson Book could find imitation among us.”\(^ {56}\)

Another important book published by the Relief Society, with the approval of the Genealogical Society, was Susa’s *Surname Book and Racial History*. Prepared originally for the use of students in genealogy classes and for other members of the Relief Society, three thousand copies were printed and one was sent to every known genealogical and historical library in America and Europe. It was well received; complimentary letters poured in from both continents, and newly organized societies as well as many individuals requested copies.\(^ {57}\)

The administration of genealogical classes and the preparation of manuals, then, had followed a pattern similar to that of the newspaper column: they were suggested by a priesthood leader, originally conducted by the DUP, and eventually transferred to the Genealogical Society. An additional step was the transfer to the Relief Society, but in all the stages the women sought and obtained the advice and approval of priesthood leaders.

By this time the women of the Relief Society, under the continuous prodding of Susa Young Gates and her associates, had spearheaded a more intensive genealogical program among the Latter-day Saints than many people had thought possible. But they were not content until they could expand their impact even further, and the next step was the inauguration of semiannual genealogical conventions in Salt Lake City.

In the Relief Society General Board meeting of 4 September 1913, Jeanetta Hyde proposed that a series of genealogical lessons be given for interested people attending the forthcoming October general conference of the Church. It was actually too late to plan such an activity, but the board liked the idea and during the conference held a special genealogical reception for stake representatives. By April the women were ready with a
full-scale, three-day convention following the regular general conference meetings, and five hundred delegates from sixty-five stakes were present. President Anthon H. Lund represented the First Presidency of the Church in opening the conference, but beyond that the conference was fully a women’s affair, and the women conducted all the sessions. Two meetings, consisting of instruction on genealogical methods and temple work, were held each day. Emmeline B. Wells, president of the Relief Society, made a significant observation on the impact of women on genealogical work when she noted that “the work of the Relief society is so closely connected with that of the Genealogical society that membership in the one practically implies interest in the other.”58 For the rest of the decade, the two societies continued to cooperate in sponsoring genealogical conferences or lectures at general conference time.

For many women, the highlight of the decade was the International Congress of Genealogy in July 1915 in connection with a world’s fair in San Francisco. The women of the Relief Society began planning for it at least a year in advance, though at first they received little official encouragement from Church leaders. When Susa asked the members of the board of the Genealogical Society about helping the California group send out notices, Joseph Fielding Smith replied that the board was not interested. Nor did it feel the need to appoint a committee to cooperate with the California group, for the board did not see that such an action would result in any great prestige to the Society.59 Susa and her friends felt differently, however, and despite the priesthood’s lack of interest, they became very much involved in both the planning and the advertising.

Both the Relief Society and the Genealogical Society of Utah were invited to send delegates to the meeting. Once they decided to take part, the women made sure that their participation was no small thing. Susa obtained permission from the Relief Society General Board to invite every stake genealogical committee in the Church to send one or more delegates to California. Plans were made to charter a special train from Salt Lake City. Circulars were printed and sent out, and the Relief Society Magazine zealously promoted the conference, telling the women that if they were frugal they could finance the entire week’s excursion for fifty dollars.60

The women responded enthusiastically. On 22 July a special Oregon Short Line train of fourteen cars left Salt Lake City with nearly two hundred fifty excursionists aboard. They reached San Francisco the next day and on Saturday, 24 July, attended a special Utah day at the fairgrounds. There a number of dignitaries spoke, including several California officials, Utah’s governor William Spry, and Latter-day Saint Church President Joseph F. Smith. The preconference highlight, however, was the day-long meeting of the Genealogical Society of Utah on 27 July, the day before the three-day
international congress met. There was considerable outside interest in what the Latter-day Saints were doing, and the meetings were well attended.61

When the International Congress of Genealogy met the following three days, the Latter-day Saints played a prominent role. There were 106 official delegates from 66 invited organizations, and of these, 22 were from the Genealogical Society of Utah and 26 from the Genealogical Extension Division of the Relief Society.62 In addition, the many Latter-day Saint visitors, especially women, from the intermountain states swelled the attendance. As if to emphasize the growing significance of the Latter-day Saints in genealogical work, the Congress appointed Joseph Fielding Smith and Susa Young Gates to a number of permanent committees. In addition, it authorized the Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine to publish its proceedings, which was done in the October 1915 and January 1916 issues. Special bronze medals were presented to Anthon H. Lund as president of the Genealogical Society of Utah and to Emmeline B. Wells as president of the Relief Society.63 The Latter-day Saint genealogists, and especially the women, were making their influence felt.

As the second decade of the century progressed, it was the women of the Church, largely through the Relief Society, who were chiefly responsible for popularizing genealogy and who carried the major burden of both research and temple work. They led out in developing genealogical classes, instructional manuals, improved research methods, and other means of stimulating genealogical and temple activity. For example, when the Relief Society started the classes on genealogy, they introduced an index program to encourage women to gather information on their families. The Relief Societies distributed cards on which the women were asked to record the names and the dates and places of birth and marriage of their ancestors. After the cards were completed, the local Relief Societies were to collect them and turn them into the General Board. The cards were to become a basis for an index of family names at the Genealogical Society.64 The women distributed the index cards until about 1917 when Church leaders asked them to discontinue the practice in order to shift the Relief Society's focus to increasing membership in the Genealogical Society. The Relief Society dutifully agreed and did not feel responsible for index cards distributed by the bretheren. As Susa Young Gates wrote to Maud B. Roskelley, “If the index cards have been distributed by the agents of the Genealogical Society, we would have no right to pick them up.”65

About the same time, the Relief Society began what soon became a Church-wide tradition of temple excursions. Temple work for the dead, after all, was the primary reason for their interest in genealogy, and by 1916 all the women of the Church were being encouraged to spend at least one day a year in one of the temples doing “official work for the dead.” “Official
work” meant doing templework for those people on the Relief Society “charity lists”—that is, lists of names furnished to the Genealogical Committee by those who were unable to go to the temples themselves. Arrangements were also made for women who lived long distances from the temples to donate money for the purpose of paying others to do temple work. In addition, the Relief Society encouraged those far from temples to organize annual temple excursions.66

Although the index cards and temple excursions were two new programs begun by the Relief Society, by 1917 Susa felt that the local women should not initiate new programs without the support of the Genealogical Society, and that all genealogical questions in the wards should be referred to the stake president, not to the Relief Society.67 In 1918 she told the sisters, “You will never get anywhere by going at it alone, or by trying to be a law unto yourself. . . . Our motto is: It is better to be united on an inferior plan than divided over a superior one.”68

The Relief Society played its role well, but by 1920 it was perhaps inevitable that another change should come. The Genealogical Society, governed directly by the priesthood, was also attempting to organize committees in all the wards and stakes, and there were obvious questions about the propriety of the two groups conducting overlapping activities. The Genealogical Society proposed, therefore, that it take over completely the responsibility for assisting in research, giving genealogical lessons, and collecting index cards, while the Relief Society should continue to promote annual temple days and excursions for women. The Relief Society could also continue lessons so long as they were theological and not practical in nature. In the process, however, the women of the Church were reminded that, despite the changes, they should not “slacken your efforts, . . . but hold up the hands of the brethren and continue in the good work of filling our temples.”69 The Relief Society agreed, and for one year (1921) the women conducted classes on the theological basis of temple ordinances for the dead.70 That year Emmeline B. Wells was replaced by Clarrisa Smith Williams as Relief Society president, and the General Board was reorganized. Although Susa was retained on the board, she was taken off the lessons committee and consequently did not have as much influence on Relief Society decisions as before.71 The classes on genealogy were phased out completely.

The ease with which Susa abandoned her genealogical classes and the related projects to which she had given years of effort may be partially explained by the fact that she saw her administrative involvement in genealogy as a temporary assignment. She started the genealogy classes to deal with what she saw as a lack of knowledge within the Church. With the support of the priesthood leaders, she taught classes to both men and women,
but she felt more comfortable working directly with the women and moved in that direction when it was possible. She depended upon the Genealogical Society for support and gave her full assistance to its plans even when doing so meant abandoning her own. Throughout it all, she saw genealogy as a priesthood assignment.

Nevertheless, Susa Young Gates continued to be involved in genealogy. In 1921 the Genealogical Society officers asked her to serve on the activities and studies committee, directed by her son-in-law, John A. Widtsoe. She accepted the call but said, “If you wish some active work and help from women in the Genealogical movement, I would suggest that you create again the Women’s Committee.” She explained that the sisters she had worked with in the past were trained genealogists; they had developed study programs and activities for the Relief Society, Young Ladies, and the Primary Association, and they had planned programs and lessons for the Genealogical Society. The Women’s Committee was not formed again, but a number of women served with Susa on the activities committee, which was responsible for the genealogical conventions sponsored on a Church-wide basis. The women’s duties, however, seem to have been limited to providing refreshments and organizing the musical numbers. They were generally a support to the conventions which were planned and conducted by men. The Society organized no new activities especially for women.

By the end of 1920 genealogical activity among the Latter-day Saints was again fully under the auspices of the Genealogical Society of Utah. During the previous two decades, genealogy work had evolved through several stages: from a mainly male-oriented missionary work, through a variety of activities sponsored and dominated by women, to a return to the direct and active control of the priesthood. It was often the women, such as Susa Young Gates, to whom even priesthood leaders wrote for advice on how to improve their organization and activities. Female genealogists stumped the Church, giving special short courses and preaching the gospel of ancestor hunting, and they staffed the library of the Genealogical Society. The Relief Society trained the women, the women took their responsibility seriously, and, it appears, they took it so well that sometimes their husbands and sons defaulted. The women tried valiantly to provoke the priesthood to good works in genealogy, but in the meantime the women carried the major burden themselves. They nevertheless saw their supervisory assignments as temporary, for genealogy work was ultimately the administrative responsibility of the priesthood. The women’s work of more than a decade, however, provided the Genealogical Society with much new expertise and a vast new clientele.
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5. This was a twenty-four page book entitled A Genealogy of the Family of Mr. Samuel Stebbens and Mrs. Hannah Stebbens, his wife, from the year 1707 to the year 1771. For a catalogue of early family histories in the United States, arranged chronologically, see William H. Whitmore, The American Genealogist, 2d. ed. (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1868). The first edition of the work (1862) was called Handbook of American Genealogy. Other editions were subsequently published.


7. For more on this unique kind of missionary work, see Embry, “Missionaries for the Dead.”


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14. Untitled manuscript in Relief Society Genealogical Programs folder, 2.


19. Gates, “Women and Genealogy,” 11. This manuscript says that the column began in 1905, but the date given above is correct.


22. Deseret Evening News, 8 August 1908, 23, Joseph Fielding Smith (1876–1972) was the son of Joseph Fielding Smith (1838–1918), who was President of the Church at this time. The father was usually identified as Joseph F. Smith and the son as Joseph F. Smith, Jr. Later, however, the son adopted the convention of being called Joseph Fielding Smith, and he is usually identified that way. Though the early records dealt with here identify him as Joseph F. Smith, Jr., we have adopted the more well-known convention.


24. Untitled manuscript, 4 pp., Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives, 4.


26. Other examples are the Sunday School movement in the nineteenth century and the Boy Scout program in the early twentieth century.

27. Susa Young Gates to Pierson W. Banning, 18 March 1916, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.


29. Deseret Evening News to Elwood Ward, Utah Relief Society, 30 September 1918, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.

30. Susa Young Gates to Joseph Smith, Jr., 17 October 1918, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.

31. Susa Young Gates to Joseph F. Smith, Jr., 17 October 1918.

32. Susa Young Gates to the President and Board, Genealogical Society of Utah, 29 August 1918, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.

33. Susa Young Gates to Pierson W. Banning, 6 September 1918, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.

34. Though Susa suggested on 29 August 1918 that Joseph Fielding Smith become the editor, in the same letter she also suggested Anderson.

40. Following through on what some women wanted to accomplish through the DUP, for example, they memorialized certain events and movements in Church history in a series of public meetings in 1911 and 1912. See list in an announcement in Deseret Evening News, 16 September 1911, 14. The list included pioneers from various periods in Church history, from Zion’s Camp, and from various immigrant pioneer groups.
44. See report, “The Biennial Meeting of the Genealogical Society of Utah,” The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 1 (April 1910): 137–38; The Deseret Evening News, 6 April 1910; and Minutes of the Genealogical Society, 15 March 1910, 126–27. The six committees were on (1) increasing memberships and subscriptions to the magazine, Benjamin Goddard, chairman; (2) meetings and social gatherings, C. S. Martin, chairman; (3) historical and genealogical papers, Osborne J. P. Widtsoe, chairman; (4) town and family histories, Joseph S. Peery, chairman; (5) collecting published records and relics, Thomas A. Clawson, chairman; and (6) an executive committee consisting of Heber J. Grant, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Joseph Christenson.
45. Relief Society General Board Minutes, 19 October and 2 November 1906 and 6 December 1907, LDS Church Archives.
46. Undated and untitled seven page manuscript, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives. This manuscript, written about 1916, is a draft of an article by Susa Young Gates, “Genealogy in the Relief Society,” that appeared in The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 7 (January 1916): 41–45. The above story did not appear in the final publication. In Gates, “Women in Genealogy,” an allusion also is made to this meeting. In the first manuscript it is dated 1908, while here it is dated in 1910.
47. Genealogical Activity in Ogden Stake,” The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 7 (January 1916): 46–47.
48. “Genealogical Activity,” 46–47.
49. “Genealogical Activity,” 46–47.
50. “Genealogists Abroad,” The Utah Genealogical and Historical Magazine 5 (1914); 125–33.
51. Relief Society General Board Minutes, 13 April 1913, 44.
53. Report filed in Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives. The 1915 date is presumed from internal evidence.
55. The manual contained lessons on the following topics: Material and Sources of Information; Approximating Dates; Methods of Recording; Heirship in Temple Work; Numbering; Work in the Library; Some Standard Works; What the Country Genealogist Can Do; Family Organizations; Diagramed Pedigrees Reduced to Family Groups; Instructions Concerning Temple Work; Making Out Temple Sheets. See Gates, “Women in Genealogy”; and “Susa Young Gates,” 99.

56. Gates, “Women in Genealogy,” 18–19, apparently quoting a translated version of the article,

58. Deseret Evening News, 7 April 1914, 2.

64. Genealogy Lesson Department in Relief Society Magazine 4–7 (1916–1920).
65. Susa Young Gates to Rebecca N. Cutter, 18 January 1918, and Susa Young Gates to Maud B. Roskelley, 4 February 1918, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.
68. Relief Society General Conference Minutes, Relief Society Magazine 5 (December 1918): 676.
70. “Theology and Testimony,” Theological Lessons Department, Relief Society Magazine 8 (January 1921): 55–57; and (February 1921): 114–19.
72. Susa Young Gates to Anthon H. Lund and General Board of the Genealogical Society, 14 October 1920, Susa Young Gates Papers, LDS Church Archives.
73. Susa Young Gates to Anthon H. Lund, 14 October 1920.
74. See Minutes of the Relief Society General Board, 14 October 1920; Minutes of the Genealogical Society, 15 October 1920; and Minutes of the Committee on Activities and Lesson Work, 8 November 1920, in Susa Young Gates Collection, Utah State Historical Society.