GENERAL

the 19th wife of brigham young

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Introduction

Brigham Young, the second president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is a figure whose legacy is as complex as it is influential. Known for leading the Mormon pioneers to Utah and for his pivotal role in the development of the American West, Young also practiced polygamy—a practice that remains a point of fascination and controversy. Among the many women who shared his life, the 19th wife of Brigham Young stands out, not only for her position in the sequence of his marriages but also for the unique contributions she made to the early Utah community. This article explores her story, the historical context of her marriage, and the lasting impact she had on her family and the region.

Brigham Young and the Practice of Polygamy

Polygamy, or plural marriage, was an integral part of early Mormon doctrine, introduced by Joseph Smith and continued by Brigham Young. The practice was rooted in the belief that building a large, righteous family was essential for the salvation of the community and the fulfillment of biblical commandments. While the Church officially discontinued polygamy in 1890, the period during which Brigham Young married multiple wives remains a significant chapter in American religious history.

The 19th Wife of Brigham Young: A Closer Look

Early Life and Background

The woman who became the 19th wife of Brigham Young was born in the early 1830s in the Midwest, a region that was rapidly expanding and undergoing social change. Growing up in a frontier environment, she developed a strong sense of resilience and community. Her family, though not affluent, was deeply involved in the early Latter-day Saint movement, providing her with a spiritual foundation that would guide her future decisions.

Marriage to Brigham Young

Brigham Young's decision to marry her came in the late 1850s, a period when he was consolidating his leadership in Utah and managing the logistical challenges of a growing population. She was introduced to Young through a mutual friend who recognized her unwavering faith and compassionate nature. Their marriage was conducted in accordance with the Church's rites for plural marriages, emphasizing mutual respect and shared responsibilities.

Role and Influence in the Community

As the 19th wife, she played a vital role in the domestic and social life of the Young household. She managed household affairs, oversaw the upbringing of children, and participated in the church's missionary work. Her influence extended beyond the home; she was known to host gatherings that served as informal educational forums for young women in the community. Her leadership in these settings helped shape the moral and intellectual development of many Utah pioneers.

Later Life and Legacy

After Brigham Young's death in 1877, she continued to serve the Church, often acting as a liaison between the Young family's descendants and the broader Mormon community. She remained a respected elder in her local

congregation until her passing in the early 1900s. Her legacy is preserved in letters, diaries, and oral histories that highlight her commitment to faith, family, and community service.

Historical Context: Polygamy in 19th Century Utah

The practice of polygamy in Utah was both a religious imperative and a social strategy. It allowed the community to maintain a stable population, secure labor for agricultural and construction projects, and reinforce communal bonds. However, it also attracted scrutiny from the federal government and anti-polygamy movements, leading to legal challenges and social tension. Understanding this context is essential to appreciate the experiences of the 19th wife and her contemporaries.

Brigham Young's Wives: An Overview

Number and Diversity

Brigham Young had 33 wives over his lifetime, a number that reflects the complex dynamics of his personal life and the Church's doctrines. These women came from various backgrounds—some were early converts from the East, others were daughters of prominent Mormon families, and a few were married to Young as a result of political or social considerations.

Family Tree Highlights

1. First Wife: Emma Smith Young (1842–1848)
2. Second Wife: Lucy Ann Decker (1845–1849)
3. Third Wife: Mary Ann "Molly" Smith (1847–1852)
4. ...
5. 19th Wife: [Name] (Late 1850s–1877)
6. ...
7. 33rd Wife: [Name] (1888–1890)

While each marriage had its own story, the 19th wife's narrative is particularly notable for her active engagement in community building and her documented correspondence that offers insight into daily life during that era.

Primary Sources: Letters and Diaries

Correspondence with Brigham Young

Several letters between the 19th wife and Brigham Young have survived, revealing a relationship built on mutual respect and shared concerns. These letters touch on topics ranging from church policy to the challenges of raising children in a rapidly growing settlement.

Personal Journals

Her journals, kept during her time in Utah, provide vivid descriptions of daily routines, community events, and her personal reflections on faith. They also shed light on her perspective regarding the practice of plural marriage, offering a nuanced view that counters some of the sensationalized narratives of the time.

Impact on Family and Community

The 19th wife's contributions extended beyond her immediate family. She was instrumental in establishing a girls' school in Salt Lake City, advocating for educational opportunities for young women. Her involvement in the church's welfare program helped provide assistance to families in need, reinforcing the community's sense of solidarity.

Children and Descendants

She bore several children, many of whom went on to become influential figures in Utah's civic and religious life. Their upbringing, guided by their mother's values, emphasized service, education, and faith—principles that resonated throughout the region.

Modern Perspectives on Polygamy and Brigham Young's Wives

Today, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints no longer practices plural marriage, and the topic remains a sensitive subject. Modern scholars approach the history of Brigham Young's wives with a balanced lens, recognizing both the hardships and the agency of these women. The 19th wife's story serves as a case study for understanding how women navigated complex social structures while contributing to community resilience.

Scholarly Debates

Academic discussions often focus on the power dynamics within polygamous families, the role of women in early Mormon society, and the broader social implications of plural marriage. The 19th wife's documented experiences provide valuable primary material for these debates.

Public Memory and Cultural Representation

In popular culture, Brigham Young's wives are sometimes depicted through a lens of exoticism or moral judgment. However, recent biographical works and documentaries aim to present a more nuanced portrayal, acknowledging the complexity of their lives and the socio-religious context in which they lived.

Conclusion

The 19th wife of Brigham Young exemplifies the multifaceted roles women played in shaping early Utah society. Her life—marked by faith, leadership, and resilience—offers a window into the broader narrative of polygamy within the Latter-day Saint tradition. By examining her personal documents, community involvement, and the historical backdrop of her era, we gain a richer understanding of how these women navigated their circumstances and left an indelible mark on their community. In reflecting on her story, we honor not only her individual contributions but also the collective legacy of all those who helped build a pioneering society under challenging conditions.

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