

A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History

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Helen Mar Kimball Smith Whitney (1828–96) witnessed early Mormon history from its center. She was a daughter of Heber C. and Vilate Kimball and she became a plural wife of Joseph Smith. After the Prophet's death, she married Horace K. Whitney, with whom she raised a large family in Utah. Near the end of her life, Helen wrote her reminiscences of life among the early Latter-day Saints. She relayed her experiences of the momentous: the Missouri persecutions, the very beginnings of polygamy, the exodus from Nauvoo, and the sojourn at Winter Quarters. She also wrote much of daily living: family life, friendships, dancing, and Sabbath-day observance. Her narrative provides a woman's view of the ordinary and the extraordinary in early Mormon history.

Reminiscing from the distance of four decades makes for memory problems, but Helen Mar Whitney's narrative benefits from her use of letters and diaries of her father and others. Also, the retrospective position from which she wrote allowed for mature reflection and enabled her to see life lessons in her past experiences. For example, she wrote, "The experience had at Winter Quarters taught me that it was only through obedience and great humiliation, more especially through fasting and prayer, that we could obtain any great manifestations from on high, or the power to enable us to overcome the adversary" (462–63).

Helen's reminiscences were published serially in the Woman's Exponent from 1880 to 1886. The Holzapfels provide us the service of pulling together into one book all the scattered installments from this practically inaccessible periodical. In appendixes the editors also provide Whitney's autobiography and her obituary written by her friend Emmeline B. Wells. An introductory essay, accompanied by a number of photographs, invites the reader into the book.



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