

# Some Thoughts Regarding an Unwritten History of Nauvoo



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A recent reading of my Nauvoo bibliography disclosed that at least sixty books have been written dealing wholly or in part with some aspect of the Mormon experience in that city. But these scores of articles on the subject increase our knowledge of only the major events in this “Kingdom on the Mississippi.” Few, if any, major works have treated “early Mormon lifestyles, or the Saints as human beings,” to use Davis Bitton’s phrase. Christopher Lasch, in his book, *Reflection on American History*, has severely chastised Mormon historians for “detaching the subject from its surroundings,” and for failing to clearly illuminate what gave Mormonism its vitality<sup>1</sup>. I suspect that the illumination will not be forthcoming until historians devote more time to studying the letters, diaries, and journals of the common Latter-day Saints who lived—and very often died—in Nauvoo<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps it is appropriate to challenge someone to write a really distinguished social history of Nauvoo. A very hurried calculation discloses that by the end of 1846 Latter-day Saints had lived in Nauvoo 2,575 days or 61,800 hours. Not all of this time was spent in fleeing from Missouri officials, reading scripture, receiving revelation, working on the temple, or even sleeping. Even though the historian concedes that a tremendous amount of the men’s time, at least, was spent in missionary work, work on the temple, politics, and meetings, the question still may be asked, “What were the women and children doing? and thinking? and feeling?” The briefest perusal of Nauvoo literature reveals a glaring lack of information regarding this aspect of Nauvoo’s history. Outside of a few brief glimpses into the life of Emma Smith and her part in the organization of the Relief Society, the books and articles seem to review the remainder of this city’s rise and fall through the eyes of Joseph Smith, John C. Bennett, Brigham Young, Sidney Rigdon, or Governor Thomas Ford.

The women and children spent more time in Nauvoo than the men did, but histories are written as if more than two-thirds of the Church and the non-Mormons who lived there scarcely existed. The purpose of this paper, then, is to focus for a moment on daily life in Nauvoo as it was experienced by the women and children who sacrificed so much for the cause they, too, believed was true, hoping that by doing so I may encourage historians to rise to the challenge to write the full history of this city.

Learning to say goodbye and coping with loneliness were significant parts of the Nauvoo female experience. It could probably be demonstrated that Mormon men were away from home in those early days more often than other American males, and while the partings themselves may not all have lasted very long, they were extremely traumatic and had far-reaching implications for those left behind. Louisa Barnes Pratt, whose husband was called on a mission to Tahiti leaving her to care for four children, recorded:

The parting scene came, the two eldest daughters were very lonely. We walked with him to the steamboat landing; he carried the youngest child in his arms. It was told us he would be absent three years. . . . It was unfortunate at the last as he stepped on to the steamboat the children saw him take his handkerchief from his eyes they knew he was wiping away his tear. It was too much for them they commenced weeping; the second daughter was uncontrollable. The more we tried to soothe her the more furious were her complaints; she was sure her father would never return<sup>3</sup>.

Louisa wept for three days before a calmness came over her and she could smile again. Perhaps the most tragic aspect of these frequent and often long periods of separation was that many husbands and wives were no longer compatible when reunited, and divorces all too frequently occurred. This knowledge must have gnawed at even the most faithful heart<sup>4</sup>.

While the husband served God, the wife was expected to provide for the family, take care of business matters, procure the food, construct the home, plant the crops, raise the children in the ways of the Lord, and cope with frequent sickness and death.

Caroline Crosby, whose husband served two missions<sup>5</sup> during the Nauvoo period, returning from one with smallpox, wrote in her journal, "Death became so frequent a visitor in Nauvoo that we were perfectly familiar with it."<sup>6</sup> "Sickness was also a major part of the lives of Nauvoo families. When Peter Maughan returned to the Mormon capital from operating the Church's coal mine on Rock Island, he found his entire family sick with fever and ague. They had to take turns crawling to the water bucket, pulling themselves up with almost superhuman effort, and then on hands and knees making the return journey, pushing the water jar ahead of them a few feet at a time."<sup>7</sup>

Young Mosiah Hancock had to crawl to a spring fifty yards from his cabin to get water for his little sister, Amy, and his father and mother, who were too weak to lift themselves from their beds. He would later recall that his hands and knees became raw sores and he found himself dreading the sound of the human voice, for regardless of who spoke it was always for water<sup>8</sup>.

Fortunately the chills and fever didn't occur every day, and most of the diary entries of this period speak of good and bad days. On the good days, the Saints would work and prepare for the bad ones, relieved that they

escaped the chills and fever for even one day. Frequently this disease would possess a body for a full year. Of course there were remedies for every kind of disease and an entire chapter of a Nauvoo history book could be written on medical practices alone. Every issue of *The Wasp* advertised medicated lozenges guaranteed to cure coughs, worms, fever, and ague. That they did not is abundantly clear from the records of the period. Dr. Willard Richards often prescribed a weed that grew in many front yards as a cure for diarrhea, and in at least one recorded instance it worked.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that there was much sickness and death in Nauvoo is not in itself terribly significant. Other American pioneers had to cope with these ordeals as well, so it becomes the task of the Mormon historian to probe and analyze the available data and then compare his findings with those found among other pioneer groups to determine whether there was something unique and significant about the way Mormons dealt with the tragedies inherent in life.

Diaries and letters also show life among the early Saints meant a daily battle with hunger. Nauvoo was not a city of abundance, and while it is true that when gardens matured the Saints ate beans, apples, corn, melons, peas, beets, tomatoes, cucumbers, lemons, figs, and raisins, still many of even the best providers were often short of flour, milk, butter, eggs, and other staples. Almost every letter from this period deals with the great struggle for food, and this fact has to be part of the drama of this city<sup>10</sup>. It is significant to note that a large part of a woman's day was devoted to procuring and preparing food.

Other frontier peoples also grappled with fatigue, hunger, and the threat of starvation. So what, if anything, is there in the Mormon experience that sets it apart? Was it, perhaps, the Saints' ability to somehow see the hand of God in every event whether good or bad? Or was it their uncanny way of turning every occurrence so as to support their belief that they were preparing the world for the second coming of the Savior? But did not other religions have similar beliefs? And if so, what was there about the Latter-day Saints that caused their movement to persist, grow, and flourish while many others of the same era are now only footnotes in religious history books? Sidney Ahlstrom, in his critically acclaimed book, *A Religious History of the American People*, admits that he is unable to fathom what it was about Joseph Smith that made him so different from the other self-proclaimed prophets of his time.<sup>11</sup> Could it be simply that he told the truth or is the matter more complex than that? There is the distinct possibility that the solution to these and other questions is to be found, at least in part, in the records the Saints left behind, as well as what they read and believed.

One of the things they read was *The Wasp*, which appeared once every two weeks. In it the Saints could read poetry by Mrs. Hemans, Eliza R.

Snow, or others with a literary bent. The front page frequently contained moralistic short stories. One such story, "Home, Sweet Home," was about a beautiful girl named Julia, who was courted, seduced and deserted by a handsome gambler and rogue. She pined for death. Strangely, the rogue knew no peace either, because, as the last sentence says, "the worm that never dies gnaws at the heart-strings until they are severed, and he who victimized soon lays as low as the victim<sup>12</sup>." There were also articles regarding Thomas Sharp's nose, lists of people who had unclaimed letters at the Nauvoo Post Office, and even some jokes: "An Irishman cautions the public against harboring or trusting his wife, Peggy, on his account, as he is not married to her." And, "Snufftakers differ from all the rest of the world, for they turn up their noses at what they most admire<sup>13</sup>." Each issue also ran W. D. Huntington's fully illustrated advertisement indicating that he had a complete supply of coffins and if he did not have your size, one could be made to order.

Through the minutes of the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute we know that the Mormons read very few novels, but rather studied many books of considerable academic reputation. Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," biographies of Napoleon, histories of England, France, and the United States were read frequently by the citizens of Nauvoo. Joseph Smith himself owned such works as Thomas Dick's *Philosophy of a Future State*, Mosheim's *Church History*, and the *Histoire de Charles*, to name only a few of the volumes in his Nauvoo library<sup>14</sup>. Little has been written about the books the Mormons were reading. It may be that the works found in the Nauvoo library are not significantly different from the books read by other Americans of the time, but only a comparative study will tell. Even if their reading lists are similar, the most important aspects regarding Mormons' reading habits must be the way they used the things they read, and the fact that they were not ignoramuses, or the gullible, simple-minded people they are often portrayed as being, mostly by a hostile press. If the books of the Nauvoo library can become the focus of a comparative study; historians will soon have available additional insights into the intellectual habits of the Latter-day Saints.

Late afternoons and early evenings were sometimes spent either in reading or writing letters, and often a week or more would be spent writing, off and on, a letter to an absent family member. Departing and returning missionaries often served as postmen. When the news circulated that a certain elder had arrived home from laboring in the same area as a loved one, the entire family was filled with anxiety until they knew whether he had brought a long-awaited letter. If he had, the letter was read and re-read.

When the weather was bad, meetings were held in the homes of the Church members. In these gatherings the Saints sang and spoke in tongues,

prophesied, bore testimony to the truth of the gospel, and closed with hymns like “Shall I for Fear of Feeble Man the Spirits Course in Me Restrain.” Many studied Parley P. Pratt’s *A Voice of Warning*, which is probably indicative of their concern and expectations regarding the return of the Savior. Almost every diary reveals the joy of the Saints when they could hear the Prophet Joseph Smith preach. One person wrote that she first heard the Mormon leader speak while he stood on a barrel with his hands on the shoulders of a disciple to keep his balance<sup>15</sup>.

Often “Family Blessing Meetings” were held. At these gatherings adopted families<sup>16</sup> as well as blood relatives were invited. Guests at these meetings also often consumed large quantities of hot wheat bread and sweet wine. At one such gathering, Father Young was so moved that he could not speak and Brigham Young was forced to deliver the expected sermon. These meetings would close with the father blessing his entire family. Following such gatherings, joy would reign for days.<sup>17</sup>

And what about the youth? There were many activities for them: swimming in the river, corn husking parties, quilting bees, rag bees, and rides in the Prophet’s large buggy. Joseph Smith III remembered that it was customary on Saturday afternoons for the men and boys to gather and indulge in such athletic events as running, jumping, wrestling, and throwing weights. Arthur Milliken organized some of the young men into a small troop of horsemen that was subsequently attached to the Nauvoo Legion. Other boys were formed into companies in order to learn how to drill properly. Still others were used as drummers in the great parades of this colorful city’s militia<sup>18</sup>. Some of the very small tagged along behind the marching Legion, banging on pots and pans, pretending they, too, were soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

At least one group of boys used to row out to an island in the middle of the Mississippi River and tease an old billy goat, much to the displeasure of its owner. there was a hill of some size on the island which ended rather abruptly. A small pond lay twenty-five feet below the crest and the boys would torment the goat until it got so angry it would chase them. they would lure it to the cliff above the pond and then quickly dodge its charge, making it fall into the water below. One day the owner, a rather large man, provoked the goat himself. It seems he enjoyed watching the foolish animal fall into the pond as much as the boys did, but being neither so nimble nor quick, he was butted in the stomach, fell into the pond, and almost drowned. Fortunately, the boys were hiding in the brush, saw the whole thing, and rescued him.<sup>20</sup>

The young son of Wilford Woodruff, left in the care of an aunt while his father and mother served in the British Mission, rode horses, herded cows, played with the knife his father had sent him, enjoyed the “new cap” his mother knitted and mailed to him, and attended Church meetings with

Hannah Ells. But his fingers were often too tired to write to his parents<sup>21</sup>. Much more could be said about the children.

Joseph Smith, whom David Miller has called “by all odds the most significant motivating, guiding and controlling influence in Nauvoo,”<sup>22</sup> became what he became, in part at least, because of the influence of Lucy Mack and Joseph Smith, Sr., and his life at home. Realizing that the instructions he received from heavenly messengers made him much more than just a typical American boy of the nineteenth century, still I for one would someday like to read a history of Nauvoo that was weighed against American and world history, and that did not merely trace the same old events that have been written about by Cecil McGavin, B. H. Roberts, and others. I am calling for a book which will portray the Mormons, first as people fighting loneliness, sickness, tragedy, and death in some significantly different ways from other Americans; second . s husbands and wives striving to keep intact marriages which toward the end of the Nauvoo period were considered to be “eternal” or “celestial” through long periods of separation; third as parents worrying and caring for their children, whom, again toward the close of the period, they believed they would have with them forever if they were successful in their religious efforts; fourth as Latter-day Saints, often devout, sincere, even evangelical, also believing that this fact made them “a peculiar people,” and attempting to demonstrate why this was so; and only lastly as Masons, politicians, and members of the Nauvoo Legion. This history will be found in the letters, diaries, journals, and in the archaeology of the people who dwelt there. We need someone to write this part of their story with the same feeling love, warmth, and skill that has characterized the best books historians can offer.

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1. Christopher Lasch, *Reflections on American History, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), pp. 56–69.

2. *The Wasp* (a biweekly newspaper edited by the Prophet’s brother, William Smith) always published a list of the people who had died since the previous issue had been printed. These lists usually contained from eight to twelve names and if we assume that ten might represent an average number then approximately 250 people died each year in the Mormon capital. This would mean that from 1,500 to 2,000 people died during the six years that Nauvoo was a flourishing city.

3. Louisa Barnes Pratt, *Journal*, p. 118, Church Historical Department.

4. See the diaries of Angela Farley, Patty Sessions, and Louisa Barnes Pratt, Church Historical Department.

5. See the Leonora Taylor—John Taylor letters in this issue of *BYU Studies*.
6. Caroline Crosby, Journal, unpagged, Church Historical Department.
7. Mary Ann Maughan, Journal, p. 25. Copy in Joel E. Ricks Collection, Church Historical Department.
8. Mosiah Hancock, *The Life Story of Mosiah Hancock* (n.p., n.d.), p. 14.
9. Maughan Journal, p. 26.
10. See letters of Bathsheba Smith to George A. Smith; Hannah Ells to Phoebe Woodruff; and the diaries of Mary Ann Maughan and Louisa Barnes Pratt.
11. Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), pp. 501–09.
12. *The Wasp*, 23 April 1842, p. 1.
13. Ibid.
14. Minutes of the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute, Church Historical Department. See also Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Literary Institute,” *BYU Studies* 14 (Spring 1974):386–89.
15. See journals of Mary Ann Maughan, Louisa Barnes Pratt, Caroline B. Crosby, and Drusella Hendricks, Church Historical Department.
16. See Gordon Irving, “The Law of Adoption: One Phase of the Development of the Mormon Concept of Salvation, 1830–1900.” *BYU Studies* 14 (Spring 1974): 291–314.
17. See the Susa Amelia Young Gates file in the Church Department. Talk given by Heber C. Kimball to his family.
18. Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration* (Independence: Herald House, 1952), pp. 27, 46.
19. For a consideration of more serious activities of boys in Nauvoo, see Thurmon Dean Moody, “Nauvoos Whistling and Whittling Brigade,” in this issue of *BYU Studies*.
20. Joseph Levi Fifield, Journal, copy in possession of the author.
21. Letters of Hannah Ells to Phoebe Woodruff, 5 May and 3 June 1845.
22. David E. and Della S. Miller, *Nauvoo: The City of Joseph* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1974), p. 64.